



The Chicago Letter and Its Aftermath

The university's note to new students sets off national debate on safe spaces, trigger warnings and more. Presidents of Bowdoin and Yale, with different tone, urge engagement with uncomfortable ideas.

Scott Jaschik

August 29, 2016

Those tasked with writing letters to incoming freshmen frequently wonder if anyone reads them.

John Ellison, dean of students at the University of Chicago, need not worry. His letter to new students has been read and scrutinized not only by Chicago students but by professors and pundits nationwide. "Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called trigger warnings, we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial and we do not condone the creation of intellectual safe spaces where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own," he wrote.

To those who regularly campaign against what they see as political correctness, and to plenty of others, the letter was the message they have been waiting for -- and that they think students need.

But to many others, the letter distorted programs on which many students rely, ignored the hostility many students feel on campus, and belittled the sincerity of faculty members who work to make higher education more inclusive. Many also said that the letter, by criticizing specific academic practices, could be seen as limiting academic freedom by discouraging the use of those practices.

In a twist first reported by *The Chicago Tribune*, Chicago may not be as pure on safe spaces as the letter suggested. It turns out that the University of Chicago website features references to efforts to create safe spaces for students -- and even a Safe Space Ally Network for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. One of the safe space allies is none other than the same John Ellison who wrote to freshmen criticizing the safe space concept. Ellison did not respond to messages, and his email has an "out of office" response.

While Ellison hasn't been talking, Chicago officials are promoting his ideas. Chicago's president, Robert J. Zimmer, published an essay in *The Wall Street Journal* Friday reiterating the points Ellison made, and saying that "free speech is at risk" in academe.

"Universities cannot be viewed as a sanctuary for comfort but rather as a crucible for confronting ideas and thereby learning to make informed judgments in complex environments," he wrote. "Having one's assumptions challenged and experiencing the discomfort that sometimes accompanies this process are intrinsic parts of an excellent education. Only then will students develop the skills necessary to build their own futures and contribute to society."

Open to Discomfort

The Chicago letter from Ellison similarly argued that part of a good college education is being open to ideas that make one uncomfortable. "You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort," he wrote.

While many educators are criticizing the Chicago letter, two college presidents this weekend urged their students to be open to ideas that make them uncomfortable. Their talks did not attack safe spaces, trigger warnings or the like, but they spoke in a positive way of interacting with ideas that freshmen would find unfamiliar and in some cases counter to their way of thinking.

Clayton Rose, the president of Bowdoin (at right), urged students to be "intellectually fearless."

He explained that "a great liberal arts education and liberal arts experience must make you uncomfortable. Now stop again for a moment -- fearless and uncomfortable. I am here to become intellectually fearless, and making this happen requires my being uncomfortable, at times rattled, and even offended."

He added: "Don't avoid being uncomfortable, embrace it. Tomorrow, a week from now, a year from now, when you are in a discussion in class, listening to a speaker -- in the dining hall, dorms, wherever -- and you hear something that really pushes your buttons, that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up, you should run to it, embrace it, figure out why you are uncomfortable, unsettled, offended, and then engage with it.

"Engage with it in a thoughtful, objective, and respectful way. This is how you learn. This is how you become intellectually fearless. And this is how you change the world. Remind yourself that this is exactly why you are here."

Peter Salovey, president of Yale University, focused his speech for freshmen on "false narratives" and the reality that many people believe or believed for years in things subsequently shown to be untrue. A challenge for everyone, but especially college students, is to avoid such false narratives.

"People naturally construct narratives to make sense of their world. I have been concerned to point out that in times of great stress, false narratives may dominate the public mind and public discourse, inflaming negative emotions and fanning discord," he said. "In our times especially, a wide array of instantaneous transmissions rapidly amplify such narratives. As a result, we sometimes find that anger, fear, or disgust can blind us to the complexity of the world and the responsibility to seek deeper understandings of important issues."

If "you hear something that really pushes your buttons, that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up, you should run to it, embrace it, figure out why you are uncomfortable, unsettled, offended, and then engage with it."

--Clayton Rose, Bowdoin's president

Yale, he said, "is a place for you to learn how and why to gravitate toward people who view things differently than you do, who will test your most strongly held assumptions. It is also a place to learn why it takes extraordinary discipline, courage, and persistence -- often over a lifetime -- to construct new foundations for tackling the most intractable and challenging questions of our time. You have come to a place where civil disagreements and deep rethinking are the heart and soul of the enterprise, where we prize exceptional diversity of views alongside the greatest possible freedom of expression."

Context: a Year of Protests

The Bowdoin and Yale speeches did not mention the Chicago letter or the intense campus protests last fall on issues of race and inclusivity.

Two other presidents -- Barry Glassner of Lewis & Clark College and Morton Schapiro of Northwestern University -- weighed in with an essay in *The Los Angeles Times* defending the student protest movement that has been criticized and mocked by those who are cheering on the University of Chicago letter (which they did not mention). They argued that criticizing safe spaces and trigger warnings oversimplifies real issues faced by many students.

"We have less patience with pundits and politicians who opine from gated communities and segregated offices about campus incidents that, for all their notoriety, are utterly unrepresentative of the main points of tension on campuses," Glassner and Schapiro wrote. "For every student who complained about inauthentic ethnic food in the cafeteria, to cite one well-publicized example, exponentially more Asian and Asian American students endured insults and snubs based on jealousy, stereotypes or outright hatred. Likewise, for every example of students demanding safe places or trigger warnings so as to avoid material they consider offensive or upsetting, innumerable LGBT students and students of color found themselves in situations where they were affronted or physically threatened."

On social media, some have speculated that the Glassner/Schapiro piece was intended as a response to the Chicago letter. Via email, Schapiro said that the essay was written before the Chicago letter became public.

The Praise for the Chicago Letter

As soon as the Chicago letter started to circulate, it attracted praise -- primarily from people who have been concerned about what they perceive as limits on campus speech.

Roger Pilon, writing on the blog of the libertarian Cato Institute, praised Chicago for "bucking the trend at colleges and universities across the country by refusing to pander to the delicate but demanding 'snowflakes' and 'crybullies' who've tyrannized American campuses over the past few years."

Alex Morey, on the blog of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has long opposed limits on campus speech, noted that the University of Chicago never banned faculty members who want to use trigger warnings from using them, and that the letter was thus entirely consistent with principles of academic freedom. "FIRE hopes this will be the first of many requests from colleges and universities asking students to recommit to freedom of expression this academic year," Morey wrote.

But the letter also attracted attention and praise in quarters not normally focused on campus speech issues. In *New York Magazine*, Jesse Singal, a writer for the magazine, said the letter "could have been less provocative" and that there is little evidence that trigger warnings are widely used or causing any problems in higher education. But he called the letter important and significant.

"Pundits trying to play political football with this issue act like it's a left versus right thing, or a crazy-young-people versus rational-older-people thing, but in reality, there's a strong case to be made that *most students* favor a liberal conception of campus free-speech rights; they're just quieter about their preferences than the activists who believe that open debate of controversial subjects is harmful," Singal wrote.

He added: "There have absolutely been recent instances in which campus outrage has snowballed out of hand, in which protesters have actually impinged on the ability for real debate to take place, and these episodes matter. If you actually read the letter that got Erika Christakis in so much trouble at Yale, for example, it's clear that the outrage was disproportionate to the content. At Wesleyan [University], the column that sparked the uproar was far milder than what you'll hear in the next 15 seconds if you flip on AM radio.

"And it isn't just my opinion that these and other campus reactions were overblown -- a small but nationally representative survey of campus undergrads from last year found that, despite all the gnashing of teeth about the supposed indoctrination of today's college students, about 80 percent agree with the statement that 'freedom of speech should either be less limited on college campuses or there should be no difference compared to society at large.' If that finding is anywhere close to accurate, the vast majority of students don't think anyone should get punished for expressing views that progressives find discomfiting or offensive — they accept that it can be true that a debate is offensive to some people, but shouldn't be shut down." (*Inside Higher Ed* coverage of the Yale and Wesleyan incidents references may be found here and here.)

Critiques of the Chicago Letter

After an initial flurry of praise, the letter has attracted considerable criticism -- much of it from students and professors who say that the issues in teaching, learning and diversity today are far more complex than the way Ellison described them. (An *Inside Higher Ed* blogger, John Warner, offered a critique on Friday and another today, and our website is publishing a Views essay today, defending safe spaces, by Matthew Pratt Guterl, chair of American studies at Brown University.)

Many professors have been arguing that the Chicago letter is drawing attention to the wrong challenges facing higher education.

The blog The Good Enough Professor has a post called "Monsters and Mythical Creatures of Higher Education." The post lists real threats to higher education (declining state support, a push to view higher education as job training, student debt and the "adjunctification of higher education"). Then it lists "things that don't pose a threat to freedom of inquiry," such as "professors' efforts to prevent bigoted students from derailing discussion" or "the acknowledgment that traumatized students may find some material difficult" or "events, spaces, organizations that give students who have, as a group, been historically excluded from certain institutions the opportunity -- if they wanted -- to have community and a sense of belonging at those institutions."

Finally the blog notes that using trigger warnings and other efforts to help students feel included are individual choices made by individual faculty members -- and not forced on anyone. The blog lists as "things that don't exist" such things as "institutionally enforced expectations that faculty not talk about certain things" and "institutionally enforced expectations that students be allowed to opt out of anything that makes them uncomfortable."

Another response to Dean Ellison comes in the form of an open letter to him from Jasmine Mithani, a current undergraduate. She wrote that she agreed with him that students should have their ideas "challenged by our rigorous liberal arts curriculum and demand for critical thinking." But she added that students "should not expect to have their life experiences belittled by the very person who is tasked with advocating on their behalf. I am referring to your paragraph describing the university commitment against 'so-called 'trigger warnings.''" And Mithani said that she doesn't think he understands what they are and how they are used at Chicago and elsewhere -- and that they do not mean students don't read difficult works.

She offers this example from her Chicago education: "I was in an English class last year that was reading *The Autobiography of Red*. Having recently reread it, I emailed my instructor asking if she would inform the class that the book described incestual sexual abuse -- something not at all expected from a lyric based on a very short Greek myth. She immediately responded in the positive, and at the end of the next class she told us to take care with the reading, as there were depictions of sexual abuse and incest. That's it. This experience restored my faith in the instructors at this university -- their empathy, their care for the wellbeing of their students, and the respect they have for the integrity of their pupils. Trigger warnings are not about oversensitivity -- they are about empathy, and recognizing the varied experiences of all students at this university."

Another critique of the Chicago letter may surprise some. The author is Malloy Owen, and he wrote in *The American Conservative*. Owen describes himself as a conservative student active in the campus anti-abortion movement. He praises Chicago for never interfering when that movement brings speakers to campus.

But he argues that the campus left may "have a point" that theoretically open discussion in classes doesn't necessarily take the ideas of all students seriously. He said he could understand how class discussions could leave some students feeling marginalized.

"Here's what the campus left says: Imagine a core social-science seminar in which the conversation turns to police brutality and racial bias. If the class consists of 20 students and

reflects the racial composition of the college, one or two of them will be black. If these students' attitudes towards police brutality reflect national averages, the black students will see a connection between police brutality and racial bias while a majority of their classmates won't," Owen writes.

He adds: "I can say from experience that young, intelligent, accomplished, opinionated, and arrogant students like the ones who populate classes at Chicago are not always attuned to other people's most deeply felt concerns. What might be an intensely personal issue for the black students could easily be dismissed out of hand by the white majority. The right tends to ask, well, why don't the black students just speak up? But the point is that at the University of Chicago, speaking up is not always a simple or risk-free enterprise. You can perform the same thought experiment about rape victims in a discussion that touches on sexual violence: it's not difficult to imagine how the noisy majority that knows only what it's read in the newspaper could make class hard to bear for victims of severe trauma."