



Chicago School of Free Speech

An antidote for the infantilizing craze sweeping campuses.

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"I'm a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me," read the headline of an essay for the liberal website Vox earlier this year. The author, who was frightened enough to write under a pseudonym, admitted that he "cut out anything I could see upsetting a coddled undergrad," including books by Mark Twain.

The American Association of University Professors last year warned: "The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual."

The liberals who run U.S. universities can't be surprised by the epidemic of grievances on their campuses. Their generation used political correctness to exclude conservative thought from the faculty. Now their students reject academic freedom for everyone. Administrators quickly cave in to their demands, abandoning centuries-old principles of open inquiry.

Students have been taught there are no limits, so they expect their most extreme demands to be taken seriously. "Be quiet!" a Yale undergraduate screamed to the master of her residential college: "It is not about creating an intellectual space!" Students insist on "trigger warnings," protection from "microaggressions," and "safe spaces" where no one will challenge their prejudices.

Protesters at Amherst demand a ban on posters favoring free speech. Johns Hopkins students want a mandatory class on "cultural competency." Wesleyan undergraduates tried to get the campus newspaper defunded for an op-ed critical of Black Lives Matter.

After students at Yale demanded that Calhoun College be renamed because its namesake defended slavery in the early 19th century, students at Princeton demanded its Woodrow Wilson School be renamed because Wilson was a segregationist in the early 20th century. Even Rhodes scholars are joining in: A group last year ended the tradition of toasting their Oxford benefactor because Cecil Rhodes was prime minister of segregated South Africa more than a century ago—never mind that he was a liberal in that era.

The University of Michigan canceled a screening of "American Sniper" when Muslim students protested (the school showed "Paddington" instead). Students at Smith refused media access to a sit-in unless journalists first pledged "solidarity" with the protesters. A University of Missouri professor called for "muscle" to remove a student journalist covering protests. Disinvited campus speakers

include former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, International Monetary Fund head Christine Lagarde and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a critic of Islamism. Comedians Chris Rock, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David avoid campuses for fear of offending.

The good news is that some universities are bucking the trend. The University of Chicago formed a committee under law professor Geoffrey Stone “in light of recent events nationwide that have tested institutional commitments to free and open discourse.”

The committee report, released in January, cited former university president Robert Hutchins, who defended a speech on campus by the 1932 Communist Party presidential nominee by saying the “cure” for objectionable ideas “lies through open discussion rather than through prohibition.” Another former president, Hanna Gray, said: “Education should not be intended to make people comfortable, it is meant to make them think.”

The Chicago statement on free expression echoes these sentiments: “It is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.”

Instead, “the university’s fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the university community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the individual members of the university community, not for the university as an institution, to make those judgments for themselves, and to act on those judgments not by seeking to suppress speech, but by openly and vigorously contesting the ideas that they oppose.”

(Disclosures: I am a proud Chicago alum, an embarrassed Yale grad and a mortified Rhodes scholar.)

Purdue and the Princeton faculty have voted to adopt the Chicago principles. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education is encouraging other universities to sign up. Meanwhile, expect students to find ever more microaggressions, perhaps including degrees in the names of offending founders: Elihu Yale made his fortune as a British East India Company imperialist. Exploited Chinese laborers built Leland Stanford’s transcontinental railway. James Duke peddled tobacco. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie and Henry Mellon were robber barons.

Liberal academics are reaping what they sowed. They can now adopt the Chicago approach of tolerating “offensive, unwise, immoral” ideas or resign themselves to producing graduates knowledgeable only about their own pieties.

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