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## Speech on College Campuses: Anything But Safe

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# Speech on College Campuses: Anything But Safe

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# **SPEECH ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES: ANYTHING BUT SAFE**

## **AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO ACCEPTANCE LETTER**

**Amanda Richey**

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.” The sentiment behind the popular nursery rhyme animates debates over “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings” in higher education, as rivals disagree over the extent to which students should feel protected in their diversity of identities and experiences. Opponents view these speech policies as opportunities for individuals to “retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own,” and as fundamentally counterproductive to informed debate.<sup>1</sup>

These arguments become more interesting when analyzed in media markets. Complex issues of academic freedom, student speech, and respect of difference are condensed and often expurgated through pundit quips about “politically correct (PC) culture.” Until recently, the body of work concerning this cultural moment was largely confined to academic circles; after all campus speech obviously concerns campuses. *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* mention the term “safe space” in featured articles from the mid 2000s forward and the 1990s forward, respectively.<sup>2</sup> These narrow debates

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<sup>1</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 14 - 15

<sup>2</sup><https://www.insidehighered.com/search/site/%22safe%20spaces%22?page=9>

and

[http://www.chronicle.com/search?q=safe+space&published\\_date=3\\_or\\_more\\_years](http://www.chronicle.com/search?q=safe+space&published_date=3_or_more_years) (accessed December 3, 2016).

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gained public traction in November 2015 when volatile race relations at the University of Missouri, stemming from Black Lives Matter advocacy, created scenes for mass media circulation (including Melissa Click's muscular "enforcement" of free speech spaces even against student media coverage).<sup>3</sup> Later that year, worries about cultural appropriation and free expression in Halloween costumes at Yale only compounded the concern that universities had become unhinged in their handling of student speech.<sup>4</sup> These examples provided conservative pundits fodder for news stories that "liberal indoctrination" had convinced most faculty and students that their identity performances were more important than rigorous or thoughtful debate. "The Coddling of the American Mind," published in *The Atlantic* in the fall of 2015, helped frame public concern in one cohesive narrative: college students are hiding from or even actively opposing ideas that make them uncomfortable. This narrative, in addition to contemporary news stories, entered a polarized media landscape demarcated by partisan alliances.

A seemingly innocuous acceptance letter, directed to students in the Class of 2020 from the University of Chicago's Dean of Students in The College, also entered this media environment. The letter gained prominent coverage in mainstream American media in August of 2016 for its firm condemnation of "intellectual safe spaces" and "trigger warnings." The acceptance letter reinvigorated discussion about safe spaces, both within academic circles and within a broader public. While the letter could simply be read as a formal introduction to campus speech norms, or a marketing stunt to spread the University of Chicago's name, it also represents a renewed lay

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<sup>3</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, "Campus Activists Weaponize 'Safe Space,'" *The Atlantic*, November 10 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Anemona Hartocollis, "Yale Lecturer Resigns After Email on Halloween Costumes," *The New York Times*, 7 December 2015.

interest in free speech regulation and identity on American college campuses.

This essay will analyze the University of Chicago acceptance letter as the latest text to enter a body of work in the American public addressing campus speech and speech protection. After an overview of the cultural history of American campus speech concerns, the rhetorical situation will be described to better illuminate the Dean's possible intentions under the specific conditions. Next, the essay moves to an analysis of the dominant ideographs and structural elements within the University of Chicago text, followed by a comparison with other college acceptance letters. Finally, the essay will outline the initial response to the University of Chicago letter and indicate the potential significance of the text to the contemporary cultural moment.

***From Movements to Codes to "Coddling:"  
The Cultural Context***

The text's condemnation of trigger warnings and intellectual safe spaces emerged from a recurring cultural fascination with the regulation of American campus speech that goes back 50 years. The 1960s are renowned for student activism — from the civil rights movement to the anti-war movement. However, one movement in the fall of 1964 specifically addressed students' rights to free speech, and "was the first major campus rebellion" of the decade, according to one scholar.<sup>5</sup> The Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley united thousands of students, and eventually gained extensive faculty support, against the university's president and deans for restricting political advocacy on campus. After three months of sit-ins and rallies, faculty in the

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<sup>5</sup>Robby Cohen, "Berkeley Free Speech Movement: Paving the Way for Campus Activism." *OAH Magazine of History* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 1985):16.

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Academic Senate voted to vindicate student leaders facing administrative backlash and endorsed the movement's underlying principle that the "content of speech or advocacy should not be restricted by the university."

In the 1980s and 1990s, national coverage of campus speech shifted to the defense of college's brand reputation, as public funding decreased and pressure to compete nationally increased. Racist incidents gained broad exposure, with the help of recently created 24-hour cable news channels. In response, campuses created policy punishing intentionally derogatory language in "hate speech codes." The necessity of hate speech codes, beyond normal student conduct procedures, worried students and faculty,<sup>6</sup> and lawyers questioned the constitutionality of these policies.<sup>7</sup> According to Gould, by the mid- to late-1990s hate speech policies had "actually increased in number following a series of court decisions that ostensibly found many to be unconstitutional."<sup>8</sup> The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) published a statement cautioning against the use of campus speech codes in the July 1992 issue of *Academe*, the association's peer reviewed journal. The statement warned against speech codes and the slippery slope they might create "to differentiate between high-value and low-value speech, or to choose which groups are to be protected by curbing the speech of others."<sup>9</sup> Further, the statement reaffirmed the importance of freedom of expression and, at the very least, toleration of ideas that members of academic communi-

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<sup>6</sup> Charles R. Lawrence, "If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus." *Duke Law Journal*, no. 3 (1990): 434.

<sup>7</sup> Jon B. Gould, "The Precedent That Wasn't: College Hate Speech Codes and the Two Faces of Legal Compliance." *Law & amp Society Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 345.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> American Association of University Professors. "On Freedom of Expression and Campus Speech Codes." *Academe* 78, no. 4 (July/August 1992): 30-31.

ties may hate. “Free speech is not simply an aspect of the educational enterprise to be weighed against other desirable ends. It is the very precondition of the academic enterprise itself.”<sup>10</sup>

The current rendition of American campus speech concerns is one marked by what critics call a “hypersensitivity” among college students and the “return of political correctness” policing speech.<sup>11</sup> According to Lukianoff and Haidt in “The Coddling of the American Mind”:

A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense... This new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom, even as a basis for discussion.<sup>12</sup>

Lukianoff and Haidt backed this claim with evidence of already widely circulated contemporary race and diversity scandals and student demands for safe spaces in these heated exchanges. This narrative took for granted the significant social frictions created by Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and mass incarceration, the worry about Hispanic immigration, and the fear of Islamic extremism. Still, significant buzzwords of “safe space” and “trigger warning” propelled fear that anybody might declare their narrow viewpoint as “safe” and themselves “triggered” by any viewpoints in tension with their own, and media coverage could easily find significant and worrisome examples of both.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015. Peter Beinart, “Political Correctness Is Back,” *The Atlantic*, October 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind.”

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Both terms originated before the current culture solidified their usage to refer almost exclusively to speech. According to Catherine Fox, safe spaces first appeared on college campuses in the early 1990s as physical places for LGBTQ+ students to be welcomed.<sup>13</sup> The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) spearheaded this effort through its safe space training kit and ally network programs, which the group still continues today. The term “trigger warning” has a more ambiguous origin, though it appears to have first emerged as a concept relating to treatment for PTSD. The term later gained prevalence in self-help and feminist forums on the Internet, “where they allowed readers who had suffered from traumatic events like sexual assault to avoid graphic content that might trigger flashbacks or panic attacks.”<sup>14</sup> The social significance of both terms had, however, shifted from their original meanings when Lukianoff and Haidt documented cases of students exempting themselves from texts, videos, or experiences they found offensive or even just causing strong emotional responses in classroom settings.<sup>15</sup> Exact definitions of both terms remain obscure despite their widespread usage in contemporary culture. The generally polarized understanding of these terms, and their perceived dangers or necessities as policies, is possible because the terms are poorly defined among American news-consuming publics.

Corporatization of education has also led to a shift in focus, onto students’ emotional well-being and built environments that are “conductive” to learning, whatever that means. At the same time, social demands make the expected outcomes of collegiate experience more severe and anxiety producing. In 2015 the number one mental health diagnosis among American

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<sup>13</sup> Catherine Fox, "From Transaction to Transformation: (En)Countering White Heteronormativity in "Safe Spaces" *College English* 69, no. 5 (May 2007): 498.

<sup>14</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015.

college students officially changed from depression to anxiety.<sup>16</sup> According to *The Wall Street Journal*, in 2016 “nation-wide, 17 percent of college students were diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems during the past year, and 13.9 percent were diagnosed with or treated for depression, according to a spring 2016 survey of 95,761 students by the American College Health Association.”<sup>17</sup> The percentage of college students with anxiety rose over five percent since 2011.<sup>18</sup> The conversations surrounding speech on campuses inevitably are attuned to students’ mental health, though institutions disagree on what policies best support their students, and by extension their public images.

Recent policy changes also accompany the current pre-occupation with speech in American higher education, reflecting the corporatization and anxiety. The federal Departments of Justice and Education edited language in a statute defining sexual harassment to broaden the punishable offense from speech that is “objectively offensive” to speech that is “unwelcome” in 2013.<sup>19</sup> According to Lukianoff and Haidt, this legislative shift in sexual harassment law permeates all anti-discrimination statutes. “Everyone is supposed to rely upon his or her subjective feelings to decide whether a comment by a professor or a fellow student is unwelcome, and therefore grounds for a harassment claim. Emotional reasoning is now accepted as evidence.”<sup>20</sup>

While there are multiple sides to the safe space and campus speech discussions, and these debates have an impact

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<sup>16</sup> Abby Jackson, "Depression Is No Longer the No. 1 Mental-health Concern among College Students." *Business Insider*, June 2, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Peterson, "Students Flood College Mental-Health Centers," *The Wall Street Journal* October 10, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Peterson, 2016

<sup>19</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015

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on university policy and even federal legislation, the majority of conversation surrounding this issue within the public sphere has been unsophisticated and polarized by political affiliations. Opponents of the proliferation of safe spaces and trigger warnings claim that their prevalence on college campuses prevent students from growing intellectually because they prevent students from encountering ideas that make them uncomfortable. Proponents of the creation of safe spaces and the use of trigger warnings see them as methods that actually allow for a more diverse and sincere exchange of ideas within classrooms because they respect students' multiple backgrounds. Responding to *The New York Times'* August 2016 article on the University of Chicago acceptance letter, three recent alums of peer Ivy League institutions claim that trigger warnings are a necessity on campuses and that Dean Ellison fundamentally misunderstands the purpose of trigger warnings.<sup>21</sup> An article by *The Washington Post*, published in May of 2016, asks local college students to discuss "the new language of protest" by explaining what the cultural buzzwords mean to them as individuals. When asked how they respond to the sentiment that millennials are coddled one student retorted: "I don't think that respecting people's existence is coddling, to be very frank."<sup>22</sup>

Clearly the contemporary controversy over campus speech and speech regulation is not novel. The University of Chicago class of 2020 acceptance letter is not particularly novel either. The letter is not unique in substance when compared to other texts in the current public debate about campus speech policy, "politically correct culture," or student well-being and activism. When analyzing the content, the text simply condemns trigger warnings and safe spaces. Official statements

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<sup>21</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/free-speech-on-campus.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/free-speech-on-campus.html?_r=0) (accessed November 21, 2016)

<sup>22</sup> Teddy Amenabar, "The New Language of Protest." *Washington Post* May 19, 2016.

from other institutions of higher education have been just as firm in their approval of these policies. Rather, the University of Chicago letter is unique in stylistic structure and in its appeals of authority. The acceptance letter format represents an unprecedented “insider’s view” of campus speech policy. Whereas previous prominent texts have occurred entirely outside of the academy or entirely within, this latest text blurs the lines between university and public audiences, claiming authority in both realms.

The letter serves first and foremost as a traditional acceptance letter to incoming students from the echelons of the university administration. The intended primary audience (the students) first read this text in April or May of 2016, a full two to three months before the letter was widely circulated in media outlets and showcased to a general news-consuming public. Although this text is unique within the current public sphere’s body of work addressing campus speech and safe spaces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not novel, historically speaking. The University of Chicago letter is the latest text in over 50 years of discussion concerning free speech and speech regulation in American colleges. This text’s importance lies more in *how* it condemns safe spaces and trigger warnings, more so than the act of condemnation.

***Not Your Average Acceptance Letter:  
The Rhetorical Situation of the Text***

In addition to the cultural situation, the University of Chicago acceptance letter resides in a rhetorical situation where constraints of genre, audience, and exigence apply to the text. Various components of the rhetorical situation indicate that the University of Chicago letter differs from the broader body of work in the public sphere surrounding the discussion of safe spaces and speech on college campuses.

As far as timing goes, Dean Ellison, the speaker in the letter and presumed author, is a newcomer to the University of

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Chicago administration. Dean Ellison joined the university's administration in July of 2014, just before the start of a new academic year.<sup>23</sup> His previous work was at Harvard University where he was an Associate Dean and a professor of near eastern languages and cultures.<sup>24</sup> Although the letter is not his first act as dean of the college, it is the first to make headlines outside of the University of Chicago and broader higher education circles. The letter might also be Dean Ellison's first letter to incoming students since his arrival at the college.

There are structural constraints to the text. As an acceptance letter, Dean Ellison's message must be formal (mailed in an era of email efficiency), short, and plain-styled. However, other constraints guide the structure of the letter as well. The language is clear in outlining the University of Chicago's goals and firm in disapproving of safe spaces and trigger warnings because the text is intended for more than one audience. *The US News & World Report* Higher Education section ranked the University of Chicago as the third best university in the nation for the 2017 edition of their annual report.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, according to the university's student newspaper, *The Chicago Maroon*, the undergraduate college accepted its lowest percentage of applicants for the 2020 class (out of the largest application pool) in its history. The college only admitted 7.9 percent of 31,411 students who had applied.<sup>26</sup> The University of Chicago's preeminence means these genre norms will be especially scrutinized by undecided students and a press eager to spotlight nascent trends from university leaders. Dean

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<sup>23</sup>Alice Xiao, "Dean Ellison Holds Fireside Chat." *The Chicago Maroon* January 30, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> US News & World Report "Best National Universities": <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities> (accessed December, 3 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Payton Alie, "University Admits Record Low 7.9 Percent to Class of 2020." *The Chicago Maroon* May 31, 2016.

Ellison probably understood this when the letters were signed and mailed. While incoming students were intended recipients, the letter was probably penned with the intent of one day circulating broadly in a news cycle.

The two audiences for Dean Ellison's text are both mediated and a disparate collection of individuals rather than a unified group reading the text together; however, the audiences differ in every other respect. The primary audience for the text was the group of graduating high school students who received the acceptance letter. This collection of individuals received their letters in the spring of 2016 and the text appears to serve its genre's purpose as an acceptance letter welcoming students to the university. The second audience is the collection of administrators and faculty at peer institutions who received the text through digital copies that were flanked with news commentary in late August of 2016. The letter distinguishes the University of Chicago from peers that either do not have a firm stance on campus speech and safe spaces or have a stance in the opposite direction. For example, the dean of Yale's undergraduate college expressed the college's commitment to safe spaces in a December 2015 Q&A style interview with *TIME* magazine:

Students calling for a safe space are not saying they want their classroom to be a safe space. They know the class is going to be a place to push and be pushed, where unusual or different ideas are going to be put out there and they have to wrestle with them.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Tessa Berenson and Haley Sweetland Edwards, "Exclusive: Yale's Dean Defends 'Safe Spaces' Amid Campus Protests." *Time*, December 9, 2015.

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The interview followed a widely circulated scandal about cultural appropriation and policing self-expression surrounding an email about Halloween costumes at Yale.<sup>28</sup>

The first audience for the University of Chicago text appears to be a non-rhetorical one. Accepted students, especially since they are not a unified audience beyond the common thread of their age and academic achievement, cannot respond effectively to the text or the exigence behind it. They can accept the policy of their new academic home or they can reject the policy either by refusing to attend the institution or challenge it once arriving to campus in the fall. The second audience is rhetorical, although it is not addressed directly by the speaker in the text. Peer institutions can respond to the text: they can affirm or condemn the University of Chicago's action and they can change their own policies, given enough time.

Why would there be a secondary rhetorical audience for this text? The University of Chicago has been lauded as a model for free expression and speech policy in higher education in the United States. Shortly after the text of the letter was widely spread among media outlets in August of 2016, the Editorial Board of *The Chicago Tribune* declared the "U. Of Chicago is the University of Common Sense."<sup>29</sup> Earlier, in September of 2015, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonprofit educational foundation and advocacy group, announced a partnership with the University of Chicago to encourage other American higher education institutions to adopt free expression policies modeled off of the Chicago institution.<sup>30</sup> One goal of circulating this text in

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<sup>28</sup> Liam Stack, "Yale's Halloween Advice Stokes a Racially Charged Debate." *The New York Times* November 8, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> *The Chicago Tribune* Editorial Board, "Why the U. of Chicago Is the University of Common Sense." *Chicagotribune.com* August 26, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> "FIRE Launches Campaign in Support of University of Chicago Free Speech Statement." FIRE. September 28, 2015.

mainstream media, a more visible venue than the institution's obscure academic policy webpage or partnering nonprofits' websites, is to encourage the letter's secondary, rhetorical audience to change their behavior. Lastly, an influential group that appears to have been left out of both the rhetorical audience and the role of speaker for the text is the faculty at the University of Chicago. According to a letter from a University of Chicago associate professor of history in response to a *New York Times* article about the text, the faculty was not made aware of Dean Ellison's statement before the letter was mailed. In fact "the first that members of the University of Chicago faculty learned of the letter on speech policy issued by Chicago's dean of students, John Ellison, was from newspapers" in August.<sup>31</sup> The omission of faculty, from the roles of both speaker and audience, is pertinent because of the dominant theme of unified community within the University of Chicago acceptance letter.

The final component of the rhetorical situation is the strong commitment by the University of Chicago to free expression amid the November 2015 uncertainties for free speech in higher education, an exigence that goaded multiple responses by the university. The University of Chicago's Committee on Freedom of Expression has compiled statements pertaining to academic freedom of faculty and students since 1995 and published them on their website.<sup>32</sup> The committee, formed in July of 2014 by the president and provost, was tasked with creating a vision statement "reflecting the University's commitment to and tolerance of multiple forms of free expres-

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<sup>31</sup> Stanley, 2016. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/free-speech-on-campus.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/free-speech-on-campus.html?_r=0)> (accessed November 21, 2016)

<sup>32</sup> University of Chicago, <<https://freexpression.uchicago.edu/page/statements-and-messages>> (accessed November 21, 2016)

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sion.”<sup>33</sup> The committee issued their statement on January 1st of 2015. A portion of it reads:

Although members of the University community are free to criticize and contest the views expressed on campus, and to criticize and contest speakers who are invited to express their views on campus, they may not obstruct or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe.<sup>34</sup>

Given the history of free expression and free speech at the University of Chicago, the recent acceptance letter appears to just build on previous work within the institution. There is one important caveat though: the letter from Dean Ellison is the first text in this body of internal documents to explicitly mention, much less condemn, trigger warnings and intellectual safe spaces. Additionally, the letter is directed to a primary audience of incoming members of the University of Chicago community; all other statements on campus speech compiled by the committee are directed to a primary audience of community members who have already been assimilated into the University of Chicago group. The text clearly responds to the broader cultural exigence beyond the University of Chicago by adopting the broader culture’s significant language to share the institution’s message of free expression to new and disparate audiences through the unconventional medium of a college acceptance letter.

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<sup>33</sup>Robert J. Zimmer and Eric D. Isaacs. "President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Eric D. Isaacs: Letter to Campus." UChicago News. September 25, 2014.

<sup>34</sup>Geoffrey Stone, Marianne Bertrand, Angela Olinto, Mark Siegler, David Strauss, Kenneth Warren, and Amanda Woodward. Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression. University of Chicago. Accessed November 21, 2016.  
<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf> (accessed November 21, 2016)

***Community Freedom is more important than You:  
Ideographs and Authority within the Text***

At first glance the University of Chicago acceptance letter does not appear to be a rhetorical text. The language is brusque and the style is low and instructional, even bureaucratic. One could read the text as a crash course in speech policy for an incoming member of the university community. However, there are subtle persuasive appeals working behind the scenes to establish an argument about the validity of the University of Chicago's speech policy. Within the University of Chicago acceptance letter there are dominant ideographs that present separate juxtapositions of individual liberty and group conformity. The ideograph of <freedom> establishes a dichotomy between the University of Chicago's policies and those supporting trigger warnings and safe spaces. The secondary terms of <trigger warnings> and <safe spaces> also serve as ideographs, albeit negative ones. The ideograph of <community> juxtaposes current members of the University of Chicago community ("we") with the intended primary audience, the high school student to whom the letter is addressed ("you"). This final ideograph further guides the structure of the text in terms of pronoun usage, direct address, and active versus passive verbs. When the University of Chicago text is compared with others within the genre of college acceptance letters, elements of choice and agency common to other acceptance letters are absent. All of these components converge into a subtly persuasive text that prevents the primary and secondary audiences from challenging the assumptions about community, speech, and speech policies that the text presents.

The ideographs of <freedom> and <community> are widespread throughout the acceptance letter. <Freedom,> as it is presented in the text, concerns "academic freedom,"<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 12, 22, and 23

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freedom of “inquiry and expression,”<sup>36</sup> and freedom to “espouse ideas”<sup>37</sup> or “exchange” ideas.<sup>38</sup> The term is presented nine times within the letter and is present in every paragraph except the first and last ones. The emphasis on freedom, a positive ideograph within American culture, is juxtaposed with the discussion of safe spaces and trigger warnings in the third paragraph:

our commitment to *academic freedom* means 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.<sup>39</sup> [italics added]

This is the only time trigger warnings and safe spaces are mentioned. Despite their relative absence compared to <freedom> these terms are no less powerful as ideographs that dominate the text. According to Michael McGee, who first theorized ideographic criticism, “an ideograph is always understood in its relation to another.”<sup>40</sup> Under the dichotomous relationship established in the text, the University of Chicago’s policy is “good” because it supports “freedom” and the alternative of trigger warnings and safe spaces are “bad” because they do not. However, trigger warnings and intellectual safe spaces are not explicitly defined in the text and as such they almost function as empty signifiers, taking on whatever meaning a

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<sup>36</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 6, 7, and 8

<sup>37</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 18

<sup>38</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 16

<sup>39</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 12 - 15

<sup>40</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, "The “ideograph”: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 14.

reader wishes. The only definition the reader receives about these concepts is that they allow individuals to “retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.” If this were always the case, then why would comparable American institutions like Yale support safe spaces and trigger warnings? The fact that neither the “bad” trigger warnings or safe spaces are explicitly defined, especially because they are more ambiguous terms than freedom, presents a troubling dichotomy that does not allow for an alternative interpretation of these policies where they are not antithetical to the goals of higher education.

<Community,> as it is presented in the text, concerns the University of Chicago both as a monolithic group and individual “members”<sup>41</sup> within the group. The term “our community” is presented twice while “members of our community” is presented three times. The pronouns “our” and “we” are more frequent, appearing in every paragraph of the text except the last one. The emphasis on community, both through explicit naming of the term and through collective pronouns, is juxtaposed with the direct address towards the primary audience. Throughout the text, “our” and “we” is paired with “you,” the teenaged recipient of the acceptance letter. For example:

*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.*<sup>42</sup> [italics added]

This example indicates that the “you” is secondary to the “we” of the <community>. The “you,” an incoming member of the community, is expected to conform to the community norms, even (or especially) when they “cause

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<sup>41</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 7, 8, 10, and 18

<sup>42</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 9 - 11

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discomfort.” Whereas the collective pronouns appear in almost every paragraph, “you” is noticeably absent from paragraphs three through five, which discuss trigger warnings, the goal of diversity within the community, and the history of the University of Chicago’s “debate, and even scandal, resulting from our commitment to academic freedom.”<sup>43</sup> The non-direct address within this section is understandable, since these paragraphs outline community norms. However, this central section is also the only section of the entire text that uses verbs of stasis rather than active verbs. The fourth paragraph has no human actor. The subjects are concepts, not people such as “we” or “you.” This paragraph features emotional appeals and actions to support community goals that have yet to be fulfilled. “Diversity...*is* a fundamental strength of *our community*,” line 17 reads. But who will ensure that the community is in fact diverse in “opinion and background?”<sup>44</sup> “The members of our community *must have* the *freedom* to espouse and explore...ideas;” but who will work to guarantee that freedom?<sup>45</sup> The lack of “you” pronouns represents a shift away from directly addressing the primary audience. The removal of active verbs in this section of the text persuades the reader to enter a type of contract where they fill in the blanks left by the text. In order for the “you” to join the “we,” the reader must become the actor that ensures the community’s goals of diversity and freedom are met, or at the very least does not impede the community from ensuring the goals are met. The sentences in paragraph four also appeal to the reader to act on the virtuous ideographs presented in the text. The accepted student should uphold standards of <freedom> – by rejecting trigger warnings and safe spaces – to support the <community>.

Compared to other university acceptance letters, the University of Chicago text diverges from genre norms in two

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<sup>43</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 23

<sup>44</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 17

<sup>45</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 18-19

significant ways. The University of Chicago letter does not assume that the primary reader, the graduating high school senior, might choose a different college or university to continue their education, nor does it include relevant supplementary information like an “Accepted Students Day” date or final deposit deadline for enrollment. For example, a 2013 *Washington Post* article on American college acceptance letters included 10 examples of elite Eastern Seaboard universities’ acceptance and denial letters for the class of 2017.<sup>46</sup> Half of the acceptance letters included language that implied that the student’s choice to attend college at the institution they were accepted into was not final. An acceptance letter from MIT explicitly stated, “You’ll likely have offers of admission from many fine schools, but we hope that you’ll choose to enroll at MIT.” Additionally, nine of the 10 acceptance letters included important dates for students, such as final deposit deadlines and days to visit campus with peer accepted students. While these 10 institutions are hardly representative of the letters sent annually by hundreds of universities across the United States, they do represent norms for the genre: a conciliation that the reader has agency in accepting or rejecting the school and some basic guidance in the form of “next steps” to fulfill that agency. The absence of an appeal to students to finalize their decision further emphasizes the dominance of <community> in the text. The language assumes that the student reading the letter is already a neophyte member of the University of Chicago and that he or she will not reject this community by choosing to “continue [their] intellectual journey” somewhere else.<sup>47</sup> The last line of the University of Chicago letter says it best: “See you in September!”<sup>48</sup> Additionally, the fact that the University

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<sup>46</sup> Richardson, Linch, and Anderson, March 31, 2013. <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/local/university-acceptance-and-denial-letters/86/> (accessed December, 3 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 4

<sup>48</sup> Ellison, 2016, line 27

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of Chicago letter does not address practical “next steps” for students represents a framing device that reveals the text’s secondary audience of administrators at peer institutions. There is no need to discuss the logistics behind the transition from high school to college because the secondary audience does not need this information. The practicality of choosing a college and the logistical steps that accompany it are eclipsed by the prominence of <freedom> and <community> and their implications for campus speech within the text. The text appears to follow the constraints of the college acceptance letter genre merely in the length of the letter and in language presented in the first and final paragraphs congratulating the recipient for acceptance into the University of Chicago community. In this way, the expected genre of a college acceptance letter “brackets” the actual text concerning <freedom,> <community,> and speech.

The prevalence of culturally “good” ideographs and the juxtapositions between <freedom> and trigger warnings and safe spaces as well as between “we the community” and “you the incoming student” creates a virtuous authoritarian tone. The community within the University of Chicago is upholding the important cultural value of freedom by condemning trigger warnings and safe spaces, even if incoming members of the community want these policies. The work that the reader participates in to “fill in the blanks” left by static verbs in paragraph four reinforces the authority of the community. Further, the lack of agency conceded to the reader in choosing a college, arguably a genre norm for college acceptance letters, completes this work to assert authority. However, all of these components pertain to the primary audience of accepted high school students. The same authoritarian tone applies to the secondary rhetorical audience of administrators at peer institutions. Without considering the “we” versus “you” juxtaposition the authoritarian tone is not as evident, but the prevalence of <freedom,> and its juxtaposition with trigger warnings and safe spaces, is not contingent on a designated audience. The

emphasis on <freedom,> an ideograph with very positive and powerful connotations in American society, and the assertion that “one of the University of Chicago’s defining characteristics is our commitment to *freedom* of inquiry and expression” still aligns the speaker in the text to a culturally entrenched moral superiority and the authority that stems from it.<sup>49</sup> This authority is conveyed whether the audience is subordinate to the University of Chicago community, as an incoming college student, or on the same level of the hierarchy, as a member of a peer institution of higher education. The prevalence of ideographs and their moral undercurrents, the juxtapositions these ideographs present as well as the structure of pronoun usage, direct address, and active language all establish a text that might prevent audience members from questioning the claims the text presents about speech and community.

***Merging Publics’ Understanding of Campus Speech:  
Why This Letter Matters***

It may be too early to tell the effect that the University of Chicago acceptance letter had on the intended audiences or on the broader debate addressing safe spaces and free speech on college campuses. However, media response in the three months since the letter was circulated broadly among a general American public indicate the wider importance of this text to the current cultural moment.

According to Google Trends, both the terms “trigger warnings” and “safe space” saw an increase in popularity on the search engine during the week of August 21st to 28th 2016, the same week that NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other major news outlets released coverage on the University of Chicago acceptance letter.<sup>50</sup> “Trigger warning”

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<sup>49</sup> Ellison, 2016, lines 5-6

<sup>50</sup> Google Trends. Accessed November 21, 2016.

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saw peak popularity during this week for the first time in a decade, whereas the popularity for “safe space” was at 53 percent popularity, with peak popularity in the fall of 2015, according to the Google Trends website on November 21st. When comparing the two cultural buzzwords with the term “University of Chicago letter,” there was a correlation in increases in popularity in August of 2016 (Figure 1).

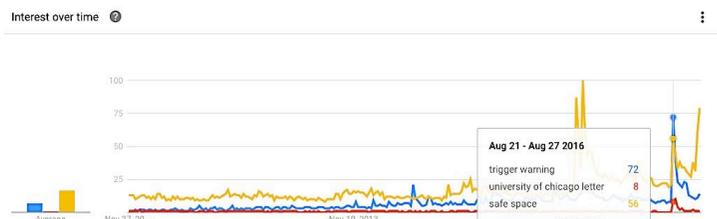


Figure 1. Popularity of terms “trigger warning” (in blue) “university of chicago letter” (in red), and “safe space” (in yellow) from November 27, 2011 to November 21, 2016. Accessed November 21, 2016.

The University of Chicago letter gained this prominence by addressing separate audiences (higher education institution communities and general news-reading publics) through the novel medium of a college acceptance letter and by adopting significant, though relatively abstract, vocabulary. The letter went one step beyond previous literature concerning safe spaces and speech regulation to offer unique perspectives to each audience. Laypeople consuming the text through the news cycle gained an “insider’s view” of the college admissions process while peer institutions and incoming student members of the University of Chicago community saw freedom of expression and campus speech policy defined against intellectual safe spaces and trigger warnings. This dual address to distinct audiences merged the segmented readers into one public unified by the act of reading the letter. Apart from this common ground, however, the readers diverged on their opinions concerning the purpose behind the letter and the University of Chicago’s speech policy itself.

Apart from the merging of audiences into a unified public, the text's structure also presents a persuasive appeal to prevent the reader from questioning the philosophical assumptions made in the text. The adoption of culturally significant ideographs and buzzwords beyond the institution's internal speech policy vocabulary allowed the text to gain prominence in the news cycle. When paired with the virtuous authoritarian tone of the letter, it further entrenches the broader cultural narrative of safe spaces as a dangerous and pervasive threat to higher education that must be stopped. The letter does not allow for any questioning of what is meant by "intellectual safe space" or why this term is in opposition to <freedom>. When this persuasive appeal is pushed beyond an insular university community into a politically polarized cultural situation, it further justifies the staunch opinions on either side of the issue, without fostering informed or sophisticated discussion. By failing to define common, relatively abstract terms in the text, advocates of safe spaces and trigger warnings can assert that Dean Ellison doesn't know what he's talking about in the acceptance letter. By creating a dichotomy between these speech policies and the unquestionable virtue of freedom, opponents of safe spaces and trigger warnings can assert a moral high ground, using the letter to justify their claims. Either way, the text creates a wall of authority that buttresses against engaging the "other side;" it functions to merely reinforce beliefs about the necessity or danger of certain speech policies. While it remains to be seen whether the University of Chicago acceptance letter to the Class of 2020 will have this effect – or any lasting effect, for that matter – on the broader contemporary fascination with speech and its regulation on college campuses, the unique structure of the text, its subtle persuasive appeals, and its emergence in a time marked by social polarization suggest that this is not the last time we will see the merging of the academy and the broader media market. The implications of this merge, particularly on complex topics like academic freedom, speech, and identity, are pertinent. Letters like this

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one seem to not only frame accepted students as fated customers, but also seek out mediated audiences that will polarize the discourse of college around unnecessary, empty buzzwords linked to central political ideographs of freedom and speech. However, there are much better spaces to discuss the words and symbols that will “never hurt us” than a college acceptance letter.

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