Academia wrestles anew with how freely words can flow

By Dugan Arnett GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 07, 2016

When the University of Chicago recently came out against the use of so-called “trigger warnings,” saying they represented a danger to campus free speech, it represented something of a rarity.

Few universities have taken a stance on trigger warnings, which initially were used to alert audiences that an upcoming discussion on, say, rape or other violence could trigger a trauma response for some. Most schools leave the matter up to individual professors.

But the widespread publicity surrounding the Chicago announcement — delivered in August in a letter to incoming freshmen — ignited fresh concerns that these alerts, increasingly used to flag a much wider variety of potentially offensive or upsetting material, represent the latest in a series of affronts to freedom of expression.

Long considered havens for the free flow of discussion and ideas, American colleges and universities in recent years have increasingly become battlegrounds over disputed speakers or events. In May, student protests at DePaul University halted a speech by conservative pundit Milo Yiannopoulos. Christine Lagarde, International Monetary Fund chief, and Condoleezza Rice, former secretary of state, withdrew as 2014 commencement speakers at Smith College and Rutgers University, respectively, amid campus outcries.

In other cases, speech in the classroom has come under fire. A tenured professor at Louisiana State University was fired last year after using vulgar language and creating what administrators deemed a hostile learning environment. And at Marquette University, another professor was reportedly suspended after insulting a colleague in a blog post, accusing her of curtailing classroom discussion against gay marriage because of her political beliefs.

Into this climate arrives the issue of trigger warnings — a phenomenon that some say is already altering the subject matter professors feel comfortable broaching in class.

“How could a teacher not be affected by this, if they would like to create a classroom experience that is not causing distress?” said Harvard Law School professor Jeannie Suk Gersen in an e-mail. “So teachers, myself included, make some compromises.”

In a 2014 New Yorker piece, in fact, Gersen wrote that student complaints regarding the teaching of rape law had grown so significant that roughly a dozen new criminal law teachers she’d spoken with had decided against teaching rape law altogether.

While trigger warnings have existed, at least informally, for decades, it’s only recently that they’ve garnered deeper examination.

Many professors, after all, have provided students a common-courtesy warning before delving into sensitive subject matter — such as rape or graphic violence — allowing vulnerable students to emotionally prepare for the discussion at hand.

“I just don’t get why people would want to risk truly hurting someone or damaging their mental and emotional well-being if it could be easily avoided,” said Alice Lahoda, a senior political science major at Northeastern University. “It’s never going to be completely avoided, but if you can reduce it dramatically, why wouldn’t you?”
But the problem has arisen, some say, as the number of topics thought to merit warnings has mushroomed.

The general unease of colleges over the warnings and other potentially inflammatory or upsetting speech can be traced to a number of factors, educators and higher-education experts say. Students who, in paying ever-growing tuition costs, increasingly view themselves as customers. A decline in tenure that has left some professors feeling more vulnerable to student complaints and unflattering course evaluations.

And not least of all, a general wariness toward a millennial generation often viewed as entitled.

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Stephen Prothero, Boston University professor

“Some professors see today’s students as constantly demanding accommodations,” said Sarah Brown, a reporter for the Chronicle of Higher Education who often writes about campus life issues. “So they’re thinking of these trigger warnings as these entitled students wanting us to make everything the way they want it. They think, ‘What’s next? What else are students going to demand?’ ”

It’s not an unwarranted concern.

A Gallup poll released this year found 69 percent of college students who responded say schools should be able to restrict slurs and other language that are intentionally offensive to certain groups, but 72 percent draw the line at curbing political views.

In a recent survey of college professors conducted in part by the National Coalition Against Censorship, meanwhile, respondents said they’d fielded student complaints on everything from religious excerpts to spiders. At Columbia University, a student newspaper editorial last year argued that Greek mythology deserved a trigger warning. And a 2014 push by students at the University of California, Santa Barbara — eventually squashed — called for students to be excused from class, without penalty, should they deem certain material too distressing.

All of it has left some academics grappling with where to draw the line.

“What’s the end result?” said Karl Giberson, a professor of science and religion at Stonehill College in Easton. “It ends up being this kind of frightening scenario where everybody is in their own ivory tower, where they can believe whatever they want and they never get into a conversation that’s going to upset them.”

In the case of trigger warnings, however, there’s little evidence to suggest that universities are pushing for widespread adoption.

According to the NCAC survey, less than 1 percent of respondents reported that their institutions had adopted formal rules. Schools that have attempted to implement such guidelines — including Ohio’s Oberlin College a few years back — have been met with considerable backlash.

“The [fear] is that ‘Oh, God, all of a sudden we have censorship at the university,’ ” said Stephen Prothero, a professor in Boston University’s religion department. “And I haven’t seen that. I think this is a case where maybe the fears outweigh the real dangers.”
Far more common, it seems, are subtle institutional suggestions that professors conduct themselves in a respectful, common-sensical manner, leaving teachers to develop their own strategies for balancing the free flow of ideas and the emotional well-being of students.

Perhaps the most foolproof approach comes courtesy of one humanities professor who took part in the NCAC survey.

At the start of each semester, the professor has taken to offering a simple, blanket statement: *There’s something in this class, the warning goes, to offend everybody.*

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