

Faculty
Conference
Papers

2019



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Introduction

FIRE's 2019 Faculty Conference was held in Boston from October 31 to November 2, with conference sessions and discussions taking place at Boston University. As in previous years, the mission of the conference was to bring together an interdisciplinary group of faculty for a weekend of discussion on topics concerning free speech and academic freedom, anchored by the presentation of papers selected through an open call for proposals. The volume here consists of several of the papers presented in 2019.

From our current vantage point, a conference where you could gather several dozen professors together seems like a kind of lost paradise. Within months of our gathering in Boston, the COVID-19 pandemic would remake most of our daily lives from top to bottom. Our institutions of higher learning have been among the most profoundly affected, with instruction either going wholly remote or existing in a hybrid state of in-person and virtual education. However universities have managed their affairs during the pandemic, it will still be some time before they are back to managing as they once did.

Another shock higher education experienced in the year since our 2019 conference is the effects of the renewed focus on issues of racial injustice brought to the forefront by George Floyd's death in Minneapolis and the resulting protests, some of which gave way to rioting and looting. It was clear immediately to FIRE that the nationwide protests of last summer would have ramifications for higher education: Speech on sensitive racial and cultural topics would be treated with heightened scrutiny, and the pressure to enforce ideological orthodoxies would increase, as happens in times of crisis.

We underestimated just how fraught campus discourse would become, however. Requests for FIRE's assistance reached unprecedented levels, even during the summer, which is normally a quieter time for our organization. Numerous professors found themselves the target of campaigns calling for them to be fired for offering reasoned critiques of prevailing sentiments, or even inadvertently offending students or others. These campaigns played out in the background of a nationwide debate on "cancel culture" spurred by these very same issues. Meanwhile, academic freedom faced enough structural challenges as it was, with tenure in decline,

administrative prerogatives repeatedly asserting themselves over the faculty's role in institutional governance, and students growing increasingly lukewarm about free speech ideals.

It is unfortunate that the COVID-19 pandemic prevented FIRE from holding our annual conference as planned in 2020, because the year's events have illustrated just how important it is to provide a space for professors to network with, as well as to vigorously debate, peers who share their concern for the state of free speech in higher education. Fortunately, we plan a return to form with our conference in October 2021. In the meantime we are working to develop new resources and tools to keep faculty connected and engaged and to help them defend their rights and educate themselves on free speech at their institutions. Faculty looking to stay connected to FIRE's work and advocacy are encouraged to sign up for FIRE's Faculty Network,¹ and to keep an eye on our Faculty Resources page,² where we house our growing catalogue of faculty content.

Faculty who present at our conferences are given time to review and revise their papers, sometimes significantly, based on feedback received from panelists and attendees as well as their own further reflections, before FIRE issues this volume. The upending of personal and professional lives that has been a signature of the pandemic has been among the factors contributing to the extended timetable for producing this volume. The last year's roadblocks, however, can't diminish our pride in showcasing a variety of scholarly perspectives on pressing issues, or our gratification at our conference's ability to consistently draw the heterodox group of attendees it does. In the current climate, the need to redouble our commitment to providing this outlet is clear.

A final word: The papers contained herein represent the scholarly and personal opinions of the authors, and not necessarily those of FIRE. And while the papers are bound together for the purposes of this volume, the work is in all other ways the sole property of the authors to do with as they wish.

¹ <https://www.thefire.org/get-involved/join-the-fire-faculty-network/>.

² <https://www.thefire.org/resources/free-speech-resources-for-faculty/>.

Are Trigger Warnings Countertherapeutic?

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Trigger warnings have been the flashpoint of a highly polarized controversy embroiling academia (McNally, 2014). Critics complain that such warnings undermine academic freedom and coddle a cohort of students accustomed to overprotective parenting (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

Proponents of trigger warnings argue that many students have suffered trauma, exemplified by alarming rates of sexual assault on campus. Accordingly, they say, professors need to issue warnings about lecture topics and reading assignments likely to trigger intense emotional reactions in vulnerable students. At the very least, trigger warnings may enable students to brace themselves emotionally, mitigating their distress. Indeed, predictable and controllable stressors are less upsetting and pathogenic than unpredictable ones (e.g., Başoğlu, 2017; Mineka & Kihlstrom, 1978).

In some cases, however, professors should exempt especially vulnerable students from attending certain classes or other course requirements, and arrange alternative, less triggering ones for them. Denying such accommodations would imperil their access to an educational environment where they are free to learn.

The trigger warning debate has been framed as affirming the needs of survivors versus defending the academic freedom of professors. Yet there are reasons to believe that trigger warnings, however well-intentioned, are not in the best interests of the very students they are meant to protect. The purpose of my essay is to show why this may be the case.

Triggers, Trauma, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

For the past several decades, Americans have become accustomed to films rated as PG-13, R, or X to notify parents about those unsuitable for children of a certain age. More recently, cable news shows have alerted viewers about potentially disturbing footage depicting terrorist attacks or other forms of violence. Yet the proximal antecedent of trigger warnings in the classroom hails from the feminist blogosphere. Especially on sites concerning sexual abuse and violence, bloggers have issued warnings about content that may trigger distress in some readers.

The concept of an emotional *trigger* originated in the field of traumatic stress studies. The focus of this field is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) a psychiatric syndrome that can arise from exposure to one or more traumatic stressors (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, pp. 271-280). PTSD comprises four clusters of symptoms. The *intrusion* cluster includes reexperiencing symptoms such as nightmares, intrusive sensory images of the trauma (“flashbacks”), and psychophysiologic reactivity to reminders of the trauma. The *avoidance* cluster includes efforts to avoid cues, feelings, and thoughts related to the trauma. The *negative alterations in cognition and mood* includes persistent shame, anger, and difficulty experiencing positive emotions. The *alterations in arousal and reactivity* cluster includes exaggerated startle responses, irritability, hypervigilance, and sleep difficulties. A requisite number of symptoms from each of these clusters must be present for at least one month and must cause distress or impairment in everyday life to qualify for the diagnosis of PTSD. Moreover, to count as traumatic, the stressor must be severe (i.e., involving threat of death or serious injury or sexual violence).

The release of stress hormones during a terrifying traumatic event tends to render the central features of the experience highly memorable, occasionally at the expense of trivial peripheral details (McNally, 2003, pp. 105-158). However, the mind does not operate like a videotape machine that records every detail with flawless fidelity. Nevertheless, emotionally intense experiences, especially traumatic ones, tend to be recalled very well (e.g., Porter &

Peace, 2007). Indeed, contrary to notions that intense emotion results in repression or dissociation of traumatic memories (e.g., Freud, 1896; Spiegel, 1997) rendering them inaccessible to awareness, memories of trauma are remembered all too well as PTSD exemplifies (McNally, 2007a, 2012). Indeed, people with PTSD recall their trauma with a vividness and emotional intensity approximating that of the original experience.

In summary, the primary aim of trigger warnings is to alert trauma survivors to cues capable of triggering reexperiencing symptoms of PTSD. However, some proponents argue for a much broader range of trigger warnings to alert students about other topics ranging from suicide, racism, colonialism, and so forth.

Putting Trigger Warnings in Context: Facts About PTSD

When considering the relevance and importance of trigger warnings in academia, there are several important issues to keep in mind. First, although trauma is common, PTSD is relatively rare. For example, the epidemiologists Breslau and Kessler (2001) found that 89.6% of a representative sample of 2,181 adults in metropolitan Detroit reported having experienced at least one qualifying trauma (e.g., rape, serious accidents, natural disasters, interpersonal violence, sudden death of a loved one), yet only 9.2% of them developed PTSD. To be sure, in the days and weeks following a terrifying, life-threatening trauma, many people experience some PTSD symptoms, such as difficulty sleeping, being hypervigilant (“on edge”), and having intrusive images about what happened. But the diagnosis requires that symptoms persist for at least one month.

Second, psychophysiological reactivity triggered by reminders of one’s trauma is far more pronounced in survivors with PTSD than in survivors without PTSD (e.g., Orr, McNally, Shalev, & Rosen, 2004) including women reporting histories of childhood sexual abuse (Shin et al., 1999). For example, in the script-driven laboratory paradigm (e.g., Pitman, Orr, Foa, de Jong, & Claiborn, 1987), trauma survivors listen to audiotaped scripts that recount their trauma in the second-person, present tense during while investigators record their heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductance activity (e.g., sweating on the palm of the hand), and facial electromyographic activity (e.g. muscle tension associated with grimacing). Depending on the study, subjects may also listen to

audiotaped (“control”) scripts of other stressful (but nontraumatic) events and emotionally positive ones in addition to neutral scripts.

The take-home message of these studies is that trauma survivors report more emotional distress and exhibit greater reactivity on the physiological measures in response to their trauma scripts than to other scripts and more so than do trauma survivors without PTSD. This research implies that the reactions that trigger warnings are designed to prevent occur primarily in survivors with PTSD, not others who have experienced trauma.

Interpersonal trauma (e.g., violence) is more likely to cause PTSD than non-interpersonal trauma (e.g., natural disasters, accidents). Hence, people whose trauma involves others deliberately trying to harm them are at greatest risk for PTSD, and this is especially true for survivors of sexual assault. In an epidemiologic survey of a representative sample of 34,653 American adults (Breslau, Troost, Bohnert, & Luo 2013, p. 382), interviewers asked subjects, “Were you EVER sexually assaulted, molested or raped or did you EVER experience unwanted sexual activity?” Among women, 14.2% responded affirmatively, whereas 2.7% of the men did so. Of those responding “yes,” 43.2% of the women and 17.1% of the men had developed PTSD. In contrast, subjects who had experienced severe accidents or natural disasters were far less likely to develop PTSD than were those who had experienced sexual assault. Among the women exposed to these two types of trauma, 16% and 6.9% developed PTSD, whereas these rates for men were 6.4% and 3.5%, respectively. To the extent that sexual assault is common on campus, these data imply that the subset of trauma survivors with PTSD should be correspondingly larger. And survivors with PTSD are those most likely to exhibit the psychophysiological reactivity triggered by reminders.

Although sexual assault is especially pathogenic, many rape survivors recover within three months of their trauma even without treatment. In one study, clinical assessors interviewed women approximately two weeks after the trauma (Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992). They found that 94% met symptomatic criteria for PTSD, but the requisite month had not yet elapsed for them to receive the formal diagnosis. After one month and three months following the trauma, the rate of PTSD dropped to 65% and 47%, respectively. Nevertheless, these data indicate that a substantial number of survivors of sexual assault continue to suffer the consequences of their trauma long after it had occurred.

Clinical researchers have developed and confirmed the efficacy of several psychological treatments for PTSD (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science, 2008). These versions of cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) include prolonged exposure (PE) therapy (e.g., Foa et al., 1999; Foa & Rothbaum, 1998) and cognitive processing therapy (CPT; Resick, Williams, Suvak, Monson, & Gradus, 2012). Efficacious treatments embody the *exposure principle* (e.g., McNally, 2007b) which holds that anxiety and stress-related disorders require patients to systematically expose themselves to stimuli, situations, activities, and memories that provoke fear and anxiety even though they are not objectively dangerous. These harmless cues gradually lose their capacity to trigger distress via “desensitizing” habituation. For PTSD, exposure therapy entails having patients close their eyes and recount their trauma in the first-person present tense. To be sure, such repeated imaginative relivings of one’s trauma is itself distressing, even in the presence and via the guidance of a supportive therapist. Yet just as people lose their capacity to be frightened after repeated viewings of the same horror movie, so do they lose their capacity to experience extreme distress when thinking about their trauma. Patients do not forget their trauma. Rather, they become capable of recalling it without experiencing extreme negative emotion.

Working with their therapists, patients develop a hierarchy of progressively more challenging situations and activities associated with their trauma. Patients practice exposing themselves to these previously avoided cues until their anxiety subsides. By systematically confronting harmless, but distress-triggering cues, patients master their fears, conquer PTSD, and reclaim their lives. Therapists also help patients reason through cognitive distortions they may harbor, such as irrationally blaming themselves for their trauma or misinterpreting flashbacks and other symptoms as signifying impending psychosis or moral weakness. Although not everyone benefits from evidence-based CBT therapies for PTSD, most lose the diagnosis after several months of weekly treatment.

Many people favor the phrase *survivor* versus *victim* because they regard the former as signifying empowering agency to triumph over trauma. Others reserve *survivor* for those whose life was in danger during the experience (e.g., natural disasters, serious accidents, and terrorist attacks) versus ones not involving threat to one’s life (e.g., being sexually fondled as a child). Regardless of these terminological quibbles, there is an important psychological distinction

between acknowledging one's trauma and having it become central to one's identity. Indeed, a substantial amount of research confirms a robust association between chronic PTSD symptoms and scores on the Centrality of Event Scale (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; for a review, see Gehrt, Berntsen, Hoyle, & Rubin, 2018). This scale assesses how important an experience is to one's personal identity. It captures how integrated the event is in one's life story, the extent to which it signifies a turning point in one's life, and the degree to which it shapes one's view of the future.

For example, a study of 102 women who reported histories of childhood sexual abuse adult revealed that the more central their molestation was to their identity, the more severe were their PTSD symptoms (Robinaugh & McNally, 2011). This was especially true of the tendency to view the future through the lens of their childhood trauma. Although this cross-sectional study cannot determine whether centrality was driving severity of PTSD symptoms or vice versa, one potential implication is that it may be best to acknowledge one's trauma without it dominating one's sense of self.

Do Trigger Warnings Help, Hurt, or Neither?

Following some evidence-based speculation about trigger warnings in a magazine article (McNally, 2014) and in an Op-Ed essay (McNally, 2016), I collaborated with my clinical psychology Ph.D. students, Ben Bellet and Payton Jones, on several experiments testing the impact of trigger warnings (Bellet, Jones, & McNally, 2018; Bellet et al., in press; Jones, Bellet, & McNally, 2020).

Our first experiment was conducted online via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform, and it involved 274 American adults without a trauma history and whose average age was approximately 37 years old (Bellet et al., 2018). Via pilot testing, we identified three categories of passages from world literature that were emotionally neutral, mildly distressing, or markedly distressing (e.g., graphic description of a brutal murder). At baseline, all subjects read three mildly distressing passages and provided ratings of anxiety and other emotions immediately after reading each one on a 0 to 100 sliding scale. Subjects randomly assigned to the trigger warning group read five neutral passages and five markedly distressing passages in random order and again rated their emotional reactions. They received the following message prior to each of the five markedly distressing passages: "*TRIGGER WARNING: The passage you are about to read contains disturbing content and may trigger an anxiety response, especially in those who have a*

history of trauma.” All subjects then read three additional mildly distressing passages not preceded by trigger warnings and rated their emotional responses after each. Finally, all subjects completed the Words-Can-Harm Scale, and scales measuring how likely they thought that lasting emotional would occur to them and to people in general should exposure to a very serious trauma occur.

The results revealed no differences in anxiety responses to markedly distressing passages between the groups, nor did the groups differ in their response to the three final mildly distressing passages. Hence, receiving a trigger warning did not diminish the anxiety subjects reported in response to these passages. However, scores on the Words-Can-Harm scale moderated the impact of trigger warnings. The stronger the belief that words can harm, the more subjects in the trigger warning group responded anxiously to the markedly distressing passages. Moreover, subjects in the trigger warning group rated themselves and people in general as likely to experience lasting emotional harm should they encounter trauma, relative to the subjects in the control group. These findings imply that trigger warnings may inadvertently increase a sense of vulnerability while boosting state anxiety if subjects also believe that words can harm.

We next replicated the essence of the previous MTurk experiment but did so among trauma-naïve undergraduates from Harvard University ($n = 426$) and Coastal Carolina University ($n = 36$; Bellet et al., in press). The anxiogenic effects of trigger warnings for those who believe that words can harm and the anxiogenic effects of trigger warnings on the perceived vulnerability of self and others should trauma occur did not replicate. However, college students who received trigger warnings responded with more anxiety to the markedly disturbing passages than did students who did not receive them.

Finally, we recruited 451 American adults who reported histories of trauma for our third MTurk experiment (Jones et al., 2020). In this replication, trauma survivors who received trigger warnings before reading the markedly distressing literary passages did not differ in their anxiety response to them relative to trauma survivors who did not receive trigger warnings. However, trigger warnings *increased* anxiety response among subjects who met probable criteria for PTSD ($n = 150$), including those for whom their most triggering passage was reminiscent of their own trauma ($n = 133$). Moreover, trauma survivors who received trigger warnings scored higher on the Centrality of Event Scale than did those who did not receive trigger warnings. This is an ominous

finding as higher scores on this measure predict subsequent PTSD symptom severity, whereas the reverse does not hold (Boals & Ruggero, 2016).

Taken together, our findings suggest that trigger warnings have small, transitory negative effects, especially on trauma survivors with probable PTSD. Our results are broadly consistent with the findings from six experiments reported by Sansom, Strange, and Garry (2019) suggesting that trigger warnings are “neither meaningfully helpful nor harmful” (p. 778). Taken together, trigger warnings, if anything, have minor adverse effects on the well-being of those receiving them.

What Should Be Done?

Trigger warnings are a counsel of avoidance. They imply that survivors, especially those with PTSD, should avoid reminders of their trauma likely to trigger highly distressing psychophysiologic responses. Although avoidance can reduce distress in the short term, it maintains one’s fear and sensitivity to triggers, thereby countertherapeutically maintaining PTSD. Students unable to navigate through their college courses without trigger warnings may need to prioritize their (mental) health and seek evidence-based treatment for PTSD discussed earlier. Indeed, rather than encouraging or mandating trigger warnings, colleges and universities can best serve these students by providing them with efficacious CBT or referring them to therapists in the community capable of treating PTSD properly.

Meanwhile, professors can review their syllabi with their students at the beginning of each semester. Informing students of what will be covered in class and in the readings does not entail *warning* them about what they will learn in the course. A detailed preview of the course is not a “content” warning, let alone a trigger warning. It is merely good educational practice.

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The Silent Crisis in the Classroom

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Early in the Spring 2019 semester, I stood before about 30 students in a *Social Problems* class at the University of Illinois and introduced sociology's three foundational theories: symbolic interactionism, structural functionalism, and conflict theory. Of the three theories, the one that sociologists have invoked most frequently in recent decades to explain contemporary social inequalities is conflict theory, which understands the world as a series of struggles for power as groups fight for control over resources. Conflict theory, as described by sociological theorist Randall Collins, "emerged as an effort to produce a nonideological version of Marxism." Although Collins added "I do want to stress, however, that conflict theory has quite a lot in common with Marxism, and that it willingly incorporates whatever explanatory discoveries Marxism makes." (1, p. 69).

In sociology and related disciplines, conflict theory morphed into its more recognizable contemporary variations that include race-conflict theory, gender-conflict theory, and intersectional theory—where the theories differ primarily along the lines of which groups are battling for resources. That day in class, I paused to ask students about one of these in particular: intersectionality. Intersectionality (or intersectional theory), as described in 2017 by its 1989 founder Kimberlé Crenshaw, ". . . is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects," usually across a range of marginalized identities including race, ethnicity, gender, and LGBTQ status. (2) Many of the students were familiar with the term and some of them could provide reasonable working definitions. However, when I asked them if they were familiar with its political and ideological underpinnings, my question was met with silence. To provide some context, intersectionality has become so popular (and controversial) that Vox did a special feature interview on Kimberlé Crenshaw in May 2019 called "The Intersectionality Wars." (3) As author Jane Coaston wrote, "Intersectionality" has, in a sense, gone viral over the past half-decade. . . ."

There is no reason to think that, in their silent response, the students in my class were unique in their blindness to this ideological link—in all likelihood, similar responses would be obtained in other classes on the University of Illinois campus and on other campuses across the country. But the students' (lack of) response matters. When a theory, particularly one as influential as intersectionality, is underpinned by a political ideology, neglecting to share this as part of its instruction constitutes a significant omission. It telegraphs to students that this is in fact a universally accepted vision of how society and the world *is* or, more importantly, *should be* understood. In other words, there's a tacit substitution of theory for truth. The way in which intersectionality is discussed in these students' classes is a symptom of more substantial pedagogical problem.

The Problem

In the discourse about free speech and viewpoint diversity on campus, the metrics we can observe and count—shoutdowns, disinvitations, and other protests—tell us little about what goes on in the place most integral to student learning: the classroom. In this setting, a singular political perspective plays a powerful role in shaping students' educations. As seen in the intersectionality example, that perspective is often one that sees the world as a struggle for power between identity (generally defined through one's race, ethnicity, gender, etc...) groups.

While the depiction is often one where liberal professors are willfully plotting to indoctrinate unsuspecting students, this is a mischaracterization, an exaggeration, and an oversimplification of a real problem. As such, a search for instructors that fit this description will probably turn up short. In our current moment, a majority of faculty are aware that they are expected to provide space for a range of perspectives, political and otherwise, in their classrooms. So, with all the awareness and apparent good will, how is there still a problem?

The bias in instruction stems from a two-part failure. One is a failure—not unique to the academy—to make a distinction between a worldview and truth upon which everyone agrees. The other is a failure to recognize when that worldview is shaping instruction, where this can occur through the instructor's interpretation of material, in the instructional material itself, or both.

When a worldview is mistaken for a universally accepted truth, advocates of that view are positioned to start to see those who dissent as mistaken, sometimes even morally bereft, in their inability or refusal to recognize the world “as it really is.” Once this certainty takes hold, the superior moral valence attached to the “truth” can be difficult to dislodge. More problematic still: in the campus classroom case, the perspective or theory presented as truth often constitutes a valid, reasonable, and mainstream way to understand the world, leaving fewer people to challenge it and putting would-be questioners in the uncomfortable position where they have to go against the dominant view. Because there’s no way to *prove* that society is or isn’t structured in precisely the way described in the theory, treating it as truth is misleading.

The distinction between perspective and truth has become ever more critical since the level of political polarization and the degree of hostility between political parties has increased. The combination of a critical mass supporting the on-campus worldview and a moral judgment levied on those who deviate have muddied this distinction precisely at the moment when it needs to be made most stridently.

In what follows, I present examples that I have observed in my own classrooms. To be clear, I am not arguing that the topics in question shouldn’t be taught. Banning ideologically-based material in the classroom would likely create a cascade of unintended consequences that are outside the scope of this paper. Moreover, in general, these perspectives are important and should—with contextualization—continue to be given attention and consideration in a wide range of classes.

Modern Racism

Most students taking courses in the social sciences recognize racism as a familiar topic of discussion. And part of the conversation about racism, naturally, involves its definition. After all, if we can’t recognize its contours, what chance do we possibly stand in the fight against it? Traditionally and historically, racism has been linked to a belief in the superiority of one race over another. Indeed, this continues to be a definition with which most people can agree.

However, in more recent years, the definition of racism has shifted and expanded in some academic and political circles. Arguably, this expansion occurred because of a sense that, although traditional forms of racism had diminished (e.g., visibly restricted access to various aspects of society based on race), another, more insidious form that was not captured in the old definition had emerged in its stead. The new definition is alternately referred to as “modern racism,” “symbolic racism,” “colorblind racism,” and “racial resentment.”¹ Most who adhere to the new definition suggest that modern racism:

. . .is characterized by beliefs that racism is not a continuing problem, that African Americans should put forth their own efforts to overcome their situation in society without special assistance, and that African Americans are too demanding and have gotten more than they deserve. (4)

Duke University sociologist (and 2018 president of the American Sociological Association) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and advocate of the term “colorblind racism” wrote the following in the opening to his book titled Racism without Racists:

Nowadays, except for members of white supremacist organizations, few whites in the United States claim to be “racist.” Most whites assert they “don’t see any color, just people”; that although the ugly face of discrimination is still with us, it is no longer the central factor determining minorities’ life chances; and finally, that, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., they aspire to live in a society where “people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin.” (5, p. 1)

Whether the new definition describes a pervasive phenomenon is impossible to prove or disprove. It relies on assumptions about people’s motives and intent, which are always unobserved. More problematic still, the assertion of “modern racism” is that anyone who challenges it is themselves racist, adding the moral valence that further complicates matters. The

¹ While there are distinctions between the definitions, those differences don’t impact the current discussion. Further, this is not an exhaustive list of terminologies.

example in the previous quote of whites asserting they “don’t see any color, just people” is then defined as racist, with no recognition that it’s possible to hold that perspective and *not* harbor any racial animus.

There are real consequences associated with conflating a theory or a perspective with truth and, in this case, moral certitude. So ingrained is this way of thinking about racism that it shapes our research programs. As Michigan State political science professor Matt Grossman has written:

The names of common scales of survey questions used to predict Trump support tend to irk conservatives:

- “Racial resentment,” an aspect of “symbolic racism,” is measured by asking for agreement or disagreement with statements like “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class” or “Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.”
- “Hostile sexism” is measured with agreement or disagreement with statements like “when women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against” or “women are too easily offended.” The related “modern sexism” scale taps similar attitudes.
- “Authoritarianism” is measured with questions asking respondents to choose between pairs of parenting values such as “independence” vs. “respect for elders” or “self-reliance” vs. “obedience.” (6)

To his credit, the author first cited above with the definition of “modern racism” (NYU – Abu Dhabi psychology professor PJ Henry writing for the [Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations](#)) recognized that this new definition is not without controversy, stating:

One major criticism is that the construct of modern racism really is not racism at all. Conservatives have suggested that modern racism actually captures core nonracial principles behind conservatism (such as opposition to excessive government intervention and that the mention of Blacks is incidental for the construct, with the conclusion that racism is not an important political force today. Although strong evidence exists for an important link between raw negative racial attitudes and modern racism attitudes, *this controversy is yet unresolved*. [italics added] (4)

However, in spite of Henry's concession, most students are not taught that this definition is in dispute. The absence of a more complete discussion of colorblind racism communicates to students that raising objections to the concept in a principled manner is not possible, thus perpetuating silo-driven conversations on some of our most sensitive sociopolitical topics.

Queer Theory, Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality

As indicated by the opening example, most students who are taught about intersectionality aren't taught its ideological underpinnings. Queer theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory fall into a similar category in that there is generally no recognition that they are also derived from conflict theory.

While there are multiple possible ways to describe how these theories hang together, one can be traced to the rubric of standpoint theories, popularized by Nancy Hartsock in 1983. (7) According to philosopher and standpoint theorist Sandra Harding, standpoint theory "was initially formulated as a methodology intended to explain how effective feminist research had been, and should be, organized, first in sociology and then in political philosophy and biology." She continued to state that it "is widely used in research projects focused on race, class, sexuality, and studies in postcolonial research, though in these contexts the logic is only occasionally labeled as being in the standpoint tradition." (8) Tying multiple theories together at once, Harding wrote, "Standpoint work must always be 'intersectional,' in the phrase of the critical race theorists." (8, p. 194)

Although the words “Marx” or “conflict” don’t appear in Harding’s work quoted above, the term “power” shows up repeatedly, including in the following excerpt, “standpoint projects directly challenge the way research disciplines’ activities tend to be complicit with social power” (8, p. 197) Further, turning to the motivations of standpoint theory, Harding wrote (quoting Dorothy Smith), “. . . standpoint projects do not start off from the conceptual frameworks of research disciplines, which have become servants to the dominant social institutions’ material as well as ‘conceptual practices of power. . .’ Rather they start off from the daily lives of oppressed, exploited, or dominated groups.” (8, p. 194-195)

Several of these terms (*exploitation, oppression, and power*) are the hallmarks of Marxist thought. Further highlighting the ideological ties to Marxism, in the edited book Theorizing Anti-Racism: Linkages in Marxism and Critical Race Theories, Queen’s University political studies professor (and one of the book’s editors) Abigail Bakan made the following observation about Marxism and anti-racism (the latter of which is tied to critical race theory):²

There are, arguably, far more grounds for commonality than may be apparent or assumed. . .Central to this argument is recognition of a certain politics of ‘difference’ that exists in Marx’s work. . .[D]ifference can be understood. . .to refer to various forms of conflictual social relationships, that occur within the totality of capitalist society. In this sense it is implicitly integrated into the categories of human suffering identified in Marx’s work. Such ‘difference’ can be read in three forms of human suffering, or socially constructed human difference, which operate together. Exploitation is one of these conflictual social relationships but it is commonly seen to be the only one relevant to Marxist analysis; the other two are alienation and oppression. (10, p. 97-98)

Other scholars have explicitly argued that the similarities point to the importance of integration across these theories. Going back more than two decades, in 1996, economist Julie Matthaei writing in *Feminist Economics* explicitly argued:

² Anti-racism has been defined as “the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.” (9)

I have argued that feminist economics must take race and class into account, since gender does not exist independently of class and race. While Marxist theory has suffered from gender- and race-blindness, it provides the most appropriate starting point for such a feminist economic analysis. The theoretical merging of Marxism, feminism, and anti-racism allows the development of a more inclusive, and more liberatory, understanding of our economy. (11, p. 36)

These theoretical perspectives offer valuable insight into how we might understand the world and how individuals and groups relate to one another. But to teach them without a recognition that they are grounded in a political ideology (and one that, while there may be healthy disagreement over the fealty of its implementation, had ruinous effects in the 20th century) amounts to a significant misrepresentation. This failure is undergirded by the other, described earlier, which is that the perspective is not identified as what it is: one of multiple possible lenses one might bring to bear on questions of inequality.

While these theories diverge in their focus on class, race, gender, or combinations of these, they share a view of the world. And many people who don't otherwise subscribe to these theoretical perspectives would concede that the pattern of a powerful group oppressing the powerless is indeed part of our collective history. Often, disagreements lie in one's sense of the extent to which this description fits our current society, the efficacy of the solutions proposed, the goals of prescriptive policies (what "success" would look like), and how to weight the associated costs and unintended consequences of those policies.

The end result of teaching these or any theoretical perspectives without recognizing them as such is that students aren't given a well-rounded picture of the landscape of ways in which reasonable minds might disagree on sensitive issues. Consider the following example: In January 2019, Gillette released an ad that promoted a new vision of gender norms for men and boys. As described in *The Guardian*:

The advertisement features news clips of reporting on the #MeToo movement, as well as images showing sexism in films, in boardrooms, and of violence between boys, with a

voice over saying: “Bullying, the MeToo movement against sexual harassment, toxic masculinity, is this the best a man can get?” (14)

When the Gillette advertisement came out, I asked students what they liked about the ad. They were quick to heap praise on its promotion of equality and new norms, all laudable messages. I then asked why someone might object to the ad, which was controversial when it was released. A few students suggested that someone might object to it if they were clinging to antiquated gender roles. When pressed, they couldn’t come up with additional possible reasons. I offered that someone might object to the idea that traditional masculinity is inherently “toxic” and needs to be fixed. They pondered that possibility as we continued and then concluded our discussion of the ad. Without that conversation and others like it, students have no framework with which to think about the Gillette-ad-equivalent five years hence. And the depth of the discussion in most other classes is “someone attached to old gender norms.” Further reinforcing my point, I have asked a similar question to students about the advantages and disadvantages of the concept of white privilege. While the advantages flowed easily, when asked about possible motivations for an objection, there was but one who suggested that it might be divisive.

A Deceptively Simple Five-Word Solution

To the extent that it's discussed, the topic of bias in the classroom is often depicted as a problem of self-censorship on the part of students, instructors, or both. And while self-censorship is a real challenge—we want a climate where students feel able to express themselves in the classroom—framing the problem this way opens the door to a distracting debate over what percent of students have to be reporting that they self-censor in order for it to be a problem worthy of attention. More challenging still, focusing on self-censorship ignores the more fundamental issues described earlier—latent bias in the material or in the interpretation—which are problematic even if not a single person feels they have to self-censor. These are important questions to consider as we think about students' education and the citizens they become as they transition out of the college experience. Moreover, these challenges have serious implications for polarization in society more broadly. This is academic and educational freedom at their most

fundamental: the freedom, and the right, to learn how to think independently, how to understand people who think differently, how to criticize ideas, and how to have one's ideas criticized.

At times, radical solutions have been proposed for this problem. For instance, in 2017, Republican lawmakers in Arizona introduced HB 2120. (12) Part of the HB 2120 legislation prohibited “courses, classes, events and activities” that “[p]romote division, resentment or social justice toward a race, gender, religion, political affiliation, social class or other class of people.” However, when it comes to the world of ideas, politics, and morals, a top-down solution won't work. Proposals such as HB 2120 would almost certainly serve to swing the pendulum in the opposite direction—an overcorrection that would create its own set of problems. The new equilibrium can't be one in which another set of ideas is banned, simply from the other side of the political spectrum. The optimal balance point must be one where a range of perspectives are represented and, more importantly, recognized as such when they are taught.

It isn't often the case that such a pervasive and consequential problem has a low-lift, straightforward-to-implement path to improvement. For most problems we face, it seems that the complexity of the solution varies in direct proportion not only to the complexity of the problem, but also to its severity. In this case, however, the problem could be largely resolved with a five-word solution: *explicitly distinguish interpretations from truth*. Consistently making a distinction between beliefs/perspectives/theories and truth would be a significant step in the right direction.

If there's such a simple solution to an important and pervasive problem, why does it remain out of reach? In order for this solution to be implemented, three things need to happen. The first and most concrete is that ideas, perspectives, and theories need to be identified as such. The second, and more challenging, requirement is that instructors need to be willing to recognize and agree with the distinctions between interpretation and truth. Holding on to one's interpretation or theoretical perspective and insisting that it is, indeed, truth, works directly against this process. Third, perhaps most difficult, these identifications have to be carried out in alignment with the spirit *and* the letter of the solution. For instance, the following hypothetical scenario isn't difficult to imagine: After explaining the definition of modern racism, a hypothetical and well-intentioned instructor might say:

We should recognize that this understanding of racism is disputed. In particular, some conservatives argue that the concept captures parts of conservative ideology that are distinct from racism. However, many of them are denying the realities of the racialized nature of our society and, moreover, the evidence suggests that racism is indeed what underpins many of conservative beliefs, regardless of claims to the contrary.

In that moment, our hypothetical instructor can comfortably, and correctly, claim that she acknowledged the controversy over the meaning and presented an alternative. However, this was accomplished while simultaneously dismissing the alternative as conservative excuse-making. In her defense, the instructor is doing her best to recognize the multiplicity of perspectives and ultimately conveying her perception of what's real. Why does this matter? Because the first time, in the college setting or out, that students encounter someone who says something that runs counter to this definition (e.g., "I don't support race-based preference programs"), they have been given no framework with which to understand this perspective other than to categorize it (and the person holding it) as racist. The answer in this case lies with philosopher Jon Stuart Mill, ". . . is it [not] enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them...he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form." (15)

If we accept that the increase in labeling people as racist, sexist, homophobic, etc... is both a cause and a symptom of political polarization, this increase in divisiveness can be traced, at least in part, to the instructional climate on campus. To give an example of how deep these challenges run, in February 2019, I gave an informal talk in my department on related topics. During that talk, I made precisely the point I am making here: There is a problem of a singular political perspective being presented in classes. After the talk was over, one of my colleagues spoke up. He said that he thought I was painting with too broad a brush. I can't speak to the way this particular instructor manages his classroom—he may be entirely correct in his self-assessment that he doesn't create that atmosphere—but I would venture to guess that no instructor who does create a single-perspective would see themselves reflected in that

description. Yet, given the current environment, it's extremely difficult to argue that, collectively, instruction doesn't have a serious problem.

The question then becomes: How can we bring instructors, including (and especially) those who feel that this criticism doesn't apply to them or those who are inclined to insist on that their version of the world reflects a universal truth, into the effort? The single mechanism that can advance us in this direction is the unifying goal of reducing political polarization and changing the national dialog on our most entrenched problems.

We have a choice in our classrooms. We can prepare students to interact with people with a wide range of ideological backgrounds in a way that withholds judgment and seeks mutual understanding or we can teach students to be indignant and certain about the way they see the world. Indignation can be seductive in the short-term, but there can be no question that citizens most able to communicate across divides in the medium and long term will be those who can see past some of these entrenched ideological differences. College is the optimal time for this training—let's get started.

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What Is Indoctrination?

A Very Short History of the Debate about Politics in the Classroom, From Max Weber to the Present

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INTRODUCTION

In his book *Indoctrination U*, David Horowitz recalls that when he was an undergraduate at Columbia University in the 1950s, he never witnessed a professor engaging in political activism in the classroom. Horowitz's remark triggered my own memory of Columbia: In four years as a student there, in the 1980s, I never heard a professor inject a word of political commentary into a course.

Things have changed. In a recent "Campus Climate Survey" at my current institution, UMass Amherst, prepared by the University's Office of Equity and Inclusion, the research team included this assessment of the survey data:

Isolation and hostility also surfaced when instructors or peers assumed that the entire class shares a liberal political orientation; in these cases, moderate, conservative, or non-liberal students can feel invisible. In addition, students described situations where faculty did not moderate discussions in a neutral way, and they experienced hostility within the classroom from faculty.

The report then quoted several student complaints, one of which was:

Multiple professors I have this semester OPENLY MOCK individuals for not subscribing to the same liberal ideology that they do . . . sometimes as simply as "this person is not

liberal, therefore they are stupid.” It is quite shameful that faculty at a learning institution are so dismissive of any real diversity of thought.

Today, I don't wish to fill my presentation with specific examples of instructor bias. I will not recite in detail the case of Emily Brooker at Missouri State--who was required by a professor in one course to write and send a letter to the state legislature arguing in favor of homosexual adoption. I will not take pains to demonstrate that numerous academic departments now describe themselves in their web pages as committed to "activism" and "social justice." And I will merely take note of one instance of a trend that is plain today: a tendency to abuse pedagogical authority among anti-Zionist faculty members. At Columbia, the classroom conduct of Israel-hating faculty in Middle Eastern Studies, about ten years ago, was so biased that president Lee Bollinger took the unusual step of issuing a new policy concerning the “failure to show appropriate respect in an instructional setting for the rights of others to hold opinions differing from their own; misuse of faculty authority within an instructional setting to pressure students into supporting a political or social cause; and conduct in the classroom or another instructional setting that adversely affects the learning environment” (*italics added*).

Instead of portraying more cases of misconduct in the classroom, I wish to highlight some of the debates that have occurred in the more distant past about the relationship between politics and teaching. As unsettled as I am by political activism in the classroom, I also recognize that some of the individuals who have endorsed it are thoughtful; and some have held leadership positions in the academy. Also, at a conference like this, it hardly needs to be mentioned that the First Amendment protects free speech, especially political speech. Then there is academic freedom to consider. Indeed, given the meaning that many people associate with "free speech" and "academic freedom," i.e., their assumption that these two terms make academics even more free to express themselves than citizens who are not academics, it is not surprising that political activism in the classroom is rarely censured. It is worth putting on hold, at least for a while, our “opinion” on this topic, in order to deepen our understanding of the implications of being either for or against politics in the classroom. An intellectual history of the recurrent debate on this

subject can help. In this paper, I do not so much as narrate this history as provide evidence, through a few selected episodes of debate, that such a history exists.

MAX WEBER AND HIS CRITICS

No less a figure than Max Weber, arguably the greatest academic of all time in the social sciences, was absorbed by the question. In his famous speech of 1919, "Science as a Vocation," he declared:

To take a practical political stand is one thing, and to analyze political structures and party positions is another. When speaking in a political meeting . . . one does not hide one's personal standpoint . . . The words one uses in such a meeting are not means of scientific analysis but means of canvassing votes and winning over others. They are not plowshares to loosen the soil of contemplative thought; they are swords against the enemies: such words are weapons. It would be an outrage, however, to use words in this fashion in a lecture.

Weber's strictures on teaching, extended over several pages, summed up an entire philosophy: an account of what it means to live in a secular and pluralistic, or what he called a "disenchanted," society. While it is evident that Weber's opposition to the politicization of teaching serves to illustrate his famous distinction between academic inquiry and existential choice, or facts versus values, it is also evident that his discussion of teaching is more than an illustration of a theory. Weber was profoundly interested in professional ethics. The classroom, he believed, had special sociological significance: It is the place where the fact/value distinction, an abstraction in itself, crystallizes into a vocational directive.

Nowhere in his work did Weber argue that the fact/value distinction precludes people in general from discoursing at both levels. A preacher giving a sermon, a candidate speaking at a rally, a parent raising a child can justly shift registers between fact and value. University professors, too, can pursue moral and political endeavors, but these belong outside the classroom. As Weber stated in his article, "Value Judgments in Social Science":

The university teacher, like anyone else, has at his disposal other opportunities for propagating his practical ideals, and if not he can easily create such opportunities in some suitable form . . . In the press, in congresses and associations, in essays—in short, in any form which is available equally to every other citizen—he may (and ought to) do whatever his god or his demon calls him to do. But what the present-day student should learn from his teachers above all, at least in the lecture hall is . . . to subordinate his own personality to the matter in hand and so, above all, to suppress the need to display his personal tastes and other feelings where that is not called for. It is certainly not true that, as some people have maintained, ‘personality’ is, and ought to be, a ‘unity’ in the sense that it is bound, so to speak, to wither away if it is not in view on every possible occasion. In all professional work, the task as such has certain claims and must be performed in accordance with its own intrinsic laws.

Weber’s criticism of politics in the classroom hinges not only on the theoretical possibility of separating facts and values; it depends as much on his sociological construction of the classroom situation. In “Science as a Vocation,” he stated:

In the lecture-room we stand opposite our audience, and it has to remain silent. I deem it irresponsible to exploit the circumstance that for the sake of their career the students have to attend a teacher’s course while there is nobody present to oppose him with criticism. The task of the teacher is to serve the students with his knowledge and scientific experience and not to imprint upon them his personal political views.

As Peter Breiner, observes, even if one believes that Weber overstated the difference between the logical status of facts and values, it was still valid for the German sociologist to highlight the problem of power between teacher and student. The distinction between academic analysis and political exhortation acquires legitimacy in the classroom for two reasons: because the university as a whole symbolizes the disinterested quest for knowledge, and because students in the classroom comprise a captive audience, not equal to the professor.

Weber's contemporaries did not miss his point. A debate about his speech unfolded in Germany over several years. Critics understood very well that Weber's conception of modernity as the secularizing and fragmenting of culture implies the exclusion of preaching from the classroom. They simply disagreed with his supposition that modernity and secularism preclude spiritual and intellectual wholeness. Responding to the speech, Erich Von Kahler acknowledged that the core of Weber's address was the proposition that "politics has no place in the lecture-room." Kahler recognized that Weber was making a philosophical case for professional self-restraint and role division. He observed that Weber's position rested on his rejection of Platonism and other philosophies that offered a synthesis of truth, goodness, and politics. But Kahler, who identified with neo-Platonism, considered it desirable for professors to invigorate belief in the "wholly undivided, living unity growing within ourselves."

Reviewing an anthology of responses to Weber's speech, of which Kahler's response is one chapter, Peter Baehr writes:

What particularly disturbed Weber's audience was his argument that modern life consists of a number of orders or spheres--the economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, ethical, scientific among them--each of which is governed by its own immanent, distinctive principles. One had to choose between, and within, these dissonant spheres, or hold them in tension; they could not be reconciled or transcended.

From this perspective, modern life is fractured. The introduction of political advocacy in the classroom, the quintessential academic space, indicates the presence of what Weber calls "naïve optimism," an inability to let go of an all-embracing *Weltanschauung*, a running away from the tensions of modern life. In "Science as a Vocation," Weber compares the lecturer engaging in politics with the medieval Christian who believes in a morally unified cosmos. Indeed, Weber frequently uses religious language to suggest that the political activist in the classroom is a pseudo-prophet who may well have the right to preach in a church or on a soapbox in the public square, but not in a university lecture hall.

Weber intended his ban on political speechifying in the classroom to apply to academics across the ideological spectrum. But he was particularly concerned about the rise of anti-

Semitism—he makes several favorable references to Jews and Jewish culture, and several caustic remarks about anti-Semitism, in the speech. Weber was prescient, for as Ringer has shown, after the revolution of 1918-1919, the German universities were strongholds of right-wing opposition to the Weimar Republic. Students and professors then became one of the first pillars of support for the Nazi party. In the United States today, those who complain about the infusion of politics in the classroom are often debunked by their opponents, the defenders of political pedagogy, as right-wingers who lack theoretical sophistication. For example, in a live debate with Peter Wood, held on January 9, 2009, on “The Meaning of Academic Freedom,” Cary Nelson, a supporter of politically oriented pedagogy in the humanities, described opposition to political advocacy as in the classroom as a reflex of conservatives who could not process the advent of women’s studies and other disciplines that operated on the principle that all knowledge is “culturally constructed.”

Obviously, there is more to explore here as concerns Nelson’s position. But Weber allows us to see that concern about classroom indoctrination is not necessarily politically conservative or epistemologically naive. Rather, this concern is skeptical in its insistence that academic disciplines cannot resolve our basic existential dilemmas. Professors should not pretend that they “know,” through their academic disciplines, what is good or evil. The signature of being a modern academic is intellectual austerity: a capacity to compartmentalize one’s commitments--as opposed to radiating a single creed in every social space.

THE AAUP AND “INDOCTRINATION”

Having mentioned Cary Nelson, I must add that he has been, over the past twenty years, one of the leading champions of the right to bring political advocacy into the classroom. He described his own (failed) efforts to transform the political values of his students in his book *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (1997). Nelson was the co-editor of two important anthologies in the radical field of Cultural Studies: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988, co-edited with Lawrence Grossberg) and *Cultural Studies* (1992, co-edited with Lawrence Grossberg and Paula A. Treichler). Informed by Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and its elaborations by British Marxists such as Stuart Hall, Nelson played a large role in creating an American school of

Cultural Studies, with its own conferences and publications. A feature of this school, evident in the two volumes mentioned above, is the belief that the conventional academic disciplines are saturated with capitalist and racist ideology. Since the academy is always already politicized, it is sensible, indeed necessary, for progressive academics to agitate for systemic change within their courses. In the *Cultural Studies* volume, Nelson and his co-editors describe the classroom as one of the places in which critical cultural theory can be deployed to “make a difference” politically (p. 14). Among the essays in the volume, Henry A. Giroux’s “Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy,” is extremely useful because the author outlines not only his own ideas on teaching as a political venture but draws on the ideas of Paolo Freire, Larry Grossberg, Raymond Willimas, Michel Foucault, and others. One gets from Giroux’s essay a kind of genealogy for a whole way of thinking about the relationship between politics and teaching that is profoundly different from Weber’s view.

It should also be noted that Nelson was remarkably dialogical, engaging in live argument not only with Peter Wood but with Stanley Fish and David Horowitz. These encounters, captured in video, are a precious resource for anyone wishing to map out the terms of the debate about teaching and politics. Yet, I did say that I wish to highlight episodes of the debate from the more distant past. I have thus focused on Nelson for a reason yet to be mentioned: He was the president of the American Association of University Professors from 2006 to 2012. This is a supreme irony because the AAUP had long provided the foundation, in the United States, for a professional ethos that precluded introducing political activism in the classroom. I am suggesting that to understand recent debates, it is essential to understand that Wood, Fish, and Horowitz all regard themselves as upholders of older AAUP values against the AAU recently shaped by Nelson’s leadership.

The AAUP was formed in 1915, around the same time as Weber was developing his ideas on the academic ethos. One of the key figures in the creation of the AAUP was the philosopher and intellectual historian, Arthur Lovejoy. Given more time, I would describe how Lovejoy’s philosophy, influenced deeply by the epistemological pluralism (the idea that there are multiple worlds) of William James, bears similarities to Weber’s philosophy, which, as we have seen, insists on the “fragmentariness” (a term used by Karl Jaspers to describe Weber’s philosophy) of

modern life. But here I will focus on the AAUP's founding text, which Lovejoy played a leading role in composing.

The AAUP's "General Report on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure" (1915) devoted considerable attention to how professors in the classroom should approach controversies that have not yet been resolved, or are not in principle resolvable, in the academic disciplines.

Since there are no rights without corresponding duties, the considerations heretofore set down with respect to the freedom of the academic teacher entail certain correlative obligations. The claim to freedom of teaching is made in the interest of the integrity and of the progress of scientific inquiry; it is, therefore, only those who carry on their work in the temper of the scientific inquirer who may justly assert this claim . . . The university teacher, in giving instruction upon controversial matters . . . should, in dealing with such subjects, set forth justly, without suppression or innuendo, the divergent opinions of other investigators; he should cause his students to become familiar with the best published expressions of the great historic types of doctrine (italics added) upon the questions at issue; and he should, above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves, and to provide them access to those materials which they need if they are to think intelligently . . . The ought also to be especially on his guard against taking unfair advantage of the student's immaturity by indoctrinating (italics added) him with the teacher's own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters in question . . . It is not the least service which a college or university may render to those under its instruction, to habituate them to looking not only patiently but methodically on both sides, before adopting any conclusion upon controverted issues.

Lovejoy was the author of the entry on "Academic Freedom" for the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1937). There he wrote:

They [students] are entitled to learn the contemporary situation in each science, the range and diversity of opinion among specialists in it . . . The same rights of the student . . .

demand of the university teacher, in his function of instruction (*italics added*) as distinct from investigation, and publication, special care to avoid the exclusive or one-sided presentation of his personal views on questions upon which there is no agreement among experts. He is not entitled to take advantage of his position to impose his beliefs dogmatically upon his students; the nature of his office requires that alternative opinions be fairly expounded, and that the student be encouraged and trained to reach his own conclusions . . .

It is noteworthy that for Lovejoy, the exclusion of competing viewpoints is *ipso facto* an "indoctrinating" of the student. It would not have occurred to Lovejoy to restrict the concept of indoctrination to cases in which the professor materially harmed a student who disagreed, e.g., by lowering the student's grade. It was not, and it still is not, necessary to commit a tort to break a professional code of ethics.

The AAUP's 1915 strictures on teaching were reaffirmed in part in its 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom. Given that the 1940 statement is briefer as a whole than the 1915 Statement and that the 1940 text says much less about teaching, it is not clear how to articulate the relationship between the two documents. It could be argued that on any topic about which the 1940 text does not contradict the 1915 text, the 1915 text continued in force, which means the language about indoctrination in 1915 continued to represent the AAUP's position through the twentieth century. Alternatively, it could be argued that the 1940 text restarts the AAUP's policy on teaching and academic freedom, and since there is nothing about the duty to inform students of multiple perspectives on a controversial matter, the language of 1915 became defunct in 1940.

This is a matter of interpretation for every American university to resolve, because the AAUP's policies are not binding in the first place; all of its policies are advisory. Unlike the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association, the AAUP does not have certification authority. Universities often formulate their policies on tenure and academic freedom by drawing on AAUP documents, but they are not required to do so in order to be accredited. Today, it is particularly evident that some AAUP guidelines are widely ignored. For during Nelson's period of leadership (which, again, was 2006-2012) the AAUP became vociferous about the need

to unionize the faculty at all universities. "One Faculty, One Resistance" is a current AAUP slogan. But only about 20% of universities today have unionized faculty members.

I am suggesting that one of the reasons that viewpoints vary so widely on the proper relationship between teaching and politics is that the leading professional organization for academics is the source of inconsistent guidelines, and there is no agreed upon methodology for prioritizing various AAUP pronouncements. The 1940 text states that teachers "should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject." In addition, "they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence, they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution." There is nothing more on the responsibilities of the teacher, and it is not even clear that "utterances" is meant to refer to teaching—it appears to relate to extramural activity like writing editorials for newspapers. But it is up to every university to formulate its policy on the teacher's rights and duties.

"SHOULD COMMUNISTS BE PERMITTED TO TEACH?"

The ambiguities of AAUP policy played out in what was probably the biggest episode of debate over teaching and politics in the mid-twentieth century: the debate over whether members of the Communist Party had a right to teach at all. Lovejoy himself was involved. In "Communism Versus Academic Freedom," published in the *American Scholar* in 1949, he stated that the basis of the university, as a distinctive institution, is the faculty's commitment to "disinterested" investigation. "Insofar, then, as faculties are made up of men whose teachings express, *not* the results of their own research and reflection and that of their fellow-specialists, but rather the opinions of other men—whether holders of public office or private persons from whom endowments are received—just so far are colleges and universities perverted from their proper function." Lovejoy noted that communism has "already extinguished academic freedom in many countries." And he argued that membership in the Communist Party obligated one to infuse

the Party's ideology into one's teaching. As to whether it is "self-contradictory to argue for the restriction of freedom in the name of academic freedom," Lovejoy reasoned:

The objection has a specious air of logicity, but it is in fact an absurdity. The believer in the indispensability of freedom, whether academic or political, is not thereby committed to the conclusion that it is his duty to facilitate its destruction, by placing its enemies in strategic positions of power, prestige, or influence . . . But the conception of freedom is not one which implies the legitimacy and inevitability of its own suicide.

Lovejoy added a number of caveats for members of the Communist Party who have already been tenured, for professors who once belonged to the Party but no longer do, and for others. But he made it clear that academic freedom protected only academic inquiry conducted independently and in good faith; it did not apply to political activism inspired by one's membership in an a group outside the university.

On Lovejoy's side in this argument was Sidney Hook. His editorial, "Should Communists Be Permitted to Teach?" appeared in the *New York Times*, February 27, 1949. But the great advocate for the other side was Alexander Meiklejohn, the former president of Amherst College, who replied in the *New York Times* on March 27, 1949. His column had the same title as Hook's, with this subtitle: "Yes, says Professor Meiklejohn, who argues that democracy will win in the competition of ideas." Meiklejohn was not a lawyer but he was a superb First Amendment Scholar. He authored numerous articles on freedom of speech in some of the leading journals of constitutional law. He maintained that while the First Amendment did not protect every kind of speech, it was "absolute" when it came to political speech. And as the subtitle of his *New York Times* article suggests, he was an idealist who believed that good ideas will triumph over bad ones.

Meiklejohn's involvement in the debate about Communist Party members represents the point at which the AAUP's definition of academic freedom, as a set of rights and obligations specific to the academic profession, came into conflict with the emerging First Amendment libertarianism of the twentieth century. While Lovejoy and Hook believed that academic freedom pertained only when professors engaged in academic inquiry as distinct from politics, Meiklejohn

regarded professors not only as academics with certain professional rights but as citizens possessing a virtually unlimited rights of political expression.

Having suggested that opposition to politics in the classroom is not necessarily a right-wing belief, I may now add that supporting politics in the classroom is not necessarily a left-wing belief. The example of Meiklejohn illustrates that defending political expression, in any context, can be associated with a theory of liberal democracy. This is not to say that a commitment to the First Amendment necessitates the abolition of professional restrictions on teaching. The debate remains unresolved at both the constitutional and the professional levels. In this paper, I have only tried to suggest that there is a history to explore, and that this history can raise our level of understanding of the implications of taking one position or another.

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The Right to Social Media

By John K. Wilson

“Officially, I now hate white people.” [PUNISHED, James Livingston, Rutgers, tenured, 2018, https://d28htnjz2elwuj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/20161824/Investigation-Report-UniversityAction-_-J.-Livingston-2.pdf 18]

“All I want for Christmas is white genocide.” [SUSPENDED, RESIGNED, George Ciccariello-Maher, Drexel, tenured, 2017,

<https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/drexel-university-professor-resigns-after-inflammatory-tweets-lead-to-death-threats/>]

“To save American democracy, Trump must hang.” [PUT ON LEAVE, Lars Maischak, Cal State-Fresno, adjunct, 2017,

<https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/fresno-professor-on-leave-after-saying-trump-must-hang-federal-probe-initiated-against-him/>]

“Yeah, I know who I'd clock with a bat.” [FIRED, Jeff Klinzman, Kirkwood Community College, adjunct, 2019, <https://arcdigital.media/campus-free-speech-under-threat-from-the-right-8d4a8506a056>]

“I dont believe in karma but this kinda feels like it.” [FIRED, Kenneth Storey, University of Tampa, adjunct, 2017, <https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/adjunct-sociology-professor-fired-after-tweeting-hurricane-harvey-was-karma-for-trump-supporters/>]

“#LetThemFuckingDie.” [SUSPENDED, Johnny Eric Williams, Trinity College, tenured, 2017, <https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/professors-facebook-posts-prompt-university-investigation/>]

“Is it wrong of me to think that Otto Warmbier got exactly what he deserved?” [FIRED, Katherine Dettwyler, University of Delaware, adjunct, 2017, <https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/university-declines-to-rehire-adjunct-anthropologist-for-saying-north-korea-hostage-got-what-he-deserved/>]

“I wish all the fucking West Bank settlers would go **missing**.” [FIRED, Steven Salaita, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, tenured/hiring, 2014, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Salaita_controversy]

“These jewish motherfuckers do not control me.” [PUNISHED, Michael Chikindas, Rutgers University, tenured, 2017, https://www.nj.com/education/2017/12/rutgers_professor_accused_of_anti-semitic_rants_st.html]

“ISIS is not a jihadist, Islamic terrorist organization. It’s a CIA and Mossad operation.” [FIRED, Joy Karega, Oberlin College, untenured, 2017,

<https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/professor-fired-for-tweeting-anti-semitic-conspiracy-theories/>]

“I believe heterosexuality and homosexuality are both natural and neither is sinful.” [FIRED, Ruthie Robertson, Brigham Young-Idaho, adjunct, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/19/mormon-university-instructor-fired-after-facebook-post-supporting-lgbt-rights-she-says/>]

“The flag represents a systemic history of racism for my people.” [RESIGNED, Jamie Riley, University of Alabama Dean of Students, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/09/09/alabama-dean-resigns-following-breitbart-article-tweets>]

“If you are white trash, this is the perfect night out for you.” [SUSPENDED, RESIGNED, June Chu, dean at Yale University, 2017, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2017/06/20/pierson-dean-june-chu-leaves-position-after-yelp-scandal/>]

“I wish someone would just shoot him outright.” [SUSPENDED, FIRED, Kevin Allred, Rutgers University and Montclair State University, adjunct, 2016 and 2017, https://www.nj.com/essex/2017/08/beyonce_professor_montclair_state.html]

“list of 52 sites of cultural American heritage that he would bomb.” [FIRED, Asheen Phansey, Babson College, 2020, <https://firstamendmentwatch.org/babson-college-fires-professor-for-joke-he-made-on-private-facebook-account/>]

“Fuck Trump, Fuck McConnell, Fuck Graham.” [FIRED, Jorge Zeballos, Kellogg Community College, https://www.battlecreekenquirer.com/story/news/2020/02/19/kellogg-community-college-kcc-ousts-chief-equity-and-inclusion-officer-wake-trump-protest-sign/4805452002/?mc_cid=6ace5a27de&mc_eid=104055fca3]

“Next time, let it be YOUR sons and daughters. Shame on you. May God damn you.” [SUSPENDED, David Guth, University of Kansas, tenured, 2013, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/09/23/u-kansas-professor-suspended-after-anti-nra-tweet>]

In case you might be thinking that I am a horrible and crazy person, let me say that I disagree with almost every statement just made here, but I nevertheless support the right of these academics to make such statements. These are just some of the comments on social media that have led to suspensions, firings, and forced resignations on college campuses in recent years.

That last quote represents one of the key starting points for this recent wave of attacks on social media in academia. In 2013, David Guth, a University of Kansas professor, tweeted, “Next time, let it be YOUR sons and daughters” about the National Rifle Association in the wake of one of those mass shootings in America (a couple thousand mass shootings ago).

Kansas State Senate President Susan Wagle said, “Any attempt to continue employing this individual as an educational leader is offensive to taxpayers.” Senate Majority Leader Terry Bruce declared that Guth needed to be removed from KU’s faculty “immediately” and added, “Had he tweeted against a liberal advocacy group, a protected class, there is no question in my mind, that he would be removed.” Kansas State Rifle Association President Patricia Stoneking accused Guth of inciting violence, and said that her group “will do everything possible to see to the removal of this man. He should be fired immediately.”

In response to the Guth controversy, the KU Board of Regents did not defend academic freedom but instead declared, “The Board of Regents expresses its disgust and offense at the statement made by David Guth.” Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little placed Guth on indefinite administrative leave. (<https://academeblog.org/2013/09/22/in-defense-of-david-guth/>) Eventually, Guth’s job was spared, but the Kansas Board of Regents enacted an extraordinary policy restricting social media by all employees. The Board declared in a press release, “Because of the proliferation of social media use for communication purposes, and its particular susceptibility to misuse and damage to our universities, the Board believes that a provision outlining improper uses of social media will be beneficial to all parties...” (https://www.kansasregents.org/about/news-releases/2013_news_releases/471-board_amends_policy_to_include_language_regarding_improper_use_of_social_media)

This belief that there’s something uniquely evil about social media that requires special regulations is part of this growing trend toward censorship on campus.

That Kansas policy, which is still in effect today, states the social media can be punished if it “impairs discipline by superiors or harmony among co-workers, has a detrimental impact on close working relationships for which personal loyalty and confidence are necessary, impedes the performance of the speaker’s official duties, interferes with the regular operation of the employer, or otherwise adversely affects the employer’s ability to efficiently provide services.” (http://www.kansasregents.org/resources/O62018_Policy_Manual_revised.pdf)

In response to criticism, the Kansas regents did add a statement of their devotion to free speech. But the policy says, “the interest of the employer in promoting the efficiency of the public

services it performs through its employees must be balanced against the employee's right as a citizen to speak on matters of public concern." So in Kansas, campus employees don't have a clear right to extramural utterances, they only have a balancing test: Efficiency vs. free speech. In the Guth case, it's pretty clear what the result of this balancing test would be. You would have had a Guth's right to tweet balanced against the university being defunded, threatened, boycotted, and harmed in massive ways. If this policy had existed, Guth clearly would have been fired under it, and that is the point of this current policy, to discourage any similar offensive opinions from being expressed.

What's particularly disturbing about the Kansas Regents policy is the double standard, that it demands censorship only of social media expressions. Professors at Kansas are still free to publish their opinions in the *New York Times* without penalty, but if they post the exact same words on their Twitter account, even if they don't have any followers, they can be punished under this separate social media policy.

The Kansas case also is part of a disturbing trend where politicians, almost always Republican lawmakers, demand the firing of controversial professors for their social media utterances. At UC-Davis, Joshua Clover was denounced in 2019 for a 2014 tweet, "I am thankful that every living cop will one day be dead," and seven Republican lawmakers introduced a resolution, supported by the state Republican Party, demanding that Clover be fired, but the university still refused to investigate or punish him. (<https://www.sacbee.com/latest-news/article228181294.html>) But even though that's a success story, this kind of political demand for censorship certainly has a chilling effect on any public institution in California that might consider hiring a professor who has made controversial statements.

Kirkwood Community College fired adjunct professor Jeff Klinzman after he tweeted about Donald Trump, "Yeah, I know who I'd clock with a bat." The college administration declared that when a faculty member's speech "is perceived as placing public safety in jeopardy, or hampers our ability to deliver on our mission, we will always do what is necessary in service to our students' pursuit of a higher education." (<https://arcdigital.media/campus-free-speech-under-threat-from-the-right-8d4a8506a056>) In this case, the college apparently feared it might be

hampered by the threats to kill Klinzman and burn the school to the ground, along with the thousands of complaints, including from two Republican state legislators and the chair of the Iowa Republican Party. Klinzman was told he could resign and get paid for a semester, or be fired, so he resigned.

The power of presidential leadership in social media punishment was revealed in the case of Rutgers history professor James Livingston. Livingston, who is white, complained on social media that his favorite restaurant in Harlem had been "overrun with little Caucasian assholes."

(<https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/rutgers-president-orders-further-investigation-into-history-professor-disciplined-for-offensive-facebook-post/>)

Rutgers' Office of Employment Equity, apparently in response to anonymous complaints, conducted a review and found that Livingston's post that "officially, I now hate white people" violated the Rutgers policy against discrimination and harassment, and it was "not protected by the First Amendment." Livingston appealed, and the Office confirmed its finding. Then the president of Rutgers, Robert Barchi, told the Office to "more rigorously analyze the facts" and somehow the Office discovered that they were completely wrong and reversed their decision. (<https://www.dailytargum.com/article/2018/11/rutgers-retracts-decision-finds-history-professor-did-not-violate-discrimination-policy>, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Rutgers-President-Seeks/244424>)

In other cases, universities not only seek to punish faculty who post offensive things on social media, but they even turn in their faculty to the authorities, perhaps believing that this might help justify further discipline.

Kevin Allred, an adjunct professor in women's and gender studies at Rutgers University, was suspended and fired in 2016 after posting controversial comments on Twitter, including "Will the Second Amendment be as cool when I buy a gun and start shooting at random white people or no ...?" In Allred's case, the Rutgers officials called the police in New York City, asking them to seize Allred and take him to Bellevue Hospital for a psychological exam.

After Lars Maischak at Cal State-Fresno tweeted, "To save American democracy, Trump must hang," he apologized and then deleted his Twitter account with its 28 followers. But the university alerted federal authorities to the tweets, and the president Joseph Castro reported that the FBI, the Secret Service and the Department of Homeland Security had all been made aware of

the tweets. Maischak agreed to be put on leave for a semester. (<https://freespeechproject.georgetown.edu/tracker-entries/fresno-professor-on-leave-after-saying-trump-must-hang-federal-probe-initiated-against-him/>)

Repression of academic freedom is even worse in totalitarian countries. In 2018, Egyptian authorities arrested Yahya Kazaz, a professor of geology at Helwan University, and imprisoned him for nine months for his social media posts supporting President Al-Sisi's departure and stating "resistance is the solution." (<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Scholars-at-Risk-AFTE-Egypt-UPR-Submission-1.pdf>)

But the threat of dismissal still carries a powerful chilling effect on academics. Even telling the wrong kind of joke about the government can get you in trouble in America. In 2020, Asheen Phansej, an adjunct professor at Babson College, was fired for writing a Facebook post about President Donald Trump's threat to bomb 52 sites "important to Iran & Iranian culture." Phansej joked that Iran should respond with a "list of 52 sites of cultural American heritage that he would bomb" and suggested a few: "Um... Mall of America? Kardashian residence?" Although Phansej deleted the post and apologized, Babson College announced Phansej's dismissal in an official statement: "Babson College conducted a prompt and thorough investigation related to a post shared on a staff member's personal Facebook page that does not represent the values and culture of the College. Based on the results of the investigation, the staff member is no longer a Babson College employee. As we have previously stated, Babson College condemns any type of threatening words and/or actions condoning violence and/or hate." Beyond the fact that Phansej's post was an obvious joke and in no way a true threat against the Kardashians, the standard of "condoning violence and/or hate" would also require the firing of anyone who has supported Donald Trump or any other president (essentially all of them) who has committed violence or expressed hate against anyone. (<https://firstamendmentwatch.org/babson-college-fires-professor-for-joke-he-made-on-private-facebook-account/>)

In this analysis of social media cases, I am excluding cases where professors have attracted controversy for their research, teaching, or offline extramural comments. These are still very important cases, but they seem rarer than the social media controversies that now dominate the punishment of professors.

I am also not trying to compile the vast number of cases where someone, somewhere urged

the punishment of a professor for an opinion on social media. Those incidents are worrisome for creating a culture of censorship, but they are so common that documenting all of them is difficult, and the reality is that official investigation and punishment of faculty is a far more serious threat to academic freedom than someone's request to punish them.

One important fact to note about the punishment of faculty social media is the victims are overwhelmingly on the left and attacked by right-wing critics. In the controversies I could identify involving social media or email postings where faculty were denounced by leftists--including Bret Weinstein at Evergreen State, Andrew Pessin at Connecticut College, and Erica and Nicholas Christakis at Yale--there was no official punishment by the administration. Glenn Reynolds (of Instapundit) was investigated but not punished by the University of Tennessee at Knoxville after he responded to news about protesters in Charlotte blocking traffic by tweeting "run them down."(<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2016/09/28/no-punishment-run-them-down-tweet>)

One of the few conservative cases involving social media is John McAdams, who was suspended by Marquette University for his blog criticizing a graduate student instructor who received hateful comments in response. I was an expert witness in defense of McAdams. I think his conservative views resulted in him prevailing with the conservative Wisconsin Supreme Court, and his case stands as a rare example where someone punished for their expression wins out in the legal system.

This trend of leftists being punished for their social media is important to note, because it runs completely contrary to most of the public discussion about college campuses as leftist "islands of totalitarianism"(<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-conservative-nonprofit-that-seeks-to-transform-college-campuses-faces-allegations-of-racial-bias-and-illegal-campaign-activity>) If more than a dozen right-wing faculty had been fired or punished in recent years for their opinions on social media, it almost certainly would have provoked widespread complaints about a free speech crisis on college campuses.

I want to talk in detail about one social media case where the professor was never suspended, never fired, never disciplined, and never even formally investigated by the university--this is one of the far less repressive cases, but it shows some of the extraordinary efforts to punish offensive speech that go beyond the cases of firings and suspensions.

On Oct. 6, 2018, in response to the controversy over Republican leaders being treated rudely at restaurants and a tweet by Joe Scarborough urging “Don’t yell at senators, don’t shout at people in restaurants,” University of Mississippi sociology professor James Thomas tweeted, “Don’t just interrupt a senator’s meal, y’all. Put your whole damn fingers in their salads. Take their apps and distribute them to the other diners. Bring boxes and take their food home with you on the way out. They don’t deserve your civility.”

I think it is important to point out that no salads were harmed in the making of this tweet. Not only does this tweet fall far short of incitement, but incitement to toss a salad is not really a criminal category. No one inspired by Thomas has tried to grab Republican politicians by the arugula.

A week after Thomas’ salad tweet went unnoticed, the right-wing Our State Flag Foundation posted Thomas’ tweet online, declaring that he was a “radical agitator” who was “calling for outright uncivil illegal harassment.” A flood of emails to the university followed calling upon Ole Miss to punish and fire Thomas, threatening to boycott the university and stop all donations. The next day, Ole Miss’s then-Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter fanned the flames by issuing a public denunciation of Thomas on his own Facebook page, declaring, “While I passionately support free speech, I condemn statements that encourage acts of aggression.”

Then the governor denounced Thomas. US Senate candidate Chris McDaniel said about Thomas, “Another threat from another low-life liberal....Disgusting. It’s time for disciplinary action.” (<https://www.oxfordeagle.com/2018/10/23/gov-bryant-condemns-ole-miss-professors-tweet/>)

And this was not the end of it. Three months after the salad tweet, investigators from the FBI showed up in January 2019 to question Thomas about his tweet. A mocking suggestion that people put their fingers in salad was literally being investigated as a federal crime. Someone in Trump’s FBI actually sent out an order, go interview the salad tweet professor.

And still this was not the end of it, because Thomas was going up for tenure. Luckily for Thomas, the administration followed the academic process and supported the decision of the faculty who believed he was worthy of tenure. But he still needed to have his tenure approved by the Board of Trustees. Of course, tenure normally is (and should be) something rubber stamped by a Board of Trustees without any discussion, because trustees have no expertise to evaluate a

professor's academic credentials. But solely because of his tweets, the Board spent two hours behind closed doors debating whether Thomas should be fired or not. Eventually, a majority of the Board backed down in the face of a united front by the faculty and the administration.

In fact, it appears that Thomas' job may have been saved through the use of deception. Higher Education Commissioner Al Rankins reportedly warned the trustees that denying Thomas tenure could have threatened "the accreditation of our campuses." (<https://www.oxfordeagle.com/2019/05/21/with-dissent-james-thomas-granted-tenure-by-ihl/>) Fortunately, university trustees usually know very little about higher education and so they were probably unaware that accreditors never revoke accreditation over a violation of academic freedom. But this false fear, along with the strong support for Thomas' tenure case from the campus, was sufficient to overcome the desire of trustees to punish a professor for his mean tweet.

And so Thomas, who came within a hair of being fired, who was investigated by the FBI and denounced by his president, now is what we have as a victory for free speech. But how safe is free speech if this kind of extreme reaction to a salad tweet is what results? What is the chilling effect on other professors who worry about any kind of controversial expression endangering their jobs.

It's not just faculty who have to watch what they tweet. Students can be investigated for their social media, and students who continue on to work in higher education may face controversy in the future for views they expressed in the past.

Administrators themselves are also increasingly subject to punishment for social media statements. Jamie Riley, University of Alabama Dean of Students, recently resigned under pressure because of tweets from a few years ago, such as: "The flag represents a systemic history of racism for my people. Police are a part of that system. Is it that hard to see the correlation?" (<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/09/university-of-alabama-dean-resigns-breitbart-tweets.html>) June Chu, who was dean of Pierson College at Yale University, was put on leave and removed for her Yelp restaurant reviews that included a reference to "white trash." (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/yale-dean-june-chu-yelp-resigns_n_594a547ee4b0177dob8ab4ao) Kellogg Community College not only fired Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer Jorge Zeballos but also eliminated his position completely in 2020 after Zeballos posted a photo of himself outside a Donald Trump rally in town with a sign that read,

"Fuck Trump, Fuck McConnell, Fuck Graham."(https://www.battlecreekenquirer.com/story/news/2020/02/19/kellogg-community-college-kcc-ousts-chief-equity-and-inclusion-officer-wake-trump-protest-sign/4805452002/?mc_cid=6ace5a27de&mc_eid=104055fca3)

The reason why social media has become the center of the war on academic freedom in recent years is simple. Social media makes expressing opinions much easier and instantaneous, transmits those ideas globally, and creates a permanent record of those views. Professors, like everyone else, have always said dumb things, most often in personal conversations that are lost to history. By vastly expanding the amount of publicly expressed opinions by professors and the access to them, and removing the normal systems of editing and restraint, offensive ideas are now much more widely available due to social media to feed the outrage industry that has also expanded in the age of the internet, with numerous websites and media outlets ready to pounce on every any dumb thing a professor says.

To some, the solution to this academic freedom problem is easy: Professors should stop using social media, or silence their most controversial ideas. But the answer to a technological advance that allows for more expression is not censorship. Professors have the same right to use social media as anybody else, and they should not lose their jobs over it. Academic freedom protects extramural utterances no matter what medium is used for expressing them. And having some professors who try to speak to a boarder public and test their ideas by interacting on social media is, in general, a valuable addition to public discourse.

Steven Salaita (one of the professors fired for his tweets) began his book, *Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom*, by asking: "Is it a good idea for scholars to tweet? Is it even appropriate?" Salaita argued, "Most of my tweets distill decolonial theory into workaday language. Tweets are not scholarship, however. Academics can express things on Twitter (or other social media) that are verboten in peer-reviewed journals."

Salaita points to the advantages social media can offer, while others focus on the negative aspect. But the perception of social media as a new unique form of communication should not change the protections of academic freedom at all. If a professor violates professional standards and deserves to be punished, the medium chosen for that punishable activity should not matter.

On the other side, if a professor wants to engage in political debate, intellectual freedom should not depend upon choosing a particular method of expression.

Social media changes the environment for academics by increasing the speed with which ideas can be publicly expressed and distributed. But technological and cultural increases in public exposure have happened before. The changes from social media that so many regard as revolutionary are like revolutions that have happened in the past.

When the AAUP was founded in 1915, it happened partly in response to a wave of firings of professors for the public expression of their views. The rise of tabloid newspapers with a mass audience made it possible for the ideas of professors to reach a much larger public. A professor's words spoken to labor groups could suddenly be reported (and distorted) to an enormous audience that might be upset by those views.

In 1915, the AAUP could have limited its protection to the purely academic work of research and teaching. Instead, the AAUP's 1915 Declaration of Principles explicitly put "extramural utterances" on the same level as research and teaching. This revolutionary idea, that one's political opinions in a newspaper deserved the same protections as one's academic research and academic work inside the classroom, helped to solidify an expanded ideal of academic freedom and shaped the concept of academic freedom for the century that followed.

Today, in the second century of the AAUP, some people imagine that a technological advances that amplifies the voices of professors will require new limits. This is an extremely dangerous approach, one that threatens to undo all the advances in protecting extramural utterances that have been achieved in the past century.

One argument used for firing professors because of their social media commentary is that someone who expresses harsh views about a particular group or viewpoint will therefore behave in an unprofessional way in the classroom. There's actually surprisingly little evidence to support that assumption. Professors who are fired for their offensive social media beliefs are never scrutinized for their actual teaching performance.

When the Chancellor and the Board at the University of Illinois were deciding to fire Steven Salaita, they paid no attention at all to his teaching and research record and simply read his offensive tweets. But the logic used for firing Salaita was that he would be a bad teacher. As Chancellor Phyllis Wise wrote, "A Jewish student, a Palestinian student, or any student of any

faith or background must feel confident that personal views can be expressed and that philosophical disagreements with a faculty member can be debated in a civil, thoughtful and mutually respectful manner.”(<https://academeblog.org/2014/08/22/chancellor-phyllis-wise-explains-the-firing-of-steven-salaita/>)

But there was never any evidence that Salaita would teach students in the same manner that he tweets. Salaita had exceptionally high ratings in student evaluations at Virginia Tech, and despite vigorous efforts to uncover anything negative about him, no student ever stepped forward to allege any kind of rudeness by Salaita in the classroom, not to mention any misconduct. Kevin Allred, an adjunct fired by Rutgers University and Montclair State University, claimed, “I’m an amazing teacher -- my evaluations & testimonials prove it.”

In fact, the only time that colleges seem to pay attention to anything other than the offensive tweet is when they are searching for a pretext to fire someone. This was the case when Ward Churchill was fired in 2007 by the University of Colorado after criticism of his offensive blog about 9-11, and the administration investigated and fired him for charges of research misconduct. (http://www.nbcnews.com/id/19940243/ns/us_news-education/t/professor-fired-after--nazi-comparison/) At the University of Georgia, the administration tried to punish a graduate student assistant who wrote on Facebook, “we have to dismantle the institutions that make crappy white people.” Because there was no legal violation in his comments, the university instead accused him of submitting false information in his application to graduate school because he didn’t disclose the fact that he had been arrested in an Occupy protest in 2011 even though the charges were dropped. (<https://www.campusreform.org/?ID=11959>) But a disciplinary committee refused to punish the student.

Colleges sometimes use the threats against a controversial individual to justify suspending them. This is often called the Heckler’s Veto, but when it takes the form of death threats, it’s really the Terrorist’s Veto. Faculty and administrators face difficult decisions in dealing with threats of violence, but too often, administrators use death threats as an excuse to punish controversial faculty and remove them from campus. After all, if the president of the university gets a death threat, nobody ever suggests a suspension and banishment from campus as a possible solution.

One reason why colleges suppress social media is because they have policies that explicitly endorse censorship. Many colleges have terrible social media policies that are usually a mix of prohibitions and recommendations for self-censorship, rather than protections for free expression.

Brown University, for example, has an extensive social media policy giving advice such as “Remember that what you post on your personal page could haunt you professionally” and “If you discuss higher education on your own social media site, include a sentence similar to this: *The views expressed on this [blog, Website] are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Brown University.*” (<https://www.brown.edu/university-communications/social/guidelines>)

Stanford University’s policy warns, “When engaging on social media on Stanford’s behalf, do not express political opinions or engage in political activities. Your political opinions can only be expressed in your individual capacity on your own social media accounts and, even then, avoid the appearance that you are speaking or acting for the university in political matters.” (<https://ucomm.stanford.edu/policies/social-media-guidelines/>) Stanford advises for personal social media accounts, “you should include, where possible, a statement on your profile that indicates your views do not constitute official statements on behalf of Stanford.”

These kinds of guidelines for forced disclaimers are dangerous to intellectual freedom because they create a culture of aversion to controversial ideas. And this is peculiar to social media. No university has ever enacted a policy that says if you go to a conference and your nametag lists your institutional affiliation, you should write on the nametag, “My views are my own,” yet it’s becoming very common for academics to do that on their twitter account or blog at the insistence of university policy.

Many social media policies are little more than a compilation of dire warnings. The University of California Office of the President’s policy on social media states, “UC faculty, staff and students also are reminded that they are subject to University codes, policies and terms that may apply to social media use, including but not limited to the following,” and then it provides a list of 13 different codes and policies that your thoughts on social media could be violating. (<http://link.ucop.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/ucop-social-media-guidelines.pdf>)

UC-Davis has one of the best policies on social media that actually supports using it: “As a university committed to the highest standards of freedom of speech and expression, we

encourage everyone to get involved and participate in social media.” And UC-Davis guidelines do not apply to personal social media, but only for “participation on UC Davis-hosted social networks or online in your official capacity tied to the university.” Yet even the UC-Davis policy states, “When referencing UC Davis online, make it clear that you’re sharing your personal opinion and are not communicating on behalf of the university.”(<https://www.ucdavis.edu/social-media/guidelines/>)

In 2014, the AAUP released an updated report on “Academic Freedom and Electronic Communications” that recommended, “Academic freedom, free inquiry, and freedom of expression within the academic community may be limited to no greater degree in electronic format than they are in print, save for the most unusual situation where the very nature of the medium itself might warrant unusual restrictions—and even then only to the extent that such differences demand exceptions or variations.” (<https://www.aaup.org/file/Academic%20Freedom%20%26%20Electronic%20Communications.pdf>) I think this statement is a mistake by the AAUP because it still opens the door to repression. It is difficult to understand any reason why “the very nature of the medium” could justify a unique restriction on social media. Instead, campus social media policies should explicitly state that social media and electronic formats have the exact same standards for freedom of expression as any other medium.

We need to pay more attention to the recent social media firing spree on college campuses for many reasons. Academic freedom demands it, and any spike in campus firings should raise concerns. Social media represents the future of expression. The dismissal of controversial faculty for their social media is only likely to increase as future generations of faculty, raised in the era of social media, are more accustomed to using it.

One caveat here is that because there is no systematic database of attacks on faculty for their social media postings, my analysis may be incomplete. I attempted to find all the cases I could find of faculty punished for social media, but I may have overlooked some of them. I believe that FIRE, or some similar organization, needs to undertake something similar to FIRE’s disinvitation database, to track faculty who are punished for their ideas.

What should colleges do to protect academic freedom and the right to engage in social media?

First, colleges should defend and support, not denounce, professors who make controversial remarks. When Syracuse professor Dana Cloud tweeted from a protest, “We almost have the fascists in on the run. Syracuse people come down to the federal building to finish them off,” she was absurdly accused of calling for murder and received numerous threats.

(https://www.syracuse.com/su-news/2017/06/syracuse_university_chancellor_defends_prof_after_tweet_sets_off_right-wing_back.html) Administrators called her in to a meeting and asked her, “what can we do to help you?” Syracuse Chancellor Kent Syverud issued a strong statement in her defense: “I can't imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth thriving here without free speech. Our faculty must be able to say and write things -- including things that provoke some or make other uncomfortable -- up to the very limits of the law.”

Second, colleges need to revise and improve their policies and social media. We need policies that explicitly protect social media, and say that social media will be evaluated according to the same standards as other extramural utterances. A good social media policy should explicitly protect free expression and prohibit censorship. It should reject the need to use disclaimers on personal social media. And it should protect free expression even when the social media is owned by the university itself, such as when the University of Iowa banned departmental Facebook pages from mentioning a local appearance by climate activist Greta Thunberg.

(<https://www.thegazette.com/subject/news/education/greta-thunberg-iowa-city-climate-strike-university-of-iowa-facebook-post-social-media-20191004>)

Third, colleges should adopt stronger policies protecting academic freedom, giving a faculty committee broad scope to address any issues of intellectual freedom on campus, and not merely dismissals of tenured faculty. Many of the faculty who come under attack for their social media, and especially the ones who are fired for it, are part of the vast army adjunct faculty in higher education who lack many of the protections for academic freedom. Expanding the authority of faculty committees to scrutinize cases where adjuncts are fired for their extramural utterances could help provide some internal protections for academic freedom.

Fourth, colleges should create institutional structures in support of intellectual freedom to educate the campus, conduct research, protect victims, and improve policies. Just as colleges have established diversity offices and Bias Response Teams to address discrimination, they

should create faculty-run programs devoted to academic freedom, administrative offices for intellectual freedom and Free Speech Response Teams to help address problems related to censorship and to educate the campus community about academic freedom. The way that a university shows it is concerned about something is to devote resources and an institutional presence to it. We need to pressure colleges to show that intellectual freedom matters on campus by making these programs a permanent part of the university.

To conclude, I want to address the larger cultural and political problem of promoting free speech and academic freedom. I think the best way to promote free speech is build a strong consensus of the left and the right behind a principled position where all viewpoints deserve protection. There are two major problems with that. On the right, we see the danger of hypocrisy, where conservatives announce their devotion to free speech but only support intellectual freedom for their side, and either ignore or actively applaud the repression of opposing viewpoints. On the left, we see the danger of skepticism, where some leftist scholars and activists increasingly doubt whether the principle of free speech is a good idea.

Bringing attention to this wave of leftists being fired by colleges for their social media postings is critical to changing the understanding of the free speech debate on campus. For those who see political correctness as the only threat and conservatives as the only oppressed minority on campus, these cases are a reality check, and we need to push for recognition of the fact that campus censorship does come from all sides--left, right, and center. For those on the left who think "free speech" is a right-wing plot that must be abandoned, these social media cases are proof of how misguided they are. Leftist views are frequently censored, and the leftist notion that we need to give administrators more power to silence controversial views on campus should seem ridiculous to progressives if they understand how widespread suppression of leftist views is on campuses.

This wave of social media firings is a severe threat to academic freedom, but it may also be an opportunity to unite everyone in defense of free speech at a moment when too many people have doubted the value of free expression.

Trigger Warnings: After the Drama

By Angus Johnston

I've been rewriting this paper since the first day of the conference—adjusting and tearing up and putting back together in response to previous papers and ongoing conversations. So my commentators may be a little bit shell-shocked by what follows, and I apologize for that.

But I've wanted to do that because of a gradual realization I've had while I was here. As has been mentioned, I'm someone who uses trigger warnings in the classroom, and I've written publicly a bunch of times about why I think that in certain circumstances they are good educational practice. And coming from that background into this much more skeptical environment, something that has struck me over and over again in the last thirty-six hours is the extent to which proponents and critics of trigger warnings are talking past each other these days.

So in the interests of starting from bedrock and working up, I'd like to pose three foundational questions to you all, and offer my answers to them: First, "What *is* a trigger warning?" Second, "What's a trigger warning *for*?" And third, "What's the downside of using one?"

Even before we get to those questions, though, I want to provide a bit of context for my answers by talking about the trigger warning I use with my students—what it says, and how I introduce it in the classroom.

I first contemplated using a classroom trigger warning in 2014, when the broader discussion around them was first bubbling up. The thing that spurred me was a conversation that I had with a friend of mine, a navy combat veteran with PTSD, who'd had a very negative experience with a professor when discussing potentially triggering materials that he was planning to use in class. My friend asked for a heads-up before such materials were introduced, and the professor refused to give one.

I was surprised and disappointed to hear about this resistance, and it then occurred to me that if a student of mine had had a similar experience, they might expect *me* to be similarly resistant to what struck me as a common-sense accommodation. I figured it made sense for me to be proactive and put something in my own syllabus, and so I had a few conversations and did a bit of reading, and came up with the language that I've used, with some tweaks, up to this day.

I call it a content note, rather than a trigger warning, because, frankly, I teach at a community college in the Bronx, and most of my students have never heard the term "trigger warning." (I also have more general concerns about using the term "trigger warning" in an academic setting, and I'll talk about those a bit more later.) But here's the core of what I have in my syllabus:

"At times this semester, we will be discussing topics that may be disturbing for some students. If you suspect that specific material is likely to be emotionally challenging for you, I'd be happy to discuss any concerns you may have before the subject comes up in class. Likewise, if you ever wish to discuss your personal reactions to course material with the class or with me individually afterwards, I welcome such discussions as an appropriate part of our classwork."

After that passage, I include a brief discussion in the syllabus about what a student should do if they need to step out of the classroom at any time for any reason. And then, when we're going over the syllabus in class at the beginning of the semester, I bring up the story of the letter that Charles Darwin wrote after the death of his daughter Annie, at the age of ten.

Some of you, I'm sure, are familiar with this letter. Annie had contracted scarlet fever when she was eight, and was sickly after that. She died at ten, and not long after, Darwin wrote this letter, in which he talked about what kind of a kid she'd been, and the place that she had occupied in their family and in his life, and the loss, the hole, that her death had left behind.

I think it's a really important document. It's a heartbreaking document, but it's also really useful in the classroom when I'm talking about the history of medicine and the history of families. The experience of losing a child was once far more common than it is now, and if we want to enter into

the minds of people in a time that is in some ways very different from ours, looking at how they interpreted these kinds of experiences is really helpful. And Darwin was so eloquent that the letter winds up being, in my experience, a wonderful, horrifying, illuminating thing to bring in.

And so I tell them about the letter. I give them a little bit of an introduction to what it says, and then I say that while I think it's an important letter, and one that leads to good conversations, I would never want to spring it on a student who had just lost a child of their own. I say that it seems to me that that would be cruel, terribly cruel, particularly if the student was not just taken by surprise, but also didn't have a sense of their options in response: "Can I say something? Can I walk out? If I do, am I going to be punished?" And so I give that example, and I say, "If you have anything that is likely to be a problem for you in that kind of a way, or a similar kind of a way, just let me know."

That's it. That's all I do. And I'll admit that it all seems really straightforward to me.

When I first prepared this content note, I wound up talking about it and writing about it a lot. I wrote about it in *Inside Higher Ed*, in a piece that was picked up in *Slate*, I talked about it in the *Chronicle*, I've talked about it in public speaking engagements and on television and radio a fair amount, and as a result of that, my text, which I published in some of these venues, has wound up being used and adopted by a lot of folks.³

So when I tell you about my trigger warning I'm not just talking about some weird little idiosyncratic thing that I do in a vacuum. By my rough estimate, something like a hundred different professors and programs have either adopted this for their syllabus or have offered it as a sample for adoption by others. And that's only the ones that have been published online. So I'm

³ See for example "Why I'll Add a Trigger Warning" (Johnston, 2014). As I note above, I've tweaked my content note a bit since the publication of that piece, and I've revisited some of my thoughts on the topic as well. A followup blogpost on the subject is "Syllabus Trigger Warnings: A How-To, and Some Reflections, One Year Along" (Johnston, 2015).

not speaking here as someone whose position on trigger warnings is far outside of the mainstream.

However, in spite of all that, one of the things that has come up over and over again—and in fact has already come up once this weekend—is that when I describe my trigger warning, or now, having come up with a definition, share that—what I hear over and over again is “that’s not actually a trigger warning. That’s not what I mean when I talk about trigger warnings.”

And what’s fascinating to me about this, and what I think is really significant about it, is that I only ever hear that from people who oppose trigger warnings. Literally once, in response to a tweet that I wrote in 2015, I had a trigger warning proponent say “That’s not actually what a trigger warning is. You’re not doing a trigger warning. You can’t claim to be doing a trigger warning.” Overwhelmingly, folks who use trigger warnings are like “yeah, that’s a pretty good one,” or “that’s not a great one,” or whatever. But there is this very strong impulse among folks who don’t agree with trigger warnings to sort of, I would say, perhaps being a little bit uncharitable, “no true Scotsman” my own broadly adopted offering.

And it’s not just me—I see this kind of nomenclatural dispute again and again. Opponents of trigger warnings suggest “alternatives” that are essentially identical to what proponents are already doing. Or they deny that widely-used trigger warnings are trigger warnings at all. Or—with increasing frequency—they conduct and publish academic studies with simulated classroom scenarios that depart dramatically from proponents’ standard practices, and then use the results of those experiments to call the trigger warnings that proponents are actually using into question.

I find that disconnect really interesting. I’m not going to try to hypothesize as to where it’s arising from. (At least not right now. Ask me later, over a beer, and maybe I’ll share some theories.) But I think it’s really interesting. And I think it’s a gap, a disconnect, that those of us who support trigger warnings and those of us who are critical of them should try to address in some way.

If we don't even agree on what a trigger warning *is*, then we've got all sorts of fundamental problems, not only in terms of policy, but also, and maybe particularly, in research. Because if folks are researching trigger warnings, and their understanding of a trigger warning is fundamentally different from what most folks are doing in the classroom, they're going to wind up researching something that may just be a figment of their imaginations.

Which brings us back to my initial three questions: What is a trigger warning? What's a trigger warning *for*? And what's the downside of using one?

As far as the definition of a trigger warning goes, I worked on it a bit last night, and I came up with this: "A classroom trigger warning is a professor's notice to students regarding upcoming course content that may provoke a negative emotional or psychological response. It is often accompanied by guidance as to what the students' academic options may be should they anticipate or experience such a response."

I would say that this is a definition of a trigger warning that most folks who use them in the classroom would approve of. I'm not going to say that everybody is going to one hundred percent agree with it, because I scribbled it on a napkin at about eleven o'clock last night, but I think it's pretty close to what the folks on my side of this divide typically understand the term to mean. It differs from how critics typically understand the concept, in my experience, and an even larger gap between proponents and critics arises when we move from the "what" question to the "what for."

The recent experimental work on trigger warnings that I've seen, including the studies that have been discussed this weekend, have tended to share a number of features in common.⁴ First, their subjects are provided a text to read online in isolation without any supporting context or larger

⁴ Here and in what follows I rely primarily on Gainsburg et al, "Trigger Warnings as an Interpersonal Emotion-Regulation Tool: Avoidance, Attention, and Affect Depend on Beliefs" (2018), Bellet et al, "Trigger Warning: Empirical Evidence Ahead" (2018), and Sanson et al, "Trigger Warnings Are Trivially Helpful at Reducing Negative Affect, Intrusive Thoughts, and Avoidance" (2019).

purpose; second, the trigger warnings provided to the subjects are short, nonspecific, alarmist, or, in many cases—including one of those discussed this weekend—all three; and third, and crucially, study participants are instructed to read potentially traumatizing materials *immediately after* being given the trigger warning, having been given no opportunity for intervening self-preparation, management of the experience, or discussion of the experience with those who provided them with the text.

As I've noted, my own work on this subject has for more than five years emphasized student-faculty dialogue, an individualized approach, and giving students information well in advance of their encountering the materials in question.

And all of those principles, which are absent from these studies, are also present in other writing on classroom trigger warnings, *including writings which are cited in these very studies*. Kate Manne's 2015 *New York Times* op ed, "Why I Use Trigger Warnings," which is one of the ur texts of this debate, addresses each one of those issues. It's harder to conduct a study that incorporates all of those things, but this stuff is not new. This stuff has been present in the trigger warning argument, from the perspective of the proponents, from the very beginning.

Thus, trigger warnings in these studies bear little similarity to those advocated by prominent academic advocates, or those typically—as far as I've been able to determine—used in the classroom setting. And claims for their application to the pedagogy of higher education should, as a result, be made extremely tentatively, if at all.

One more quick thought, before we move on: Each of the recent experimental studies of which I'm aware uses the term "trigger warning" when introducing potentially troubling material to its research subjects, but this is itself a deviation from what many trigger-warning advocates advise as classroom practice. Where a researcher has a concern that—and the intent of testing the proposition that—a trigger warning may itself represent a psychologically counterproductive "trigger," phrasing the warning in as non-inflammatory a way as possible might provide more useful and reliable data. (As noted above, I use the term "content note" in my classes and in my

published model warning, and other academics have long urged the use of terms like “advisory”—or simply a brief factual description of the content itself.⁵)

Okay. We’ve addressed the question of what trigger warnings are, and that of what they’re for, but what about the third question—that of the downside of using them?

In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg and Jon argued—and, though I don’t agree with them in every detail, I think fairly persuasively—that our society is more eager than is useful to frame classroom conflicts and pedagogical disputes as matters pertaining to mental health and safety—personal safety, emotional safety. I agree with them that the safety/health peg is not always a great fit for the curriculum/pedagogy hole. Not every moment of emotional or psychological difficulty is a medical crisis, and not every request for interpersonal care or consideration is a medical intervention.

And given that fact, and given the underlying perspectives of the respective sides in the trigger warning dispute, I find it more than a little odd that opponents of trigger warnings are so often so eager to medicalize the trigger warning debate.

Let me return to my friend the combat veteran. This friend has, as I noted earlier, clinical PTSD. Most students who seek trigger warnings do not, as far as I’m aware, but my friend does. But even though my friend has PTSD, the request they made of their professor wasn’t framed as a request that the professor treat that condition. My friend wasn’t looking to enter into a therapeutic relationship with their professor, wasn’t looking to have the professor engage with or manage their trauma. My friend didn’t see a request for a heads-up about potential triggers—which they had identified themselves and notified him about—as a demand that he engage with their PTSD in any way. Rather, it was simply a request to be given information about the course and how it

⁵ See, among many others, Godderis and Root, “Trigger Warnings: Compassion is Not Censorship” (2016), and Gust, “I Use Trigger Warnings, But I’m Not Mollycoddling My Students” (2016).

would be taught, information that my friend believed, as an adult, would be of use as they navigated the class.

As this example illustrates, to ask for—or indeed to offer—a trigger warning is not to medicalize or therapeutize the classroom environment. It's a heads-up. It's a pedagogical intervention, not a therapeutic one. And yes, if evidence emerges that offering that kind of a heads-up may be psychologically damaging to students, then we should take such evidence into consideration. But that's true of any pedagogical practice—high-stakes testing, or starting high school classes at seven in the morning when teenagers are desperately in need of sleep, or berating your law students like John Houseman in *The Paper Chase*. All of these things are things which could potentially have adverse outcomes, but none of them are medical interventions.

And let me just say one more thing about that. As professors, our pedagogies differ in all sorts of ways, and properly so. What works for me with my teaching skillset and my course material and my student body may well not work for somebody else. Classroom practices are never one-size-fits-all, and trigger warnings are no exception. (I oppose and have always opposed mandatory trigger warnings. There was a tiny boomlet of support for mandatory warnings a few years ago, but happily, it has pretty much subsided.)

So trigger warnings are not a one-size-fits-all solution. We're never going to agree on everything. And on some questions we are going to disagree vehemently, even irreconcilably, and this may be one of them.

But although some questions are really hard, not all of them are. And if we model an approach to the less thorny questions that is collaborative, not adversarial, seeking areas of agreement, not disagreement, we may as faculty be able to learn from each other more than we imagine, and, not incidentally, offer our students, and observers of the university, a model for addressing conflicts *about* the classroom that reflects our beliefs about the ways in which students and professors can most productively tackle potential conflict *in* the classroom.

I think that if we can have a conversation about trigger warnings that is oriented around ideas about teaching practices, how we can best serve our students, and about the merits and demerits of different approaches *within* the concept of trigger warnings rather than just a blanket “are they good or are they bad,” I think we’ll be doing a profound service to our students, to our universities, and to the public dialogue in the country as a whole.

One last aside before I let you go: Something that leaps out to me vividly about the experimental studies I’ve been discussing is that the trigger warning model they use, as different as it is from those typically used in the classroom setting, is actually quite similar to what preceded the classroom trigger warning, which is *online* trigger warnings. In an online setting, all three of the characteristics that I described above apply perfectly—you’ve been given a text to read online and in isolation, a text that in many cases you don’t know very much about or have a strong commitment to in advance; the trigger warnings are short, nonspecific, alarming, or all three; and in general you are going to read the text immediately after the trigger warning, rather than having some time to think about it.

One of the purposes of trigger warnings in the online context is to let people know if maybe they don’t want to read the document, right? “I am looking for a short story that is fanfic of my favorite TV show, but I am really *not* interested in reading a story about the main character in that TV show being raped.” So if I get a trigger warning that the character is raped, I’m not going to read the story. That’s one purpose of the trigger warning.

But the other purpose of the online trigger warning is exactly what is being claimed in these studies. To provide a managed experience, all of that kind of stuff. And if that doesn’t work, as some of these studies suggest, then two things leap out. One is, that’s a really good argument against most online trigger warnings. And second—crucially, and this is a really big deal to me—it reflects *criticisms of trigger warnings that have been offered in online feminist communities for ten years*.

There is a whole ongoing discussion within these communities about whether trigger warnings are a good idea or a bad idea, and this research is actually an intervention into that discussion. But it's so siloed from that online trigger warning discussion that as far as I can tell there's virtually no overlap—the two conversations aren't being informed by each other at all. And it's a tremendous missed opportunity, I think.