



Trigger Warning Proposal

Student Government
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The Trigger Warning Initiative proposes that Professors give warning to students prior to the presentation of media or literature that presents material that could be traumatizing to students, whether in the form of an email prior to class or in the class syllabus accompanying the class schedule. According to the article, *Why I Use Trigger Warnings*, a trigger warning, “flags content that depicted or discussed common causes of trauma, such as military combat, child abuse, incest, sexual violence,” (Manne 1). We believe that students who experience mental health issues such as PTSD and panic disorders, or students who have faced traumatic experiences, are deserving of a warning that a lecture or guest speaker may aggravate those issues or traumatic experiences.

The purpose of implementing trigger warnings at Towson University is to benefit students who may have had traumatic experiences in the past. So that they are provided a classroom space that gives them full access to a meaningful educational experience. The article, *Why I Use Trigger Warnings*, also states, “The point is not to enable-- let alone encourage-- students to skip these readings or our subsequent class discussion. Rather it is to allow those who are sensitive to these subjects to prepare themselves for reading about them, and better manage their reactions,” (Manne 1). Trigger Warnings are not meant to excuse students from the material unless they begin to have a reaction related to their mental health.

Whereas, The article, *A Quick Lesson On What Trigger Warnings Actually Do*, adds, “Research from the National Alliance on Mental Illness shows more than 60 percent of college students who dropped out did so because of a mental health issue, which includes cases like PTSD and trauma,” (Holmes 9). Holmes also asserts, “Research shows that many people don’t speak up when they’re experiencing complications with their mental wellbeing. Referring to potentially serious, damaging content as something that could cause mere discomfort delegitimizes someone’s experience. In reality, it’s more than just feeling a little uncomfortable. Mental Health disorders-- particularly those following trauma -- can cause panic attacks, difficulty sleeping, problems with concentration and more.” (Holmes 5).

Whereas, *Refocusing the debate on trigger warnings: privilege, trauma, and disability in the classroom* argues, “A common misconception is thinking of discomfort and trauma as synonymous. The difference between the two terms has often been ignored in the trigger warning debate. Discomfort jolts us out of our prior perspectives. Students can learn and continue to learn through discomfort. Trauma, on the other hand, does not simply jolt us out of our own perspectives. Trauma completely disrupts our focus and makes learning virtually impossible. Trauma can be defined as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.” Feelings of being traumatized result in a “paralyzing, overwhelming cascade of emotional and physiological responses. Conflating trauma and discomfort can lead to our failure to take seriously the mental health needs of our students,” (Rae 3). The article also states, “Trigger warnings should not be seen as “coddling” students, but rather as considering their right to be and *stay* in the classroom, respecting their right to learn despite the obstacles they face. Moreover, warnings do not exist to enable—let alone encourage—students to skip readings about troubling

subjects, but to allow those who are affected by those subjects to prepare themselves, to better manage their reactions,” (Rae 4).

Academic freedom has become a widely used argument against trigger warnings in the classroom. Logan Rae writes in his article, *Re-focusing the debate on trigger warnings: Privilege, trauma, and disability in the classroom, about the effects which trigger warnings have on academic freedom*. He writes, “While academic freedom is an important value, the connection to trigger warnings lacks clear explanation. Richard Vatz argues that faculty avoid teaching controversial material when students who perceive themselves as victims are present. Rather than charging trigger warnings with blame in this situation, we might more appropriately view the threat to academic freedom stemming from administrators refusing to support their faculty who receive challenges from students. . . A trigger warning does not prevent instructors from showing certain texts, it merely flags potentially traumatic material within those texts. The American Association of University Professors has also spoken out against trigger warnings, claiming that their use “infantilizes” students. Yes, some students may have experienced traumas relevant to a planned discussion topic, but these would be “exceptional [rare?] individual experience[s],” whereas trigger warnings are sent to the entire class. Worse yet, the AAUP asserts, the warnings “might elicit a response from students they otherwise would not have had.” “On Trigger Warnings,” *American Association of University Professors*, August 2014. <https://www.aaup.org/report/trigger-warnings>. It seems that the AAUP is doing the infantilizing here. Simply hearing a warning will create the trauma? The assertion assumes that students are unable to figure out whether a trigger warning pertains to their own life experience. Trigger warnings and similar pedagogical practices are about disability access. They are about recognizing all that your students bring to the classroom and considering that not everyone has the privilege to learn uninterrupted. In my experience, I have used and benefited from trigger warnings. While it is difficult for me to see why scholars and commentators are against the use of trigger warnings, I do sympathize with many of their concerns. The stress of not knowing what to put a trigger warning on is also something that I struggle with whenever I get in front of a class. However, that does not mean we should not try. Like any other good pedagogical practice, this will take work. It will take trying and failing, it will take talking to colleagues, being open with your students, and calling upon your own support systems to figure out how to best help your students. Our students are worth that much,” (Rae 13).

Therefore, trigger warnings should accompany any class material which may possibly provoke a student’s mental disorder or traumatic experience. This includes:

1. Actual descriptions of **war**, like the Vietnam war, or the US operations in Afghanistan.
2. graphic descriptions of or extensive discussion of **abuse**, especially sexual abuse or torture
3. graphic descriptions of or extensive discussion of **self-harming behavior** such as suicide, self-inflicted injuries or disordered eating
4. depictions, especially lengthy or psychologically realistic ones, of the **mental state of someone suffering abuse or engaging in self-harming behavior**

5. discussion of **eating-disordered behavior** or **body shaming**
6. examples of, or links to content that features, **hate speech** or **strong abusive language**
7. and possible visual triggers (such as flashing visuals) for people with photosensitive conditions.

Trigger warnings serve to benefit Towson University as a whole community by enhancing the educational accessibility to students suffering from mental health or traumatic experiences. Strengthening the education of all students should be a priority for Towson University, and allowing more students to build their education will provide us with a growing community. Trigger warnings allow students suffering from mental health disorders and traumatic experiences to obtain a better education in the classroom. Warnings about sensitive materials listed above will give students the opportunity to process what they will be discussing or reading about. This opportunity grants these students an equitable and accessible education.