

Case 13: Trigger Happy

Trigger warnings in education are statements that advise readers of assigned content that deals with potentially sensitive topics (e.g., child abuse, rape, violence). Use of these warnings has precipitated debate on college campuses and among observers of higher education. A recent survey by the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) has shown that their use is not very widespread, they are neither demanded by most students nor required by the vast majority of colleges, and most faculty are opposed to their being required. Though admittedly non-scientific, the survey was done by a group that could be expected to be looking for a crisis of censorship. They didn't find it.

Rationale for their use is to warn students who may have traumatic reactions to the content assigned. Most advocates of trigger warnings on syllabi do not necessarily expect students to avoid the content or ask for special dispensation. The NCAC survey confirmed that few students seem to respond to the warnings.

NCAC conducted its survey in response to media attention that made the issue seem like a firestorm in higher education. Media reports evidently overstated the number of students demanding, or colleges requiring, use of warnings. Nonetheless, debate continues about the relative merits and negative effects of trigger warnings. Some feel the warnings improve classroom dynamics and encourage students to approach faculty if they are having trouble with content. Many faculty and educational experts, on the other hand, claim trigger warnings diminish the obligation of higher education to encourage rational consideration of topics. Critics also see demand for trigger warnings as a threat to academic freedom and faculty job security. Another concern is that use of trigger warnings coddles students since college may be the last safe and structured time for students to develop critical thinking skills. Critics further claim that the warnings may encourage students to avoid what is disturbing rather than to develop coping skills. A report from the American Association of University Professors notes, "The presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual."

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