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32nd Academic Chairpersons Conference,
Austin, TX

"Trigger Warnings": Balancing challenging material with overwhelming students

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Recommended Citation

Gere, Susan (2015). ""Trigger Warnings": Balancing challenging material with overwhelming students," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2015/Trends/1>

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“Trigger Warnings”

Hitting the right balance between exposure to challenging material and overwhelming students in the college classroom. Conceptual discussion, research report and practical suggestions.

This year the news media have reported on student requests for faculty in higher education to provide what are known as “trigger warnings” – explicit alerts that the material students are about to read or see in a classroom might upset them – or even, as some students assert, cause symptoms of PTSD in victims of rape or in war veterans. Students may be ahead of many faculty members and administrators in knowing how the painful histories they bring with them affect their learning. Research suggests that as many as 80% of students have experienced one or more traumatic life experiences by the time they enter college. But, should classrooms be considered therapeutic environments?

Increasingly, higher education is becoming a microcosm of society. Each year, our students grow more diverse by gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, race, physical abilities, and class. They also bring more mental health issues along with more wisdom about what they need to survive and thrive in school. As faculty and administrators we are challenged to confront these problems in learning far more directly, interactively, and innovatively. This includes addressing our own denial about how society’s legacy of domestic and international violence enters every one of our classrooms.

In this presentation, I will summarize knowledge from the trauma field to help faculty and administrators think about creating healthy learning environments without unduly neglecting or sanitizing intellectual content. I will summarize a qualitative research project I conducted with faculty members about their experience teaching and advising students with trauma histories. Finally, I will propose a structure that demonstrates how administrators and faculty might understand creating appropriately challenging and supportive educational environments for all students, including those with trauma histories.

This presentation is relevant for all chairpersons. Audience members will be invited to respond to the material presented and to offer both relevant examples from their own experience and to engage in discussion of how to balance classroom culture and climate with the demands of content.