

Resolution 31: Mandating Content Warnings for Traumatic Content in the Classroom

Abstract: Urging university officials to require instructors who present graphic traumatic content that may trigger the onset of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to provide advance notice to students and refrain from penalizing students who opt out of exposure to such content.

Sponsored by: Claire Ting '25, Shelby Williams '25

Reviewed by: Academic Policy Committee, 4-0-2

Type of Action: Recommendation

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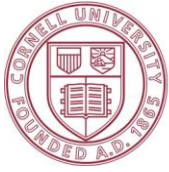
Current Status: New Business

Whereas, exposure to triggering classroom content can negatively affect students with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), resulting in emotional and physical symptoms that can lead to poorer academic performance and increased absenteeism;¹

Whereas, it is not a standard requirement for instructors at Cornell to provide content warnings for triggering classroom content;

Whereas, “triggering classroom content” can refer to a range of topics, including but not limited to: sexual assault, domestic violence, self-harm, suicide, child abuse, racial violence, transphobic violence, homophobic harassment, etc.;

¹ O'Donnell, M. L., Creamer, M., Bryant, R. A., Schnyder, U., Shalev, A., & McFarlane, A. C. (2016). Posttraumatic disorders following injury: an empirical and methodological review. *Clinical psychology review*, 47, 143-154.



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20 **Whereas**, classrooms that do not provide advance warning for triggering content negatively
21 affect students with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD);

22 **Whereas**, exposure to trauma-related information can trigger PTSD symptoms in individuals
23 with a history of trauma, and in a classroom setting, can elicit strong emotional and
24 physical reactions in students with PTSD;²

25 **Whereas**, students with PTSD may experience a range of emotional and physical symptoms in
26 response to trauma-related content, including anxiety, fear, irritability, flashbacks, and
27 panic attacks;³

28 **Whereas**, scholars at Cornell have discussed how providing advance content warnings can help
29 prepare students to engage with traumatic material in a rational and calm manner, without
30 censoring or restricting academic freedom;⁴

31 **Whereas**, including content warnings gives respect and acknowledgment to the effect of
32 triggering content on students with PTSD, both diagnosed and undiagnosed;

33 **Whereas**, doing so makes the discussion of sensitive academic topics more predictable, therefore
34 balancing the academic freedom of instructors to teach with the needs of the student
35 body;

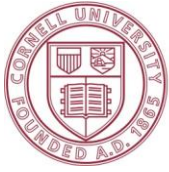
36 **Be it therefore resolved**, the University preserve the Cornellian values of “any person, any
37 study” and recognize the importance of supporting students with PTSD and other conditions;

38 **Be it further resolved**, Student Assembly implores all instructors to provide content warnings
39 on the syllabus for any traumatic content that may be discussed, including but not limited to:

² Bray, R. M., Hourani, L. L., Rae, K. L., & Dever, J. A. (2000). Trauma-related events in schools: A critical incident study of emotional impact on students and teachers. *Journal of School Health*, 70(7), 305-312.

³ O'Donnell et al., *Id*

⁴ <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/defense-trigger-warnings-cornell>



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40 sexual assault, domestic violence, self-harm, suicide, child abuse, racial hate crimes, transphobic
41 violence, homophobic harassment, xenophobia;

42 **Be it finally resolved,** students who choose to opt-out of exposure to triggering content will not
43 be penalized, contingent on their responsibility to make up any missed content.

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45 **Respectfully Submitted,**

46 Claire Ting '25

47 *Representative to the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Student Assembly*

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49 Shelby Williams '25

50 *College of Arts & Sciences Representative, Student Assembly*

51 *Academic Policy Committee Chair, Student Assembly*

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