

# A Warning System for "Disturbing" College Courses?

 [realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/03/12/a\\_warning\\_system\\_for\\_disturbing\\_college\\_courses\\_121885.html](http://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2014/03/12/a_warning_system_for_disturbing_college_courses_121885.html)

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

March 12, 2014

Since the late 1960s, the movies have had in place a rating system designed to inform viewers of the suitability of films for various audiences. The MPAA system enables parents to make responsible decisions about what their children view, and gives all moviegoers the opportunity to seek out entertainment that gives them pleasure and to avoid films they will find disturbing or distasteful.

Why shouldn't a similar rating system be adopted for the courses offered at our colleges and universities?

The answer is that it would inescapably involve the policing of expression and thought and thereby destroy the freedom to dissent and follow arguments where they lead, which is the life-blood of liberal education. Yet we are already briskly moving in that direction.

According to an article in The Daily Nexus, the University of California Santa Barbara's student newspaper, in late February the student Senate "passed a resolution to begin the process of instituting mandatory 'trigger warnings' on class syllabi at UCSB." The resolution would "require professors who present content that may trigger the onset of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to warn the students ahead of time and refrain from docking points from those who opt out of attending class that day."

UC Santa Barbara is part of a growing trend. As Jenny Jarvie reported recently in The New Republic, "many students are demanding trigger warnings on class content" and "many instructors are obliging with alerts in handouts and before presentations, even emailing notes of caution ahead of class."

Some cutting-edge colleges see no good reason to limit the use of trigger warnings to just PTSD, which on many campuses is understood to cover "survivors"—to use the technical term favored by professional educators—of sexual violence.

At Oberlin College, for example, the Office of Equity Concerns has published online a statement advising professors to provide trigger warnings not only concerning materials that could stimulate traumatic memories of sexual violence but also regarding those that have the potential to evoke traumatic feelings relating to "racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism [according to Queers United, this is "the belief and treatment of transgender

and/or transsexual people as inferior to cissexual (non-trans) people”], ableism [discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities], and other issues of privilege and oppression.”

Of course, an energetic young imagination can find almost any image or idea oppressive. And, as Jarvie observes, empirical research shows that anything—a smell, a song, the changing of seasons—can be a trigger.

Accordingly, she reasons that in the case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, trigger warnings are inefficacious, and she rightly worries that as faculty and university administrators become “more preoccupied with students’ feelings of harm, they risk opening the door to a never-ending litany of requests.”

In the spirit of John Stuart Mill’s rousing defense of liberty of thought and discussion, Jarvie argues convincingly that since there are no limits to what individuals may find offensive, trying to protect students by attaching warning labels to words and opinions will encourage the regulation of an ever-expanding range of expression. And this will inevitably restrict the variety of ideas that professors present and with which students grapple, foster intellectual timidity on both sides of the lectern, and leave students as well as professors duller and dimmer.

The swelling number of proponents of trigger warnings on campus will accuse Jarvie of going beyond the boundaries of acceptable discourse by recycling stale arguments that fetishize free speech. Such retrograde views, the proponents will contend, present a transparent effort to blame the victim, flaunt a lack of empathy for those who suffer, and treat with callous indifference the need to supervise the expression of opinion on campus for the greater good of all students.

But do the proponents of trigger warnings really have the courage of their convictions?

The determination to regulate the expression of opinion and the discussion of ideas presupposes that our students bring to the classroom delicate sensibilities and fragile psyches. If faculty and administrators really cared about our allegedly easily traumatized students, they would demand something more.

They would call for a systematic and comprehensive rating system for college courses, certainly not anything less than what Hollywood provides for movie audiences.

It might look something like this:

**G:** General Students – All students are admitted. This course tells students exactly what they want to hear.

**PG:** Professorial Guidance Suggested – This course reinforces campus orthodoxy but in ways that students might not entirely expect. It is suggested that students consult with professors before enrolling.

**PG-17-21:** Professors Strongly Cautioned – Some material in this course may be inappropriate for those who have suffered frustration, disappointment, rudeness, rejection, or any sort of limitation on their ability to bend the world to their will.

**R:** Restricted – This course may directly call into question students' opinions through hard-hitting analytical and empirical argumentation. Permission is required from the campus diversity coordinator and sexual health advisor.

**NF&S:** No freshmen and sophomores are admitted under any circumstances. No junior or senior is admitted without the consent of the professor, approval of the campus diversity coordinator and sexual health advisor, and a note from the student's parents. Without regard for the shock or revulsion normal students are likely to experience, this course vigorously puts forward reasons and evidence in support of ideas that directly oppose the conventional wisdom.

Such a ratings systems cannot be expected to guarantee students that they will never encounter a disturbing or distasteful thought. But its implementation would help complete the nationwide transformation, already well underway, of the liberal arts from an education for freedom to freedom from education.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*