

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Session 120

Date April 14, 2021

Submitted by Mustapha Samateh

Senate Vice Speaker



ASSOCIATED STUDENTS OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

BOARD BILL 5.13: Resolution for the Implementation of Content Warnings in the Classroom

Sponsors: Eva Hudak

Senate Vote: 53-2-7

WHEREAS, the University of Michigan defines content warnings as “ verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content. These notices flag the contents of the material that follows, so readers, listeners, or viewers can prepare themselves to adequately engage or, if necessary, disengage for their own wellbeing.” (10); and

WHEREAS, “One in 5 women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college” (1); and

WHEREAS, “Sexual assault can affect someone’s mental health, either short-term or long-term. This can lead to depression, anxiety, PTSD and even suicidal feelings” (2); and

WHEREAS, “About 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are physically assaulted by an intimate part- ner annually in the United States” (3); and

WHEREAS, “15% (n = 1,860) of respondents indicated that they had experienced unwanted sexual contact/conduct while at the University of Washington in Seattle (p. 138).” (4); and

WHEREAS, “Nearly 80 percent of rapes and sexual assaults go unreported, according to a Justice Department analysis of violent crime in 2016 ... only around 23 percent of survivors report such crimes to police, but it’s true” (5); and

WHEREAS, “Findings from large-scale national studies indicate that, while African Americans have a lower risk for many anxiety disorders, they have a 9.1% prevalence rate for PTSD, compared to 6.8% in Whites (Himle et al, 2009). That means that almost one in ten Black people becomes traumatized, and I think these rates may actually be higher since diagnosticians are usually not considering the role of racism in causing trauma” (6); and

WHEREAS, “Graphic videos (which she calls vicarious trauma) combined with lived experiences of racism, can create severe psychological problems reminiscent of post-traumatic stress syndrome” (7); and

WHEREAS, one student said that having no warning given before a discussion/description of racially motivated violence made them feel like “it was a casual thing to discuss the traumas inflicted upon bipoc.” (8); and

WHEREAS, “Students with a history of trauma (like sexual assault, emotional or physical abuse, war, etc.) or someone with PTSD may feel particularly sensitive or hyper-aware of words or images that could reintroduce that trauma into their day-to-day lives. For those who have experienced trauma, trigger warnings help them to avoid fight-or-flight modes that occur when they are exposed to words or imagery that remind them of the trauma” (9); and

WHEREAS, “When presented with a scene that depicts sexual violence, a student who was assaulted might shut down, disassociate, panic, become angry, or otherwise disengage from the class as they put all their attention into managing the emotional and physical symptoms the triggering material brings up for them. However, if the student is forewarned that the material includes a depiction of sexual violence, they might prepare for it ... so they can process it under controlled conditions” (10); and

WHEREAS, ““To say, “I was triggered” is not to say, as it is frequently mischaracterized, “I got my delicate fee-fees hurt.” It is to say, “I had a significantly mood-altering experience of anxiety.” Someone who is triggered may experience anything from a brief moment of dizziness, to a shortness of breath and a racing pulse, to a full-blown panic attack”” (11); and

WHEREAS, students who have unexpectedly been faced with discussions/descriptions of personally sensitive topics lose out on learning opportunities because they feel they need to leave class or are unable to focus because of anxiety, PTSD, and other symptoms (12); and

WHEREAS, unexpected discussions/descriptions of sensitive topics have caused students to have anxiety and panic attacks in class, therefore preventing them from having the same learning opportunity as other students (12); and

WHEREAS, 91% of students surveyed said that they supported content warnings being included before descriptions/discussions of physical assault in class (12); and

WHEREAS, 83% of students surveyed said that they supported content warnings being included before descriptions/discussions of racially motivated violence in class (8); and

WHEREAS, the minority of students who said they would NOT prefer content warnings be included before discussions/descriptions of physical assault or racially motivated violence also explicitly stated that seeing physical assault or racially motivated violence would not impact them in any way (8, 12); and

WHEREAS, “The inclusion of content warnings is neither restrictive (it does not label anything as off-limits to teach) nor coddling (it does not assume that students cannot handle the material, on the contrary, it treats them as adults who can and should attend to their own wellbeing with all available information” (10); and

WHEREAS, “As teachers we are responsible for ensuring that all of our students have the opportunity to learn in our classrooms and to succeed at our institutions. For instance, while I must teach the history of lynching, I also want to recognize how difficult this subject can be for my African American students, particularly given the majority-white institution at which I teach. I cannot approach the topic of sexual assault without recognizing that one in five female college students will experience such an attack, or that transgender women of color are currently at the greatest risk of anti-LGBTQ violence.” (13); and

WHEREAS, the “good practices” created by the Faculty Council on Academic Standards (FCAS) state: “Among the core values of the university are inclusivity and diversity, regardless of race, gender, income, ability, beliefs, and other ways that people distinguish themselves and others ... Inclusivity applied to teaching a course means that assignments and activities should be accessible to all students” (14),

THEREFORE, BE IT ENACTED BY THE ASSOCIATED STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON BOARD OF DIRECTORS

THAT, the University of Washington add the use of content warnings before discussions of sensitive topics including, but not limited to, sexual assault, child abuse, physical assault, racially motivated violence, abuse, and suicide to its list of best teaching practices; and

THAT, the University of Washington implement a formal method for students to submit complaints if an instructor starts a discussion/description of sensitive topics including, but not limited to, sexual assault, child abuse, physical assault, racially motivated violence, abuse, and suicide without giving students fair warning; and

THAT, the availability of this resource be explicitly broadcasted to students on relevant platforms such as MyPlan, course descriptions, and announcements, etc.

THAT, if an instructor anticipates a course may contain sensitive content, that a content warning be placed in the course descriptions listed on the University's Registration platform; and

THAT the University of Washington encourage instructors, when possible, to provide alternative materials to students so their education is not detrimentally impacted

THAT, the University of Washington add a question to the quarterly teaching evaluations done by students asking students whether content warnings were given before discussions/descriptions of sensitive topics including, but not limited to, sexual assault, child abuse, physical assault, racially motivated violence, abuse, and suicide; and

THAT, the University of Washington add content warnings before readings or any other classroom materials (e.g. videos) that include sensitive topics including, but not limited to, sexual assault, child abuse, physical assault, racially motivated violence, abuse, and suicide.

THAT, any advance warning given by an instructor be offered in a way that does not force any student to reveal any personal connection to a sensitive topic.

THAT, this bill be forwarded to the UW Board of Regents; President of the University of Washington, Ana Mari Cauce; Clara Coyote, Director of University Affairs; University of Washington Faculty Senate Chair, Robin Angotti; University of Washington Registrar, Helen B. Garrett; Faculty Council on Teaching and Learning Chair, Thomas Halverson.

End

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