

Beyond Trigger Warnings: Trauma-Informed Care and Practices in Higher Education and Student Affairs

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Regardless of which functional area a student affairs professional works in, higher education student affairs practitioners and faculty alike should be well-versed and trained in trauma-informed care (TIC) and trauma-informed practices (TIP). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) often directly correlate with physical and mental health complications such as depression, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in adulthood. Types of ACEs include abuse, neglect, household dysfunction (divorce, substance use disorder, incarcerated relative, mental illness, etc.) and although not formally included in the original Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ACEs model, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, to name a few, can and should be included when discussing trauma. More than half of college students (66%) in a study of 236 nursing students disclosed experiencing at least one ACE, with 17% reporting experiencing more than three forms of ACE's, establishing more evidence for the increase in stress among college students and their academic performance levels and mental health.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma refers to an event, series of events, or circumstances that cause an individual to feel physically and/or emotionally harmed or threatened and which has lasting negative impacts on the individual's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing. It is also important to note that trauma affects each individual differently and that trauma is incredibly complex. With 85% of undergraduate students experiencing trauma and 9% of these students experiencing levels that reach the criteria of post-traumatic stress disorder, acknowledging and consistently working towards providing trauma-informed services and policies is crucial in understanding how to advise, support, mentor, and coach student growth and learning. Trauma influences the ways in which students learn and interact with their surroundings both curricularly and co-curricularly.

TIC originated in patient and client advocacy and is a framework used in social services, criminal justice, health professions, and in the K-12 sphere. TIC is centered on creating safety, trust, and providing choice for students. The criteria for TIC include (1) recognition of trauma's prevalence, (2) recognition of how trauma impacts all individuals within the organization, and (3) responses that put this knowledge into practice.

The importance of student affairs practitioners having a foundational understanding of TIC is highlighted in thinking about how we address student behavioral patterns such as

why a student may not be participating verbally in a Resident Advisor staff meeting and focusing on the “why” behind the behavior instead of jumping to conclusions and closing off an opportunity to cultivate a supportive relationship to assist that student in their recovery process. It is also important to note that student affairs practitioners may experience retraumatization while working with students in their professional roles at their institutions. Many times, student affairs practitioners who hold historically underrepresented and marginalized identities are tasked with supporting students who are experiencing or who have experienced similar trauma in their lives, creating the possibility of secondary traumatic stress. Student affairs practitioners work with student survivors on a daily basis, regardless of their role on campus and must be aware of the impacts on students’ memory, emotions, attention, forming relationships, learning, etc. after experiencing trauma.

As faculty spend substantial time with students in their classroom spaces, TIC are integral to supporting and creating a culture of authentic care for all students, and especially those with high ACE scores. Safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment are each integral components of TIC. Faculty can integrate TIC through power dynamic breakdown in the classroom, creating brave spaces, and focusing on the co-construction of knowledge in these educational environments. Additionally, practical pedagogical strategies such as incorporating “un-grading”, or the process of decentering learning as a destination and instead a process through constructive feedback and meaningful dialogue with peers and the instructor, as well as eliminating “class participation” grading, are key to creating this sense of choice and safety for students. Another component is incorporating feedback on assignments and feedback loops into the course structure.

As higher education institutions are hierarchical in nature, creating this type of change will be challenging. Therefore, examining current policies (hiring, student worker training, scholarships, admissions, student health and wellness, career services, undergraduate research, etc.) at the unit/department and institution-wide levels will contribute to incremental positive change. Incorporating and requiring an annual or once a semester/quarter training on TIC for all faculty and student affairs professionals is integral to holistically and proactively supporting students. Similar to the concept of universal design for learning in education, TIC is necessary to create institutional support structures. One critical component of this training should be navigating various case studies and creating intentional space for staff and faculty to practice responding to a scenario with students in a trauma-informed manner. Practicing creating both physically and emotionally safe spaces is integral to students’ sense of belonging, confidence building, and self-efficacy.

The most pressing counter-argument to incorporating TIC is the notion that incorporating an additional training is time intensive and resource intensive. However, without this focal point of TIC as a critical framework to guide the field, burnout on behalf of staff, particularly Black and brown folks, and harmful negative implications for students, especially those who hold marginalized identities, will become more and more prominent. The importance of faculty, staff, and student leaders receiving training on how to create trauma-informed policies, environments, and classrooms is tenfold. In envisioning the most equitable and inclusive campus environments that foster a sense of belonging for all students, the incorporation of TIC is key. TIP calls upon staff, faculty, graduate advisors, and student leaders in higher education to approach their work with intentionality, care, and through the lens of asking students “What happened to them?” and not “What is wrong with them?”.

Overall, TIC is a systems-based approach focused on building sustainable, human-centered, safe policies and programs while actively resisting retraumatization. This TIC approach in student affairs calls on professionals and leaders in the field to cultivate work and educational environments that center transparency and trust building.