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Bridging Research to the Practice: Implementing Trauma-Informed Care to Support Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper builds upon insights from the workshop, "From Campus to Community: Implementing Trauma-Informed Care in Higher Education," presented at the 2024 Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) conference. The workshop introduced participants to trauma-informed care principles and their application in higher education, forming the foundation of the framework explored in this manuscript. Grounded in SAMHSA's Six Guiding Principles, this paper synthesizes relevant research, highlights actionable strategies, and offers practical applications to bridge theory and practice. The discussion emphasizes the importance of creating supportive classroom environments through techniques such as consistent routines, peer support, and culturally responsive teaching for students to thrive within the academic setting. Faculty development programs, including the Trauma-Informed Higher Education Certification, are presented as tools to equip educators with the skills to implement these practices effectively while advocating for systemic institutional changes. The role of institutional leadership, particularly the emergence of Chief Well-being Officers, is examined as a key factor in embedding trauma-informed care into policies and organizational culture. Additionally, the paper highlights the connection between trauma-informed approaches and community engagement, demonstrating how initiatives align with regional well-being and equity goals. By integrating these practices, the manuscript underscores the

transformative potential of trauma-informed care to foster resilience, inclusivity, and academic success for students. It concludes by calling for continued research and strategic implementation to create supportive environments where all members of the academic community can thrive.

Keywords: trauma-informed care, higher education, trauma, faculty development, community engagement, student well-being, faculty support

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the pervasive impact of trauma on college students, faculty, and staff. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma "results from an event, a series of events, or a set of circumstances that an individual perceives as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening, with lasting adverse effects on their functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). Trauma can have profound effects on individuals' mental health, well-being, and academic performance. Research indicates that college students frequently encounter significant academic pressures alongside personal challenges, which, when compounded by trauma, can lead to detrimental outcomes such as lower retention rates, diminished academic engagement, and compromised overall well-being (Kalkbrenner & Jolley, 2019; Lecy & Osteen, 2022). Further, trauma is not limited to individual experiences; systemic and structural factors, such as racial and identity-based trauma, exacerbate the impact on marginalized populations. For example, racialized groups face chronic exposure to microaggressions, implicit bias, and systemic inequities, which compound stress and distress (Henshaw, 2022). Addressing trauma within higher education settings is more critical than ever in the post-pandemic era, as the global health crisis has heightened awareness of mental health and trauma-related issues. The pandemic, coupled with collective traumas such as global crises, climate disasters, and race-based violence, has resulted in a significant proportion of individuals experiencing at least one traumatic event, according to recent research (Henshaw, 2022). These issues are particularly relevant as higher education leaders strive to create inclusive and equitable learning environments that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by underrepresented and marginalized communities (Bitanihirwe & Imad, 2023; Gao, 2023).

Given these impacts, higher education institutions are uniquely positioned and increasingly obligated to adopt trauma-informed approaches that foster supportive and resilient learning environments (Henshaw, 2022; Bitanihirwe & Imad, 2023). Trauma-informed care offers a structured approach to address these needs, with principles that promote safety, empowerment, and equity. By adopting such approaches, higher education institutions not only support individual well-being but also contribute to a more engaged, resilient academic community. By embedding trauma-informed practices into academic and administrative frameworks, institutions of higher education can improve students' academic outcomes, enhance faculty and staff well-being, and promote a campus culture of inclusivity and understanding (Bitanihirwe & Imad, 2023; Gao et al., 2023). Trauma-informed strategies are thus essential for leaders in higher education to cultivate spaces that promote recovery, foster academic success, and equip both students and staff with the tools to thrive amid adversity.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive framework for integrating trauma-informed practices into higher education. By synthesizing relevant research, exploring foundational

trauma-informed principles, and offering practical applications tailored to academic settings, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice. We highlight actionable strategies that faculty, staff, and institutional leaders can adopt to foster a culture of resilience and inclusivity. This framework builds upon insights gained from our workshop titled "From Campus to Community: Implementing Trauma-Informed Care in Higher Education," presented at the 2024 Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) conference (Holmes, Korsch-Williams, & King-White, 2024), where we introduced participants to trauma-informed care principles and their application in higher education. This paper aligns with the anchor mission of urban universities, as articulated by CUMU, by exploring how trauma-informed approaches contribute to regional well-being, equitable student success, and community resilience. Additionally, the workshop and this paper draw from the Trauma-Informed Higher Education Certification Program, which offers structured training to equip academic stakeholders with the tools needed to create supportive and equitable learning environments. Together, these efforts underscore the transformative potential of trauma-informed care in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by students, faculty, and staff, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and equitable educational environment for students to thrive academically.

Literature Review: Relevant Research Findings

Overview of Trauma and Its Impact in Higher Education

Research has consistently shown that trauma is prevalent among college students and significantly impacts their academic and personal lives (Mall et al., 2018; Gress-Smith et al., 2013). Many students enter higher education having experienced adverse childhood events, including abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction. Recent estimates from large representative samples have reported that between 85-89% of college students have reported at least one lifetime traumatic event, with the most common traumatic events reported as unexpected death, witnessing family violence, and unwanted sexual attention (Frazier et al., 2009; Anders et al., 2012). These traumatic events can lead to long-term emotional and psychological challenges (Artime et al., 2019; Arria et al., 2013; Karatekin & Ahluwalia, 2016). For instance, Gress-Smith et al. (2013) found that childhood adversity significantly correlates with depressive symptoms and insomnia among college students, suggesting that academic and social stressors exacerbate these mental health challenges. Furthermore, the intersection of systemic traumas, such as race-based violence, xenophobia, homophobia, poverty, and ableism, adds another layer of complexity, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. For example, LGBTQ+ students experience up to 2.5 times the likelihood of PTSD compared to heterosexual peers (Budge et al., 2013). These students are more likely to encounter both individual traumas (e.g., childhood adversity, community trauma) and chronic, identity-based stressors (e.g., microaggressions, institutional exclusion), which compound their impact and contribute to disparities in educational outcomes (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; Grest et al., 2020; Underwood

et al., 2024). These traumas often intersect with individual experiences, amplifying their impact and creating unique challenges in educational settings.

Trauma can also lead to disengagement from academic and social activities, impacting students' retention and overall sense of belonging within the campus community (Gress-Smith et al., 2013; Karatekin, 2017). Disengagement often stems from the distress that students face, which may manifest in different ways, including but not limited to anxiety, dysregulation, and the inability to cope. Distress not only impacts students in these various ways but often has an impact on the students' ability to thrive within the academic setting. Figure 1 provides some examples of what symptoms of distress may look like in students who have experienced traumatic experiences. Trauma-informed approaches recognize issues such as those described in Figure 1 as possible effects of trauma, which is critical to fostering inclusive and supportive higher education learning environments. A lack of awareness of these and other potential effects on students may lead to a lack of understanding of student experiences and needs, and missed opportunities for educators to respond in a manner that will promote student well-being and success.

FIGURE 1. Examples of distress among students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma-Informed Care Principles (SAMHSA)

According to the SAMHSA, a trauma-informed care approach focuses on the "4 R's" (SAMHSA, 2014). The 4 R's consist of the organization **realizing** what trauma is and the impact that trauma has on the people whom they serve; **recognizing** the signs and symptoms of trauma

in the organization; **responding** accordingly to address trauma from a trauma-informed lens; and **resisting retraumatization** to ensure that people whom we serve are not further harmed. SAMHSA has also developed key principles of trauma-informed care that provide a framework for responding to trauma in supportive ways. These principles include safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and attention to cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). In the context of higher education, the principles are increasingly applied not only to support individual healing but also to address systemic inequities that exacerbate trauma among underserved populations. Table 1 provides a definition of each principle applied to higher education. Implementing these principles within higher education settings can provide students and staff with important tools to better cope with experiences of adversity, enhancing their academic and social experiences.

TABLE 1. SAMHSA trauma-informed principles applied to higher education

Safety	Prioritizing physical, emotional, and psychological safety for all students by establishing clear expectations, boundaries, and support systems within the classroom.
Trustworthiness & Transparency	Building trust through consistent and transparent communication, fostering an atmosphere of openness, honesty, and reliability for students in the academic setting.
Peer Support	Encouraging peer support networks to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness among students.
Collaboration & Mutuality	Establishing a collaborative relationship between faculty and students based on mutual respect, trust, and shared decision-making.
Empowerment, Voice, & Choice	Empowering students to have a voice in their learning process, encouraging autonomy, self-advocacy, and choice whenever possible.
Cultural, Historical, & Gender Issues	Recognizing and respecting the diversity of students' backgrounds, experiences, and identities, and incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices.

The application of trauma-informed care principles in educational settings has been shown to foster environments that promote healing and resilience. For instance, Gutiérrez and Gutierrez (2019) emphasize the importance of building positive relationships between faculty and students, which is a critical component of a trauma-informed approach. This positive relational aspect helps to create a safe and supportive atmosphere where students feel empowered to fully engage and succeed academically. By embedding these principles into the educational framework, institutions can better address the unique challenges faced by marginalized populations, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and a more inclusive campus culture.

The six principles outlined by SAMHSA (i.e., safety; trustworthiness & transparency; peer support; collaboration & mutuality; empowerment, voice, & choice; and cultural, historical, & gender responsiveness) are not implemented in isolation but are interrelated and adaptable to different learning environments. In higher education, these principles are operationalized through strategies such as creating predictable classroom routines (safety), clearly communicating expectations and changes (trustworthiness), facilitating peer-based learning communities (peer support), involving students in shaping class norms and activities (collaboration), and offering multiple avenues for participation and success (empowerment). The sixth principle of cultural, historical, and gender responsiveness specifically invites educators to recognize how intersecting identities and systemic inequities shape students' experiences and access to support. In this way, trauma-informed teaching shares important common ground with culturally responsive teaching, which centers student identity, cultural affirmation, and educational equity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, trauma-informed care is broader in scope, as it integrates cultural responsiveness while also addressing the physiological, emotional, and cognitive effects of trauma on learning.

Furthermore, the implementation of trauma-informed care principles not only aids in individual recovery but also contributes to a broader cultural shift within educational institutions. This cultural shift reflects a move away from traditional academic cultures that often emphasize performance, competition, and individualism, and toward environments that prioritize empathy, connection, and holistic well-being. Trauma-informed approaches challenge punitive and one-size-fits-all policies by centering flexibility, trust, and relational accountability. By fostering an environment that prioritizes safety, trust, and empowerment, higher education institutions can cultivate resilience among students, faculty, and staff alike, equipping them with the necessary tools to navigate adversity effectively.

Brain Science in Education

Advancements in neuroscience offer valuable insights into how trauma affects learning and behavior. Trauma can disrupt brain development, particularly in areas responsible for memory, emotional regulation, and executive functioning (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Understanding these neurological impacts is crucial for faculty aiming to create trauma-sensitive classrooms. For example, the concept of "regulate, relate, and reason" emphasizes the importance of helping students achieve emotional regulation before engaging in higher-order cognitive tasks, reflecting how the brain processes information sequentially from the brainstem to the cortex (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). In order to reason with a person, one must have access to the cortex (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). However, if students, faculty, and staff are entering institutions already dysregulated, engaging from the regulate, relate, and reason framework can help create systems that are supportive for them to thrive.

Faculty and staff can help students with emotional regulation by creating routines that are predictable and calm. Without regulation, it is often difficult for people to relate and reason. Once students, faculty, and staff are regulated, the next sequence of engagement is relating. The relating component can consist of, but is not limited to, building rapport with students ahead of a crisis or traumatic event occurring, peer support, and showing interest in students' overall well-being. These relational activities help faculty, staff, and students feel safe in the environment, allowing them to reason. Once people are regulated and can relate, then they are able to reason. The regulate–relate–reason framework highlights the need for structured, repetitive, and relationally supportive university environments. These practices align with SAMHSA's trauma-informed care principles, providing a holistic approach that incorporates the latest findings from neuroscience into trauma-informed education strategies (SAMHSA, 2014b).

Connection to CUMU Themes

In the context of higher education, trauma-informed approaches align with broader themes of student well-being, racial equity, and community engagement, which are central to institutions that prioritize holistic and inclusive education (Wells, 2023). A recent article published in the Metropolitan Universities Journal reinforces this alignment by describing how integrating trauma-informed practices into the higher education curriculum can improve classroom climates, foster inclusivity, and support student learning and retention, particularly for students who have experienced adversity (Young & Schepers, 2024). These approaches also reflect CUMU's commitment to anchor strategies that promote regional well-being, expand access, and build bridges between campuses and their surrounding communities. By addressing both individual and systemic trauma, these practices create pathways for universities to foster equitable environments and meaningful community partnerships, particularly in addressing disparities experienced by marginalized groups. Institutions that adopt trauma-informed practices can address these disparities by creating culturally responsive and equitable learning environments that recognize and validate students' diverse experiences. Trauma-informed approaches also support community engagement initiatives by building stronger partnerships between universities and local organizations, promoting shared responsibility for addressing community-level trauma, and fostering a campus culture of inclusivity. In doing so, trauma-informed higher education contributes directly to the themes emphasized by CUMU and the mission of the Metropolitan Universities Journal, including student success, equity, and public scholarship that advances place-based change. By recognizing the intersection of trauma and community dynamics, institutions can work collaboratively to address the unique challenges faced by marginalized populations, ultimately promoting a more equitable and supportive educational landscape.

Application: Translating Research into Practice

Trauma-Informed Care Framework in the Classroom

Since 2018, the faculty of the Case Western Reserve University Center on Trauma and Adversity has been building and implementing a trauma-informed approach within the classroom. We have grounded our trauma-informed pedagogy in research on the neuroscience of trauma and healing and have developed practical tools to create a supportive environment geared towards optimal learning for students. Applying the SAMHSA model and neuroscience findings to classroom settings offers a practical approach for supporting students affected by trauma. The principles of trauma-informed care (i.e., safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness) can be woven into classroom practices to create a supportive learning environment. A trauma-informed classroom for college students is an educational environment that recognizes and responds to the impacts of trauma on students' learning, behavior, and well-being. It involves creating a safe and supportive space where students feel respected, understood, and empowered to engage in their academic pursuits.

The following strategies have been implemented by faculty to support replication in other university classrooms, illustrating the practical application of trauma-informed principles. For instance, integrating tools like "regulation stations" (i.e., baskets of sensory and fidget toys) can help improve student attention and productivity by providing them with a non-disruptive outlet for excess energy or anxiety. These strategies are grounded in brain science, which shows that sensory input, such as tactile stimulation, can help students self-regulate their nervous systems. This regulation strategy supports transitions from a state of hyperarousal or shutdown (often seen in trauma-exposed learners) to a calmer, more focused state where cognitive engagement becomes possible (Croley et al., 2022). By helping students modulate their arousal levels, regulation stations serve as a bridge to executive functioning, attention, and working memory, which are capacities essential for academic learning.

To foster peer support and emotional safety, establishing group check-in routines at the start of class can help students feel emotionally safe and connected while also developing a greater sense of community. Educators can foster trust and collaboration by encouraging open communication and validating students' emotional experiences, which can enhance engagement and reduce stress. Providing meaningful opportunities to elicit and respond to student feedback regarding their classroom and coursework experiences can support students in feeling heard and open pathways for constructive dialogue. By incorporating trauma-informed principles such as these into day-to-day interactions, faculty can develop the foundation for classroom climates that mutually support academic success and individual resilience.

Furthermore, the integration of neuroscience findings into educational practices can enhance the effectiveness of trauma-informed approaches. For example, research suggests that understanding

brain development and the impact of trauma on learning can inform teaching strategies that promote emotional regulation and cognitive engagement (Friedman et al., 2019). These techniques align with findings that predictable structure, multisensory grounding, and opportunities for co-regulation help regulate the nervous system, allowing students to access executive functioning necessary for learning. Examples include beginning class with grounding activities (e.g., taking three deep breaths or performing a quick stretch), allowing movement breaks during longer sessions, and using consistent routines and visual schedules to help reduce anxiety. In emotionally intense discussions, faculty may use brief regulation pauses, such as journaling or silent reflection, to help students process before re-engaging cognitively. By applying these insights, educators can create structured, supportive environments that facilitate learning and help students navigate emotional challenges. Overall, the application of the SAMHSA model and neuroscience findings in the classroom can significantly contribute to creating trauma-sensitive educational environments that promote student well-being and academic success.

While trauma-informed practices benefit all students, they are especially critical for supporting those from marginalized backgrounds. These students often experience not only individual traumas but also chronic, identity-based stressors such as racism, homophobia, xenophobia, or poverty that compound the effects of trauma and shape their academic experience (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; Grest et al., 2020; Underwood et al., 2024). A trauma-informed classroom that incorporates cultural responsiveness and flexibility is therefore essential to equitable education. Strategies such as integrating readings from diverse authors that reflect students' identities, offering multiple ways to participate (e.g., discussion boards, written reflections, or voice memos), and including clear syllabus statements about trauma-aware policies are not only inclusive but necessary to support students who face systemic barriers to well-being and academic success. In this way, trauma-informed teaching operates as a universal approach with targeted benefits: fostering a supportive environment for all while intentionally addressing disparities that impact marginalized learners.

"From Campus to Community: implementing Trauma-Informed Care in Higher Education" Workshop Overview

To aid faculty and staff in understanding and implementing trauma-informed practices, the workshop "From Campus to Community: Implementing Trauma-Informed Care in Higher Education" was presented at the 2024 CUMU conference (Holmes, Korsch-Williams, & King-White, 2024). This workshop introduced participants to trauma-informed care principles and their application in higher education, focusing on strategies to foster supportive and inclusive classroom environments. In alignment with the Coalition of Urban CUMU conference theme of enhancing regional well-being, the workshop also emphasized the broader role of higher education institutions as anchor organizations in their communities. Recognizing that the well-

being of students is inherently tied to the health of the surrounding community, the workshop explored how trauma-informed practices can extend beyond campus borders to positively impact regional resilience and engagement.

Participants engaged in discussions about creating predictable classroom routines, integrating opportunities for emotional regulation, and using trauma-sensitive communication techniques. Faculty may also structure classes using a "regulate–relate–reason" flow, starting with a moment of connection (e.g., check-ins or warm-up questions), followed by content delivery, and ending with reflection or discussion to support integration. Trauma-informed syllabi may include transparent language, flexible assignment policies, and a section on self-care and academic support resources. The session further addressed the role of institutional culture and policies in embedding trauma-informed care principles across campuses and communities, highlighting strategies for fostering collaboration, equity, and empowerment. By situating trauma-informed care within the context of community well-being, the workshop underscored higher education's unique capacity to build bridges between academic settings and local communities, ultimately contributing to engaged citizenship and regional vitality. Faculty and staff left equipped with practical tools to address trauma-related challenges, empowering them to support students in ways that are sensitive to trauma's effects on learning and behavior.

The workshop incorporated several hands-on examples and case studies that illustrate how trauma-informed practices can be effectively applied in real-world higher education settings. Some examples included:

- Check-ins: Regular check-ins at the start of each class session enable students to strengthen their relational connections and foster a sense of trust and community. This simple practice helps students feel seen and supported, fostering a culture of openness and empathy.
- Regulation Activities: Designated spaces where students can take a break and practice calming techniques, such as deep breathing or sensory exercises, can be transformative for those dealing with stress or trauma. Regulation stations provide students with tools to self-regulate, such as sensory or fidget toys, promoting a sense of agency and control over their emotional responses.
- Dosing of Content: Trauma-informed teaching also involves pacing content delivery in ways that prevent overwhelm, especially when discussing sensitive or potentially triggering topics. Faculty can use strategies such as content warnings and reflective breaks to make learning more manageable for all students.
- Recognizing and Preventing Indirect Trauma in Educators: It is critical that faculty and staff are aware of the potential for indirect trauma, as a result of frequent interactions with students experiencing high levels of adversity. Providing education and support for faculty and staff around the signs and symptoms of indirect trauma, as well as prevention

and remediation strategies, is an important aspect of implementing trauma-informed approaches in higher education.

Implications for Practice

Classroom Practices

To create trauma-informed classrooms, faculty can adopt specific, actionable strategies aligned with SAMHSA's 6 Guiding Principles of safety, trustworthiness & transparency, peer support, collaboration & mutuality, empowerment, voice & choice, and cultural, historical, & gender issues (SAMHSA, 2014). These principles provide a framework for fostering an inclusive and supportive academic environment, thereby enhancing students' sense of security and promoting their engagement. Promoting safety may involve establishing consistent routines, using transparent language about course expectations, and creating a predictable classroom environment by outlining daily activities on the board or notifying students of changes in advance. Ensuring physical safety, such as having well-lit and welcoming classrooms, is equally important. Trustworthiness and transparency can be reinforced by responding promptly to students' questions, clearly communicating schedule changes, and being prepared to connect students to institutional resources during times of crisis. Peer support can be fostered by including collaborative activities, such as group projects or informal opportunities for students to build rapport, while also promoting a culture of respect by working with students to establish classroom norms that support their sense of safety and connection. Faculty can also collaborate with students by seeking their feedback throughout the semester, inviting them to suggest topics or share challenges related to the course structure. Finally, empowering students to set their own academic goals, identify their strengths, and advocate for their needs helps them take ownership of their learning experience. The use of inclusive language and equitable policies ensures that classrooms reflect and respect the diverse cultural, historical, and gender identities of the student body.

While the examples above focus primarily on in-person instruction, trauma-informed strategies can and should also be adapted for online learning environments. In online classrooms, trauma-informed strategies can be thoughtfully adapted to promote safety, trust, and connection in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. For example, to promote safety and predictability, faculty can use consistent communication channels (e.g., weekly announcements via email or LMS), maintain stable due dates, and outline expectations clearly in both written and visual formats. Short, weekly video announcements can help humanize instructors and provide a regular point of contact, fostering a sense of trustworthiness and presence.

To support peer connection and collaboration, faculty might build shared agreements during the first week of class using discussion boards or live polls, creating a foundation of mutual respect and peer support. Group projects or small breakout room discussions in synchronous sessions

can offer opportunities for structured collaboration. At the same time, asynchronous classes can include peer-to-peer response prompts, collaborative documents, or reflective partner exchanges. In emotionally complex content areas, instructors can use content warnings and provide choices in how students engage with material (e.g., alternate assignments or different formats for response), which supports the principles of empowerment, voice, and choice. Anonymous reflections, flexible participation formats (e.g., written, audio, or video), and opportunities to share lived experiences (when appropriate) can allow students to engage at their own pace and comfort level. Additionally, using inclusive language and accessible design (e.g., captions, transcripts, plain-language navigation) demonstrates a commitment to cultural, historical, and gender responsiveness, ensuring all students feel seen and supported. By intentionally applying the SAMHSA principles in digital spaces, faculty can create trauma-informed online learning environments that center emotional safety, autonomy, and connection, regardless of course format.

Faculty Development

Faculty development programs can offer these strategies as training modules, encouraging educators to tailor trauma-informed practices to their courses and teaching styles. One such professional development program is the Center on Trauma and Adversity's Trauma-Informed Higher Education Certification program, which is designed to equip faculty with the knowledge and skills necessary to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment for all students, particularly those affected by trauma. The certification program includes a 2-day live Zoom training, followed by six months of small-group technical assistance to support sustained implementation. Topics include trauma and its impact on students, trauma-informed classroom strategies, secondary trauma and self-care, cultural responsiveness, and department-level systems change. Participants are given access to a curated library of over 70 practical strategies and receive individualized feedback from facilitators and peers during monthly sessions. Through this comprehensive program, participants gain a deep understanding of trauma and its impact on college students, learn practical techniques for implementing trauma-informed care in the classroom, and explore the importance of secondary trauma and self-care, cultural sensitivity, and effective collaboration. By the end of the training, faculty are empowered to implement trauma-informed strategies in their classroom, advocate for and lead trauma-informed initiatives at the department and university levels, fostering a campus culture that promotes the well-being and academic success of every student. For departments seeking foundational exposure, the Center also offers a 2-hour interactive Zoom training that introduces core concepts of trauma, trauma-informed education, and practical classroom strategies. This session includes facilitated discussion around applying trauma-informed principles to classroom policies, culture, and student engagement. Together, these offerings provide scalable entry points for faculty and departments at different stages of implementing trauma-informed teaching.

For Institutional Policy and Culture

Implementing trauma-informed care on a broader institutional level requires intentional changes in policy and culture, grounded in collaboration across all levels of the university institutional leaders can support this shift by embedding trauma-informed values into the core policies governing academic, administrative, and support services. This process requires a thoughtful review of existing policies (e.g., attendance, grading, academic probation, and behavioral intervention protocols) through a trauma-informed lens, along with a willingness to revise practices that may inadvertently harm or retraumatize students. For example, replacing rigid absence policies with flexible, documentation-free absence allowances during crises can reduce barriers to academic engagement for students navigating trauma.

Universities should also address systemic inequities by increasing access to culturally responsive mental health resources and establishing peer mentoring programs to support underserved populations. This could include hiring racially and linguistically diverse counselors, offering drop-in counseling hours across campus locations, and creating identity-specific wellness groups (e.g., BIPOC or LGBTQ+ affinity spaces for healing and connection). Additionally, institutions may implement proactive support mechanisms such as early alert systems that flag concerning academic patterns and connect students to trained, trauma-informed advisors or care teams. Building these principles into the institutional culture also involves training all university staff, beyond faculty, in trauma-informed practices to ensure a campus-wide understanding of and commitment to these values. Annual trainings, onboarding modules, and departmental retreats can reinforce a shared language and understanding of trauma-informed care, making it a visible part of the institutional fabric.

A critical step in fostering this culture is recognizing the need for senior leadership positions, such as Chief Well-being Officers or Vice Presidents of Well-being, to champion organizational well-being. Unlike traditional wellness initiatives that focus on individual improvements, organizational well-being addresses the systemic and root causes of challenges such as burnout, retention issues, and toxic workplace cultures. This role may oversee campus-wide well-being strategy, facilitate cross-departmental partnerships, and integrate trauma-informed metrics into institutional dashboards and planning documents. By appointing designated leaders to oversee well-being efforts, institutions can prioritize policies and practices that cultivate a healthy campus environment. These leaders play a pivotal role in advancing trauma-informed care, promoting equity, and implementing sustainable initiatives to support faculty, staff, and students.

Connection to Community Engagement

Trauma-informed practices extend beyond the campus and can play a vital role in a university's community engagement initiatives. When extended through community-based learning, service-

learning, and field experiences, trauma-informed teaching prepares students to engage ethically and reflectively with community partners, especially those affected by adversity. Faculty who model trauma-informed principles in the classroom, such as empathy, collaboration, and cultural humility, help shape students who can apply these values in their civic and professional roles. Universities can build partnerships with local organizations that focus on trauma-informed care, creating a bridge between the campus and the surrounding community. Collaborative projects with community organizations can address shared goals, such as reducing barriers to education for marginalized groups, while fostering long-term relationships that benefit both the university and its community partners (Falkenburger et al., 2018). These partnerships can be mutually beneficial, with universities sharing resources, research, and best practices while gaining insights into local needs and challenges.

An example of this is our partnership with the City of Cleveland to transform its 22 recreation centers into trauma-informed Neighborhood Resource and Recreation Centers (NRRCs; Holmes et al, 2023). This initiative integrates trauma-informed principles into community spaces, creating environments of safety, trust, and healing for children, youth, and adults. By embedding trauma-informed care into recreation programming, the NRRCs address social determinants of health such as poverty, education, and housing while providing mental health resources, career readiness programs, and youth leadership initiatives. Faculty and student engagement in this work through research, evaluation, and programming offers a direct example of how trauma-informed higher education can influence broader systems.

This approach supports the broader mission of higher education institutions to not only educate students but also contribute positively to their communities. As anchor institutions, universities are uniquely positioned to act as stabilizing forces within their regions, leveraging their resources, expertise, and influence to address systemic challenges and promote community well-being. By embedding trauma-informed care into community engagement efforts, universities strengthen their role as catalysts for resilience and equity, aligning with frameworks such as the Trauma-Informed Social Justice Framework, which emphasizes the importance of addressing both individual and structural forms of trauma through community-centered, equity-driven strategies (Voith et al., 2020). These initiatives not only enhance the well-being of students and faculty but also create a network of support that fosters long-term partnerships, addresses shared challenges, and builds capacity for sustainable change. Through these efforts, higher education institutions fulfill their dual mission of academic excellence and regional impact, advancing a holistic vision of health, opportunity, and resilience within their communities.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Applications

Trauma-informed approaches in higher education provide a framework for addressing the unique needs of students, faculty, and staff affected by trauma. By embedding the principles of safety, trust, peer support, collaboration, and empowerment into classrooms, faculty development, and institutional policy, colleges and universities can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. These practices are essential for promoting academic success, retention, and well-being among students while also supporting faculty and staff who encounter trauma-related challenges in their roles (Holden & Bruce, 2024; Carello & Butler, 2015; Gutiérrez & Gutierrez, 2019). Through trauma-informed training and structured support, higher education institutions can equip their communities with tools that enhance resilience and create a sense of belonging.

Summary of Further Research

While trauma-informed practices hold promise for transforming higher education, additional research is needed to evaluate their long-term impact on student outcomes. Future studies could explore how trauma-informed strategies affect retention rates, academic performance, and well-being over extended periods. Additionally, research on the specific challenges faced by faculty implementing trauma-informed practices could offer valuable insights into creating sustainable support systems (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Doughty, 2021; Henshaw, 2022). Investigating the differential impact of these practices on diverse student populations, including marginalized or underserved groups, could also enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of trauma-informed approaches in higher education.

Implications for Practice

The ongoing development and support of trauma-informed initiatives are crucial for creating resilient and inclusive educational communities. Higher education leaders should prioritize resources and training opportunities that equip faculty, staff, and students to understand and respond to trauma. One such resource is the Trauma-Informed Higher Education Certification Program, which provides faculty and staff with the knowledge and tools to embed trauma-informed principles into their teaching, advising, and campus-wide practices. By participating in structured programs like this, institutional stakeholders can foster a shared understanding of trauma and its impacts, laying the foundation for consistent and effective implementation across all levels of the university.

Embedding these practices into institutional culture requires a commitment to long-term change, and this includes designating leadership roles focused on well-being. The emergence of Chief Well-being Officers or Vice Presidents of Well-being represents a significant step forward in advancing trauma-informed care at the systemic level. These leaders are tasked with addressing root causes of burnout, retention issues, and inequities while promoting organizational well-being through strategic initiatives. By integrating trauma-informed practices into institutional

policy, culture, and community engagement, they ensure that well-being remains a central focus of higher education's mission.

As institutions continue to evolve in response to the needs of their communities, trauma-informed care will remain an essential component of fostering well-being, academic success, and equitable access to higher education. By combining training programs, dedicated leadership roles, and a commitment to systemic change, colleges and universities can create environments where all members feel safe, empowered, and connected—both on campus and in the broader community.

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