

# Developing A Trauma-Informed Lens In The College Classroom And Empowering Students Through Building Positive Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

*In many social science college courses, professors cover a wide variety of topics that may act as triggers for victims of trauma in both traditional and online courses. At the same time, we may also encounter students who suffer trauma during their college experience. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance of creating a safe and empowering environment in college classrooms regardless of what subjects we teach. Safe environments and the relationships we build with our students play a vital role in student success by understanding the importance of being trauma-informed.*

**Keywords:** Trauma; Trauma-Informed; College Classrooms; Student Success

## INTRODUCTION

In the late summer of 2010, a young man who had recently graduated from high school left his family to begin the start of his academic career at Rutgers University. Within a month, he committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. Tyler Clementi committed suicide after his new roommate, and another student secretly taped him and a male friend kissing in his bedroom and posted it online. The case and the traumatic events that eventually unfolded would eventually result in criminal charges against the two students including several counts of invasion of privacy and bias intimidation. Tyler Clementi's death would eventually lead to several changes in campus policies (Schweber & Foderaro, 2016).

As college instructors, many of us may come to expect young college students who are psychologically healthy and well balanced to greet us on the first day of the semester. From a realistic perspective, however, students come from all walks-of-life and bring with them a wide array of personal experiences, some of which may be rooted in traumatic experiences before entering college or experiencing trauma during their college experience. Fortunately, many educators today, regardless of whether they are engaged at the preschool level or are college university professors, are becoming more aware and supportive of students that have experienced trauma (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). It is imperative as college professors that we develop a trauma-informed lens to provide students with opportunities to thrive, become more resilient, and work with the entire college community to assure their success (Davidson, 2017). Consider the following impact that trauma may have on college students.

According to Banyard and Cantor (2004), many of our students bring to the classroom a history of trauma. Fisher, Cullen, and Turner (2000) have indicated that not only have many of them experienced trauma; these students are also at greater risk for being retraumatized during their college experience (Koss & Dinero, 1989). Many of the childhood traumas they experience such as child abuse, may make them more susceptible to dropping out (Duncan, 2000), experiencing depression (Turner & Butler, 2003), and attempting or completing suicide (Bridgeland, Duane, & Stewart, 2001). By the time they reach our college classrooms, as many as eighty-five percent may have reported exposure to a lifetime traumatic event, and many others indicate that they have experienced multiple exposure to traumatic events (Read, Ouimette, White, Colder, & Farrow, 2011). Additionally, as many as fifty percent of new

college students may experience a traumatic event during their freshman year (Galatzer-Levy et al., 2012). Finally, students who are racial or ethnic minorities from lower socioeconomic families are more likely to experience a traumatic event during their first year (Read et al., 2011).

As the title of this paper implies, developing a trauma-informed lens in the classroom and building positive relationships with our students, may be a key to empowering them and help them have a successful college experience, regardless of what subject matter we teach. The discussion that follows provides a brief overview of the trauma literature to help instructors develop a trauma-informed lens in the classroom, addresses the importance of knowing what resources are available for students of trauma, and how building positive relationships with students may spark positive changes that empower students.

### **TOWARDS A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS**

The concept of trauma comes from the Greeks, which means “wound.” Trauma represents either a physical injury, or a psychological wound (Dass-Brailsford, 2007). This early recording of traumatic events and reactions date back more than 4,000 years. Historically, they are related to the destruction of the city of Ur sometime between the years 2016 and 2003 BC. As Ben-Ezra (2004) indicates, survivors of the destruction demonstrated anxiety and sleep disturbances as ancient Sumerians. Today, trauma survivors continue to exhibit these reactions.

Up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, references of psychological trauma consist of literary or philosophical writings. As societies progressed and the social sciences developed both Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud contributed to the study of trauma. Most of their work focused on individuals and sexual abuse. For example, Freud indicates that in every case of hysteria there were at least one or more instances of early sexual experiences during childhood (1962).

Progress continued and after World War I, a shift in the study of trauma began to occur, and many returning soldiers exhibited signs of shell-shock. By World War II, Kardiner (1941) introduced the concept of post-trauma syndrome or more commonly known today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, it was not until just thirty-seven years ago that the concept of PTSD became official by the American Psychiatric Association (Lasiuk & Hegadoren, 2006). Today the literature is replete with studies that indicate trauma and psychological reactions to trauma are the result of a wide variety of traumatic experiences. More recently, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) has defined individual trauma as the result of “*an event, series of events, or set of circumstances*” (p. 7) experienced by individuals that result in effects that may have adverse consequences. These may include physical, emotional, or life-threatening events that adversely affect an individual’s functioning from either a mental, physical, social, emotional or even a spiritual perspective.

Historically, the approach to treating victims of trauma was individualized. Today however, identifying, recognizing, and treating victims of trauma may also include other family members, as well as treating victims from several other sectors. These may include multiple agencies or organizations such as departments of child welfare, education institutions, the criminal justice system, health care organizations and the military. These agencies may have the potential to ease or even aggravate an individual’s potential to cope with traumatic experiences (SAMHSA, 2014). Additionally, a paradigm shift is occurring that seeks to build a more collaborative network of agencies to increase communication between these agencies. The goal is to create a network of systems that better understand the nexus between trauma and behavioral issues that will establish systems that are more trauma-informed (SAMHSA, 2014).

Within the classroom, it should be noted that as college instructors, we must take a few moments to step back, be observant and cognizant of student behaviors, and create a safe environment that allows students greater opportunities to reach their full potential. This can only occur when faculty are informed about resources that students can access. When college faculty develop a trauma-informed lens, it allows students with a history of trauma to develop positive relationships with faculty and the university. Additionally, as Rodenbush (2015) notes, it may allow students to become more responsible for their behaviors, which may help them improve their academic performance, as well as their physical and emotional well-being.

## MACRO AND MICRO TRAUMATICE EVENTS

As hurricane Harvey dispenses havoc and devastation on Texas, it reminds me of the time when I was teaching in Florida. It was the beginning of a new fall semester and within days hurricane Frances made landfall. Little did I know that Florida would be hit with four hurricanes in just six weeks and I was about to experience the most chaotic semester of my academic career. Students, faculty, administration, and the entire community were traumatized as we all tried to survive the next several months of the semester and beyond. The faces on campus soon took on an eerie feeling that looked like an episode of “Night of the Living Dead.” Several colleagues and students lost everything including their homes and apartments.<sup>1</sup>

Macro-traumatic events can have long lasting devastating consequences that stay with us for many years. From a personal perspective, the vivid images of the trauma our campus and community experienced in 2004 remain with me today. Macro-traumatic events are events that occur suddenly or that we have little or no control over but can be overwhelming, on top of our daily life struggles. These include natural disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, which can affect colleges and universities anywhere throughout the world (Phillips & Herlihy, 2009).

Trauma can also occur within institutions such as colleges and universities when they fail to protect students that have experienced trauma. Macro-level induced trauma involves trusted institutions that foster abuse (Freyd & Birrell, 2013). Freyd and Birrell refer to this as betrayal trauma, whereas we refer to it in this paper as trauma that can be induced through the lack of disregard for individuals because of “legal, institutional, or cultural norms.” Therefore, we argue that trauma may result from events or actions or the lack of actions taken by an institution because of the culture that is deeply embedded within the institution.

For example, on June 22, 2012, after years of investigation, Jerry Sandusky was found guilty of forty-five (45) counts of sexual abuse related charges. More recently, the former president of Penn State University and other administrators were sentenced to jail for failing to report sexual abuse allegations (Ganim & Simko-Bednarski, 2017). Additionally, macro social forces may also contribute to trauma which include political, legal, and institutional policies that help ignite or provide the fuel for trauma. Some of these forces may be deeply rooted in our institutions that we have ignored for years or are deeply culturally ingrained in our institutions. This is where we believe that there is an intersection between both micro and macro created trauma as provided by the Sandusky example. The trauma was perpetrated by an individual however because the cultural norms that existed, that is, one thing valued over another at the institutional level, trauma may be allowed to flourish.

School policies such as zero tolerance policies or political rhetoric that targets specific individuals such as Blacks, Hispanics, or college DACA students can also induce trauma. Additionally, while most of us would agree that slavery no longer exists in our country, the Thirteenth Amendment continues to target those convicted of crimes and allows for a form of cultural and legal slavery to be perpetrated against individuals that have been labeled as ex-convicts. Therefore, to understand the role that institutions play in traumatic events, it is necessary to examine the various ways in which the institutions we trust may contribute to abuse (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Institutional effects arise in a staggering array of events from unfair or exploitative workplace policies, to legalized withholding of rights from classes of people (such as the right to marriage or health care), to the systemic destruction of a culture or people through genocide.

From a micro perspective, trauma can develop when individuals experience an event that may drastically shape their lives. Regardless of a student’s age or academic standing, many students are exposed to a wide variety of traumatic experiences that have long lasting effects as they begin their college experience. Many of the college students in our classrooms bring with them a history of traumatic events (Banyard and Cantor, 2004) which increases their level of risks for further traumatization during their college experience (Fisher, et al. 2000; Koss and Dinero, 1989).

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<sup>1</sup> During that horrific semester, I conducted a study of students and how teaching and learning was affected by the four hurricanes we experienced. The primary purpose of the paper was to determine the student experience with their classes and how their professors handled this particularly, devastating semester. For additional information, see Gutierrez, D., Hollister, D., & Beninati, A. (2005). Hurricane madness: Teaching, learning, and the importance of flexibility in the wake of disaster. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 2(2), 49-58.

For example, they are exposed to a wide array of traumatic events that may include being victims of abuse (verbal, physical, or psychological) at the hands of family members or other students they have contact with while attending school. They may also be exposed to violence in their communities such as gang violence, drive-by shootings, or bullying by other classmates during their early academic careers, divorce, or the death of a loved one. According to Fisher, et al 2000; Koss and Dinero (1989) this may place them at higher risk of becoming victims of further traumatization while in college and as Espelage et al (2016) indicate the effects of previous childhood experiences such as bullying and early childhood “psychological trauma” can have long term effects well into a student’s college years.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can deprive children and adolescents of the security and psychological well-being needed for healthy development and multiple adverse experiences (trauma) may have long lasting consequences for many of the college students we encounter during college years, regardless of what subjects we teach. According to Kendall-Tackett (2009) and Schnkoff and Garner (2012) the trauma may be so pervasive that it may even affect the young person’s body chemistry and alter their brain structure.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS: 2015) adverse childhood experiences can include but are not limited to the following:

- Growing up in poverty
- Witnessing domestic violence or community violence
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarceration of a family member
- Living with a family member suffering from mental illness

In their study of differences between urban and rural youth, DHHS (2015) concluded that “children in rural areas were found to experience greater risk to their educational and social well-being” (p. 5) and at the same time are less likely to engage and participate in organized activities than their urban counterparts.

Considering these traumatic events, college students that we engage with on a regular basis may also be exposed to traumatic events that may substantially impact their college experience and their psychological well-being beyond their college years. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) for example, indicates that between 1995 and 2013, the age group that consistently experienced the highest rates of rape or sexual assault was females eighteen to twenty-four which was higher than females in any other age bracket<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, only 20% of student victims reported the rape or sexual assault to the police. This presents a potential situation where college female students may experience additional contact with the perpetrator on campus at college events or perhaps even in the classroom (Sinozich & Langton, 2014).

Of the females in this age group, 33% reported that the rapes were completed rapes involving some type of penetration. In other words, of the more than 31,300 sexual assaults that took place, more than 10,230 indicated it was a completed rape. Additionally, more than 6,500 males from the same age group report that they also were victims of sexual assault, accounting for 17% of all the student sexual assaults that occurred. Moreover, less than 1 in 5 female students sought assistance from some type of services agency, either public or private, for support. These services are critical because they provide recovery from such traumatic events, can offer protection from additional contact with the victim, or help them navigate the criminal justice system, which most, are not familiar with.

Other behaviors that can be traumatic include bullying. Bullying was once perceived as a normal part of child development but is now recognized as a major public health concern. Much of the literature however, has primarily focused on children and young adolescents and has ignored young adults including college students. Espelage et al

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper the definition of rape and sexual assault correspond with definitions provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Crime Victimization Survey and consists of the following. Rape is forced sexual intercourse and penetration and may include physical and/or psychological coercion that by the offender. It also includes attempted rapes regardless of gender as well as heterosexual and same sex rape and may include verbal threats. Sexual assault is considered separate from rape or attempted rape and includes unwanted sexual attacks or attempted attacks that generally involve unwanted sexual contact between two individuals. Sexual assaults may be perpetrated using force and may include verbal threats and include behaviors such as touching, fondling, or groping (see <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=317>).

(2016) however examined the effects of previous childhood bullying experiences among college students and determined that early childhood “psychological trauma” can have long-term effects well into a student’s college years.

Moreover, being bullied as a college student over gender identity may traumatize a young person so gravely that it may lead to suicide. While our example in our introduction may seem a bit extreme, experiencing trauma may none-the-less result in such extreme reactions because of the humiliation that occurs because of such a traumatizing event. Finally, in a recent survey of college students, The American College Health Association (ACHA) found that 19% of the students surveyed felt that “things were hopeless”, almost 16% were so depressed they found it difficult to function, 30% had trouble sleeping, and almost 7% had seriously contemplated suicide.

### **THE SAFE ENVIRONMENT: BEHIND THE SCREEN**

In many of our classrooms, we often find students that are less willing to engage in discussion, especially when it comes to some of the topics, we discuss may be sensitive such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, alcoholism, or violence. In these situations, a trauma-informed lens may require us to be more cognizant of student behaviors as we discuss these topics. We may want to pay closer attention to student reactions which may include body language, leaving class early during these types of discussions, and perhaps student attendance. Gauging the temperature of the class, as well as monitoring individual student reactions may offer salient clues as to which students may have experienced a related traumatic event in the past or have recently experienced a traumatic event.

Additionally, teaching online presents us with another dilemma---that is, not being able to hear inflections in students’ voices or observe their body language that may pose challenges in developing positive student relationships from a trauma-informed perspective. Identifying physical or verbal responses to trauma from students in online courses creates limitations that do not exist in real-time classes and may provide roadblocks that place limitations on building a trauma-informed perspective. Online courses however can also promote student engagement, critical thinking and group formation and at the same time provide us with a small window of opportunity to see inside the trauma some students may have experienced. In some of the courses we teach, certain tools such as videos may provide responses from students who inadvertently address their traumatic experiences through posts or written assignments. These posted messages or assignments may not be the appropriate venue for individual traumatic responses and may require an individual email or personal phone call to inform students of the types of response to help them focus on specific assignment requirements.

These teachable moments, however, may allow us to reach out to students expressing their personal experiences with trauma involvement and develop a trauma-informed lens that can help create more positive relationships with students. Recognizing moments like this will allow us to create a caring environment that models academic and social appropriateness contributing to college success by increasing skills and cognitive abilities. Additionally, it may provide us with an opportunity to refer students to the departments within our institutions that are trained to deal with trauma. Moreover, we must be cognizant of that fact that we should make every effort not to take on pseudo-roles as counselors but rather use these opportunities to refer students to the appropriate resources within our institutions or the community.

### **BUILDING POSITIVE STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS**

Creating safe and healthy classrooms for college students has many benefits for students, faculty, colleges, and universities. According to Anderson and Carta-Falsa (2002), one important challenge that must be met to develop positive relationships with students in the classroom is to include activities that reveal both the students’ and faculty member’s experiences.

Problems however can arise in this area, and someone without a trauma-informed lens may cause more damage than good when it comes to students that have experienced trauma. It would be more advantageous to have private conversations with students about their trauma and not expect them to reveal their traumatic experiences in front of others. This approach takes into consideration trauma through a trauma-informed lens and creates a safe learning environment where students can make a personal choice about discussing how traumatic issues have affected their lives.



Having a trauma-informed lens will allow us the ability to recognize signs of trauma in our students. We should however not interpret being trauma-informed as permission to engage in conversions or dialogue with our students about their trauma and need to be cognizant of the fact that we may cause more harm to students. A careful and deliberate approach that focuses on proper referral of resources should be the primary goal of these teachable moments. Creating this type of learning environment can potentially change the trajectory of our students and may empower them with tools to become successful as they continue to engage in their college experience.

### CONCLUSION

As educators, we are not counselors or therapists, but our role in a students' life is important to their success in life. We are role models who help our students reach their full potential during the time we spend with them. Shifting to a trauma-informed lens can be beneficial to the student, us as educators, and the entire university. Students that have a history of trauma could benefit greatly when the entire university faculty and staff are trauma-informed because these students are at greater risk to be victimized and suffer additional stress from the college experience (Espelage et al. 2016). Practitioners and university officials need to collaborate and identify ways in which campus programs that deal with students of trauma can empower students and help them gain a sense of control as they navigate through the college experience which is new to them (Banyard & Cantor, 2004). This collaboration would foster a cultural climate that helps break down the intellectual silos that many faculty operate within.

It requires a personal shift in our thinking, how we teach, as well as how we perceive students that have experienced traumatic events in their lives. It may also allow us to step out of our silos as we become more trauma-informed, allowing us to direct students to resources that may help them address their trauma and become students that have a better chance of success. Moreover, just as trauma can affect future generations, we can affect future generations by becoming trauma-informed. It is imperative as educators we are cognizant of the fact that we are not only teachers but that we build societies. It is a daunting task that many of us do not realize it is what we do every day.

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APPENDIX

General Trauma-informed Check List

**T**

Teaching and caring for all students

**R**

Recognize healing can emerge through the teaching -learning relationship

**A**

Assist students with additional resources

**U**

Understand how trauma impacts the student cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally

**M**

Motivate students with creative and flexible teaching

**A**

Acknowledge students may have adverse experiences in their lives