# Trauma-Informed Approach and Practices in Higher Education

## INTRODUCTION

*The effects of trauma can occur after someone experiences an event resulting in physical, emotional, and/or life-threatening harm and can have adverse impacts on individual and collective health and well-being.[1] Research indicates that exposure rates to traumatic events may be as high as 70%, meaning most people likely experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.[2] In addition to negative impacts on mental health, trauma can impact learning processes, which can lead to poorer educational and life outcomes.[3] As institutions work to support students, faculty, and staff, it is important to ensure policies, practices, and procedures align with trauma-informed approaches that support student success and encourage persistence. This resource provides an overview of the key components of a trauma-informed approach and what its application can looks like in postsecondary settings.*

## What is a Trauma-Informed Approach?

A trauma-informed approach flips the script from asking "what's wrong with you?" to instead asking "what happened to you?" Systematically approaching one another through this lens is a subtle shift that can have a profound impact. Implementing trauma-informed policies, practices, and procedures within postsecondary settings has important implications for student, faculty, and staff mental health and wellbeing. When trauma-informed strategies are implemented, individuals have the opportunity develop resilience, allowing them to reach for their highest potential.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a system that is trauma-informed:

• *Realizes* the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery;

• *Recognizes* the signs and symptoms of trauma in community members playing a role in the system;

• *Responds* by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices;

• *Resists* re-traumatization by changing organizational practices that may cause distress.[4]

There are 6 principles embedded in a trauma-informed approach, outlined in Figure 1. There are countless ways to put these principles in action, both at the system level and at the individual level. Sample campus strategies that are grounded in these principles are provided below.

An example at the *system level* might include the campus counseling center's efforts to improve the quality of mental health services on campus. Applying trauma-informed principles, they may host focus groups for students to share their experiences with and ideas for improving services. And, noting that campus-wide survey data reveals that LGBTQIA+ students are disproportionately affected by mental health concerns, they include a focus group with the LGBTQIA+

[1] *Trauma and Violence*. (n.d.). Retrieved August 2, 2022, from https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence

[2] Benjet, C., Bromet, E., Karam, E. G., Kessler, R. C., McLaughlin, K. A., Ruscio, A. M., Shahly, V., & Stein, D. J. (2016). The epidemiology of traumatic event exposure worldwide: Results from the World Mental Health Survey Consortium. *Psychological Medicine*, 46(2), 327–343. https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0033291715001981

[3] Windle, M., Haardörfer, R., Getachew, B., Shah, J., Payne, J., Pillai, D., & Berg, C. J. (2018). A multivariate analysis of adverse childhood experiences and health behaviors and outcomes among college students. *Journal of American College Health*, 66(4), 246–251. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1431892

[4] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

campus organization. Based on what they learn from students, the counseling center increases their outreach to LGBTQIA+ organizations and holds education sessions for faculty and staff on the use of pronouns. (Collaboration, empowerment, safety, cultural complexities)

At the *individual level* there are many ways to be trauma informed. For example, student advisors may pick up cues that a student is struggling academically and socially. They may then ask the student questions about their interests and provide a contact list of student organizations they might enjoy. The advisor might also provide a warm handoff to academic support resources by walking the student to the tutoring center and sharing more information about the resources available to support them academically. *(Safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment)*

More examples, tips, and strategies for institutions who want to better serve the large number of students who have experienced trauma can be found in the Guide to Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education (Education Northwest). For institutions in the earlier stages of developing a campus-wide strategy to better address mental health and wellbeing, establishing a trauma-informed system may seem daunting. However, as you can see in these examples, it is likely that your institution already has some elements of a trauma-informed approach in place. Often, trauma-informed practices are the result of specific individuals or informal cultural norms. While this is beneficial, we encourage you to explore ways to institutionalize trauma-informed practices in policies and procedures. As such, an important next step will be to examine the strengths of your current practices and policies while also identifying opportunities to create a more trauma-informed campus environment.

## Figure 1. Trauma-informed principles

# 6 TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES

### SAFETY
Creating an environment where students, faculty, and staff feel physically and psychologically protected.

### TRUSTWORTHINESS
Providing transparency and clarity of organizational operations, decisions plus clear expectations, roles, and boundaries for community members.

### CHOICE
Ensuring that students, faculty, and staff are aware of their rights and responsibilities within the campus community.

### COLLABORATION
Inviting faculty, staff, and student voice and engagement in organizational processes and services that directly impact them.

### EMPOWERMENT
Building campus opportunities to develop individual strengths, skills, confidence, and competence.

### CULTURAL COMPLEXITIES
Applying an equity lens, respecting diverse experiences and identities, and proactively working to incorporate policies, procedures, and protocols that are responsive to diverse needs.

*Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014*