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## **Do No More Harm: Changing the Classroom in Response to COVID-19 Trauma**

Erin M. Adams

The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide trauma that has long lasting effects that we are still yet to discover. For current college-aged students, many of them experienced the COVID-19 pandemic during key developmental stages of their lives. Many student affair professionals have noted the difference between the students who were in college when the pandemic hit and those who were not. This article examines trauma through the lens of trauma informed practices and high impact practices and makes recommendations on how educators can change their classrooms to better serve students.

*Keywords:* trauma, trauma informed practices, high impact practices, COVID-19

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### **Do No More Harm: Changing the Classroom in Response to COVID-19 Trauma**

January 2020 was a pivotal time in world history. Australia was suffering from wild brush fires that threatened to burn everything in its wake, floods killed at least 21 people in Indonesia, North Korea and the United States faced increase tensions surrounding the creation of weapons of mass destruction, and the very first case of COVID-19 in the United States appeared in the State of Washington. In the following months, the entire world shut down due to the worldwide COVID-19 Pandemic, George Floyd was murdered by police officers in Minneapolis which sparked protests across the country, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away, and former President Donald Trump, having lost the 2020 elections and tried to overturn the results of the presidential election. It was a time of chaos and uncertainty. Finally, COVID-19 vaccines were made available in December of 2020, but the rise of good news was short lived when the insurrection at the Capitol took place on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

As human beings, we experienced a worldwide trauma together that was broadcasted on every news and social media platform because that was how humans had to stay connected. Social distancing for the pandemic meant that people were isolating and losing human connection, especially young people who were still in school and going through several key stages of development. The pandemic disrupted the various stages of life and life events that many young adults go through, from attending a prom, to high school graduation, to starting college, and attending college graduation. Instead, many of these students did not have a prom, their high school graduation was held online where they watched it from home, and they began college virtually or delayed beginning college all together. Not only were these students' academics disrupted, but their social development was as well, which many institutions of higher education are beginning to see with the students that they serve. These students experienced a trauma that disrupted their social and emotional development, and as such, institutions of higher education need to adjust the approaches that they take when serving these students, especially in the classroom setting.

#### **Purpose**

Trauma and trauma informed practices (TIPs) will be used to outline ways in which institutions of higher education can better serve students who have experienced trauma. I will examine first year seminars, which are a high impact practice (HIPs) that many institutions of higher education are employing. Then, I will examine trauma and how it manifests in college-aged students. Finally, I will outline tenants of TIPs and make recommendations to professors who teach first year seminar classes on how they can incorporate TIPs in their classroom. I write to student affair professionals and professors who have a hand in the creation and implementation of first year seminar classes. I ask these professionals to consider the ways that they currently structure their physical classroom and the content that they teach and employ them to adopt TIPs into their teaching.

#### **What is Trauma?**

Trauma is defined by the American Psychological Association (2021) as an emotional response to a terrible event or disaster, such as an accident, rape/assault, or a national disaster. An example of a terrible event or disaster is COVID-19, which was cast in a time of uncertainty due to the little known about the disease, how it spreads, and how it affects people. In the United States alone, approximately

375,000 people died of COVID-19 during 2020 (Ahmad et al., 2023). In 2020, COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death in the United States (Ahmad et al., 2023). Trauma also encompasses adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are defined as potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (CDC, 2022). A few examples of ACEs are: experiencing violence, witnessing violence, having a family member die, substance misuse in the home, having a parent living with a mental illness, having a parent go to jail, and experiencing physical and/or sexual abuse (Hunter, 2022). These experiences create psychological trauma, which affects the person through extreme stress. This is emotionally, cognitively, and/or physically overwhelms a person's ability to cope (Valdez, 2023). When talking about trauma, one must examine ACEs because childhood trauma creates a toxic stress that can have long lasting effects on the body and brain. In this case, childhood trauma refers to ages 0-17 (CDC, 2022). For example, children who have experienced ACEs typically have a hard time communicating their emotions. When considering ACEs for students who are currently entering into institutions of higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic is an ACE that they have all experienced.

Trauma can have long lasting effects on a person, regardless of when the trauma occurred. Especially in terms of childhood trauma, those who have ACEs have had their brains affected because they suffered a traumatic event while their brain was still developing. There are three key parts of the brain that develop throughout one's childhood, the prefrontal cortex, the amygdala, and the hippocampus (Hunter, 2022). The prefrontal cortex oversees executive functions such as regulating emotions and one's ability to think critically (Hunter, 2022). The amygdala is responsible for processing strong emotions and can put us into "flight, flight, or freeze" mode (Hunter, 2022). The hippocampus is responsible for learning and new memories but can easily be damaged by certain stimuli, such as ACEs (Hunter, 2022).

### **Recognizing Trauma in The Classroom**

The peak age of trauma exposure is 16 to 20 years old and in the range of up to 89% of college students have experienced a potentially traumatic event (Breslau et al., 2008). Students with compounding minority identities are more likely to experience trauma compared to their peers who hold dominant identities (Lee et al., 2023). The extra burden of minority stress can increase a group's likelihood for trauma exposure and lasting health disparities (Lee et al., 2023; Pimental, 2022).

Gender has consistently shown up as a risk factor for trauma due to the increased likelihood of women, especially those of college age, experiencing interpersonal violence such as physical and sexual violence (Valdez, 2023). Transgender and gender diverse students have most likely experienced an ACE, paired with identity-based minority stress, puts this group's emotional-wellbeing into a higher risk category (Lee et al., 2023). LGBTQ+ students have a higher risk of trauma from everyday microaggressions to early life experiences. Attending a university marks another point of trauma for LGBTQ+ students due to the fact that they will most likely need to 'come out' again. Coming out can take on a different meaning for everyone, for some it is about self-authorship and expressing one's whole self, but for others it can be highly stressful. Florida was recently in the news surrounding the passing of the "Don't Say Gay" bill, which affirmed that sexual orientation and gender expression cannot be taught in schools through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, codifying the Board of Education's decision to ban these topics in K-12 education (Royal & Elamroussi, 2023).

White supremacy culture has contributed to the creation and existence of racial trauma within the U.S. Racial trauma “occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves inevitable marks upon their group’s consciousness, marking them forever and changing their future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Littleton-Lopez & Kombe, 2023, p.44-45). Prolonged exposure to negative racial incidents can increase one’s psychological, emotional, and physical stressors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a 30% increase in race-based hate crimes (Henshaw, 2022). This was extremely relevant with the murder of George Floyd. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals found themselves only able to communicate via social media and as such, social media became the main vehicle in which racial discrimination in the United States was discussed. Technology has made viewing traumatic events readily accessible for students, which has contributed to individual exposure (Henshaw, 2022). George Floyd’s murder also sparked national protests which were covered by news outlets that alternated between covering the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial pandemic that was raging on in the United States. In short, there was almost no way to not have a prolonged experience regarding either of these two critical events.

***Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)***

PTSD is a disorder that may result when an individual lives through or witnesses an event in which they believe there is a threat to their life, safety, and/or environment and experience fear, terror, and/or helplessness (APA, 2013). Symptoms of PTSD are psychological re-experiencing of the trauma (flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive memories), avoidance of internal and external reminders of the trauma, changes to the way in which one views the world, self, and others, typically in a negative way, loss of interest, and increased arousal (irritability, anger, hypervigilance). Combined, these can all lead to social, occupational, and interpersonal dysfunction (APA, 2013).

*Behavioral Manifestations of PTSD Symptoms in Academic Settings* (Valdez, 2023, p.17)

Behavior	Manifestation in Academic Setting
Re-Experience	Distraction
Avoidance	Excessive absences or missing assignments
Alternations in Cognitions and Moods	Negative self-talk, lack of sustained curiosity and problems completing tasks, difficulty connecting with peers
Increased Arousal	Difficulty concentrating and focusing, sleep disturbances

***Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD)***

CPTSD extends beyond PTSD because complex trauma can lead to chronic problems across multiple functions such as self-regulation. Chronic problems could include affective, behavioral, psychosocial, cognitive, relational domains of self-regulation (Valdez, 2023). These can lead to several challenges arising in a myriad of ways such as psychiatric disorders and functional deficits in the areas of attachment, anxiety, mood, eating, substance use, attention and concentration, impulse control, disassociation, and chronic medical problems (Valdez, 2023).

*Behavioral Manifestations of CPTSD Symptoms in Academic Settings* (Valdez, 2023, p.17)

Behavior	Manifestation in Academic Setting
Attachment	Mistrust of others; boundary-crossing; difficulty in interpersonal relationships, attuning to others emotional states, perspective-taking
Biology	Frequently sick, chronic pain, hypersensitive stress response
Affective Regulation needs	Emotion dysregulation and heightened states of affect, difficulty expressing feelings, difficulty communicating
Disassociation	Impaired memory, feeling detached from self and others, difficulty staying present, problems orienting to time and space
Behavioral Control	Poor modulation of impulses (e.g., Interrupting during class), addictive and obsessive behaviors, aggression towards self and others, oppositional behavior, excessive compliance
Cognition	Difficulty with executive functioning (e.g., Planning and anticipating, organizing schedules, structuring tasks), processing novel information, understanding responsibility
Self-Concept	Poor sense of self identity and separateness (e.g., Difficulty articulating one’s own thoughts and feelings)

**Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I will discuss the two theoretical frameworks that guide this paper. The first of which is Trauma Informed Practices (TIPs). The second framework that I will use is High Impact Practices (HIPs). Together, these frameworks work in harmony to create a positive environment for students to learn within institutions of higher education.

**Trauma Informed Practices**

Trauma Informed Practices have been developed by the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care. They have developed an understanding of trauma informed services that they define as:

A program, organization, or 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 clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014, p. 9)

TIPs suggest practitioners to adhere to the four R's: realize, recognize, respond, and resist (Pimental, 2023). Realization means that the practitioner understands trauma and the impact that it has on students and systems in place. Recognition requires that the practitioner realizes and understands the signs of trauma and how they appear in the classroom. Part of recognition means developing a cultural awareness for practitioners to better understand how intersecting identities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and so on manifest as symptoms of trauma. Response refers to responding to students utilizing the tenants of trauma-informed practices. Resist refers to resisting structures that uphold tenants of white supremacy and further cause harm for students who hold marginalized identities.

### ***Tenants of TIPs***

A trauma informed approach reflects Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s six tenants of a trauma informed approach. These six tenants are meant as a guide, rather than a set procedure. In the educational setting, these six tenants can work together to increase educational success for students who have experienced trauma. These six tenants are safety, trustworthiness or transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice and choice, and finally cultural, historical, gender issues.

Safety is both physical and psychological. This can be accomplished through creating a safe physical and interpersonal space, which is something that should be defined by those who occupy the space (SAMHSA, 2014; Pimental, 2022). In order to build a sense of trustworthiness and transparency, there needs to be openness and honesty throughout an organization (SAMHSA, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students reported feeling betrayed by their institution and as though they could no longer trust their institution, which are feelings associated with trauma symptoms (Valdez, 2023).

Peer support and mutual self-help are critical in establishing safety, hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and utilizing one's own story to promote healing (SAMHSA, 2014). In this context, 'peer' refers to individuals with lived experiences of trauma (Pimental, 2022). Collaboration and mutuality are important when interrogating power structures. Importance is placed on destabilizing power structures in order to level out power differences between those with power and those without power (SAMHSA, 2014). The sharing of power and decision-making allows for everyone to play a role. Empowerment, voice, and choice help to not only foster safety, but allow students to develop their own sense of self. Individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon in order to better serve others and foster resiliency (SAMHSA, 2014). Cultural, historical, and gender issues have plagued many students lives and are intertwined with how they make meaning

of the world and themselves. It is necessary to move past cultural stereotypes and biases in order to recognize and address historical trauma (SAMHSA, 2014; Pimental, 2022).

### ***Why are TIPs Important for Higher Education?***

Research has shown that students who have experienced trauma have more academic and adjustment issues (Arttime et al., 2019). Trauma related stress has been associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out of college, academic difficulties, lower GPAs, low academic motivation, and campus alienation (Arttime et al., 2019) Furthermore, students who identify as having PTSD are reported to experience a lower sense of belonging (Valdez, 2023). Furthermore, the college classroom is also a place where students are likely to experience trauma through curriculum, field practicums, and conducting research (Henshaw, 2022).

Trauma has been linked to neurobiological impacts that make concentrating, memory, executive functioning, information processing, language acquisition, and socio-emotional aspects of life difficult for students (Henshaw, 2022). The human response to trauma includes disassociating and numbing, which can be linked to poor academic performance (Henshaw, 2022). The neurobiological impacts that trauma has on an individual is also impacted by the social environment that individuals grow up in. This has all affected the way in which students' brains are able to develop and may cause the body to respond in involuntary ways (Pimental, 2022). Student's social environments now include COVID-19 trauma, racial violence and race-based trauma, active shooter events in schools, and war (Henshaw, 2022). Students learning was further impacted by the transition to remote learning, which cut out many ways that students build relationships with their teachers and peers. Due to decreased social engagement, students' sense of belonging decreased, which is related to poor academic outcomes (Valdez, 2023).

### **High Impact Practices**

Institutions of higher education have been trying to help students as they transition into college through high impact practices. High impact practices are described as having a significant educational benefit for students who participate in them, including those from demographic groups that have historically been underserved in higher education (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). Examples of HIPs are first year seminars, residential learning communities, internships, undergraduate research opportunities, writing intensive classes, and diversity courses (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). HIPs are becoming more and more popular within institutions of higher education, which makes them the perfect vehicle for promoting TIPs across institutions.

By incorporating TIPs into HIPs, institutions of higher education can not only assist students with healing their trauma but allow them to undergo this healing in a way that is framed in community and belonging. TIPs should be incorporated into every aspect of college because first year college students undergo a large adjustment period as they transition into college. Often time, these students are under a large amount of stress as they learn to navigate a new setting, often living without family for the first time, and creating a new community. For some students, the transition into college is a trauma in itself. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on outlining ways that TIPs can be incorporated into a first-year seminar in order to benefit students transitioning into higher education.



### **Modeling a First-Year Seminar with TIPs**

First-year seminars (FYS) bring together a small group of students, usually 20-30 students, with a faculty member regularly. The faculty member also acts as an advisor for these students throughout their first year, making it so that there is a connection between the advisor and advisee. FYS place a strong emphasis on critical thinking, writing, and collaborative work to develop students' intellectual competencies (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). In FYS, students will get to know at least one faculty member well, in addition to the other students in the class. These classes are also typically writing intensive, which makes students put in more effort and also opens them up to getting more peer feedback. This is a great way for students to be introduced to perspectives that are different from their own. Students benefit from this because they are getting frequent feedback from a faculty member and other students in the course (Kuh & Schneider, 2008). This kind of support creates meaningful social networks that foster a sense of belongingness within the larger community.

When students have unresolved trauma, it can undermine their academic success, especially during the college transition period (Valdez, 2023). Ways that first-year seminars can incorporate TIPs are through community guidelines, connections with the professor, ability to give anonymous feedback, detailing policies and procedures for the course, showing an agenda for the class each day, course content, articulating how the course objectives align with real world experience, activities to foster social-emotional wellbeing, creating connections on campus, ensuring physical and mental safety, and providing students with basic necessities that they need in order to be present in class.

### **Safety: Safety and Basic Necessities**

Developing safety is crucial to TIPs and this is reflected through communication and openness. For example, micro and macroaggressions can be reflected in the classroom through a demonstrated interest in one cultural group over another via “the sheer exclusion of decorations or literature that represents various racial groups” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Open communication is also critical in developing safety. Open communication with students surrounding a traumatic event that happens on campus or in the world that impacts the students, such as the war between Israel and Palestine, promotes safety when done properly. Through these communications, students are able to tell that the professor is aware of the trauma that is happening and the effects that it can have on students. It also promotes transparency and trustworthiness when resources for students' physical and emotional needs are named in these communications (Henshaw, 2022).

Additionally, approximately 1 in 3 college students experience food insecurity (Folts, 2023). In the wake of COVID-19, food insecurity on college campuses has only gotten worse. Students often have to choose between paying for textbooks and being able to afford groceries, and many choose textbooks over groceries. This is especially prominent with first-generation, BIPOC, and low socio-economic status students (Folts, 2023). For many students, food insecurity makes their college experience more difficult than it needs to be.

If a student is food insecure, then they are more likely to have lower energy levels, difficulty engaging and staying focused, report higher levels of depression, and struggle academically (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). In order to help alleviate food insecurity, professors can bring a snack basket to class and encourage students to take what they need. Snacks that would be beneficial to

include are ones that are high in protein and calories so that students are able to get the most out of what is provided. If professors do not want to provide food for students in their classroom, they can also provide food resources for their students. This can be done formally or informally by handing out materials or discussing with students the resources that are available both on and off campus for college students facing food insecurity because many often do not know of resources that are available to them (Folts, 2023).

### **Trustworthiness and Transparency: Detailed Policies and Procedures and Agenda**

Professors can foster trust by being clear, transparent, and reliable (Valdez, 2023). Detailing policies and procedures for the course is crucial for students who have experienced trauma. Due to the prevalence of trauma among college aged students, building flexibility into the class is necessary. It can look like, for example, percentage deductions for late assignments or outlining how many classes students are allowed to miss before their grade is affected.

Another way that professors can assist in student success is through extra credit. An extra credit assignment that they can offer is to have students complete the Mental Health First Aid Training that is offered by The National Counsel for Mental Wellbeing. Another extra credit assignment that could be offered is making the students engage with academic supports on campus such as the tutoring or writing center.

Furthermore, the unexpected arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everyone's lives. It was marked as a time of uncertainty and impacted nearly every student in the world; almost overnight, schools and educators had to pivot to create an online learning environment (Zhao & Watterman, 2021). During this time, many students reported feeling betrayed by their institution and higher ratings of institutional betrayal were associated with more trauma symptoms (Valdez, 2023). Due to these lasting feelings of educational betrayal and students still recovering from the uncertainty that COVID-19 cast, professors should begin each class with an agenda. This should be spoken verbally and written on the board or power point somewhere so students can know what to expect over the class period. It would also be beneficial to include the course schedule for the whole semester in the syllabus so that students can plan for tests, quizzes, and papers due later in the semester.

### **Peer Support: Connections with Campus**

An important component of first-year seminar classes is to help students with navigating campus. When students arrive on a college campus for the first time, they are often overwhelmed. At events such as orientation, there are typically resource fairs that students can attend, but many forget about the resources that they learned about. Professors should invite campus partners to come and speak for several minutes at the beginning of class. Campus partners that would be good to have would be: the office that manages first generation students, the counseling clinic, student health services, tutoring, the writing center, a librarian, etc. Increasing student awareness of psychosocial resources on campus and in the greater community surrounding the institution can assist in supporting their needs as they transition into college and continue to heal from the trauma that they have experienced. Campus and community resources should also be made clear to students by including them on the syllabus and the online course page that the school uses.

### **Empowerment, Voice, and Choice and Collaboration and Mutuality: Community Guidelines and Anonymous Forms**

The sharing of power and decision-making is promoted through partnering with those who are being served in an attempt to level the power differential (Valdez, 2023). When students are centered as partners in the classroom, they are allowed to contribute equally to common educational goals. This can be accomplished in the first class by a think, peer, share activity. This activity has students individually reflect and then get into small groups and discuss what they need from the class, professor, and peers. Then, these would be discussed as a larger class and formatted into community guidelines. It is crucial to allow an anonymous online method for students to input their needs into so that students who feel more comfortable sharing things privately or anonymously can have the ability to do so (Valdez, 2023). Stromberg and Valdez (2023) acknowledge that:

Guidelines and expectations introduced often include holding confidentiality between each other, showing compassion and kindness, offering validation and grace, encouraging curiosity and self-care, and avoiding shaming and fixing. In the anonymous survey, students often describe aspects of their identity they want acknowledged (p.22).

Professors should also facilitate both in person and online options for students to meet with them and allow them to discuss with the professor anything that might be beneficial for the professor to know. For example, a student might have parents going through a divorce and that might affect the way the student shows up in the classroom. This is something that students would not typically communicate in front of the whole class but given the opportunity to put it into a form or talk with the professor 1:1, they are more likely to bring this up.

### **Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issue: Course Content**

Historically, higher education has been for white, middle class, able bodied, cis men (Perez, 2019). Many of the student development theories such as Erickson's identity development theory, Perry's theory of intellectual development, and Dillion's sexual identity development theory were all created using white, cis men as their study subjects. These are theories that are still taught and used today due to their relevance. This can be harmful for students who do not identify with these dominant identities. Instead, professors should focus on promoting safety through a multifaceted curriculum and reducing otherness (Henshaw, 2022). Opportunities to reduce otherness within the classroom can look like inviting diverse speakers, such as other staff and faculty members, to come in and talk with the class. It is also crucial that the curriculum does not reinforce the status quo. For example, professors should be mindful of who they are assigning the students to read and make sure to include voices from underrepresented communities (Henshaw, 2022).

Education should also be about promoting lifelong learning and helping students to develop as citizens of a larger society. Colleges therefore should provide students with the skills and resources to make informed choices and develop their passions and unique talents (Zhao & Watterson, 2021). This should be reflected in the class curriculum through several different ways such as helping students develop competencies needed for the new digital age. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI),

institutions should focus on students' socio-emotional development rather than treating each student as an object to deposit coins of knowledge in (Zhao & Watterson, 2021; Freire, 2000). This education should focus on developing students as global learners and allow for students to develop their passions into their education. Assignments for these classes should be broad and not have narrow topics to focus on. That way, students are able to explore their passions throughout their educational experience and develop their own self-authorship (Zhao & Watterson, 2021; Perez, 2019). This will not only engage students more, but allow for them to make choices, propose new learning content, and create lifelong learning habits and skills (Zhao & Watterson, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Realizing the widespread trauma that many college-aged students experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is one that institutions of higher education need to acknowledge within their student bodies. COVID-19 is not the only mass trauma that higher education will endure. Gun violence at institutions of education is a serious trauma that more and more students have experienced and will likely continue to experience. Global conflicts such as the Israel-Palestinian War and the Russia-Ukraine War continue to draw students' attention, and for those who hold those identities, they continue to stress over their home country and/or friends and family who are still in those countries.

Institutions of higher education will only continue to receive students who have experienced trauma due to current events and therefore need to equip their professionals with the tools necessary to assist these students. Unresolved trauma can be detrimental to students' success, not only in the classroom but socially and emotionally as well. By creating first-year seminars that are grounded in TIPs, institutions can assist students in healing from the global pandemic and therefore increase their sense of belonging and academic success.

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