Recommended Syllabus Components: What Trauma-Informed Components Do Higher Education Instructors Include in their Syllabi?

Amanda D. Walters

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

In

Educational Psychology

Peter E. Doolittle

Brett D. Jones

Markus L. Johnson

David X. Hicks

December 15, 2025

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: trauma-informed pedagogy, college syllabi, higher education, syllabus components, content area domains, academic levels

Recommended Syllabus Components: What Trauma-Informed Components Do Higher Education Instructors Include in their Syllabi?

Amanda D. Walters

Abstract

A majority of students entering college have experienced at least one potentially traumatizing event, and up to half of college students experience trauma during their time in college. Trauma can impact a student's engagement, behavior, and cognitive functioning, affecting their learning and memory. Trauma-informed pedagogy is a pedagogical approach rooted in SAMHSA's trauma-informed framework wherein instructors can support the resilience and academic success of all students, particularly those who have experienced trauma. While trauma-informed pedagogy is an emerging field, and research ties trauma-informed pedagogical principles to positive student learning outcomes, few studies have investigated what trauma-informed pedagogical practices are currently being implemented at the college level. This quantitative study investigated three questions: (1) What trauma-informed syllabus components do higher education instructors include in their syllabi? (2) What differences exist in the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components across content area domains? (3) What differences exist in the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components across academic levels? A sample of 1,000 syllabi across 86 institutions were evaluated for the inclusion of 16 trauma-informed syllabus components. Findings reveal that while some trauma-informed practices are being widely implemented in college syllabi (up to 92% of syllabi), others remain less common (0.5% of syllabi). Significant differences were found across content areas in some components, while academic levels demonstrated generally similar adoption rates. These results illustrate the current landscape of trauma-informed pedagogical adoption across college classrooms.

Recommended Syllabus Components: What Trauma-Informed Components Do Higher Education Instructors Include in their Syllabi?

Amanda D. Walters

General Audience Abstract

Most college students have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives, and trauma can significantly affect a student's ability to learn, engage in class, and succeed academically. Trauma-informed pedagogy is a teaching approach that prioritizes creating a safe, supportive, and empowering classroom environment. Instructors who use trauma-informed practices aim to support students who have experienced trauma while maintaining high academic standards and avoiding practices that might re-traumatize students. Because trauma-informed pedagogy is relatively new in higher education, little is known about how widely these practices are being used. This study examined 1,000 college syllabi from 86 institutions to answer three questions: What trauma-informed practices do college instructors currently include in their syllabi? Do these practices vary across different subject areas (such as business, engineering, or social sciences)? And do they differ across academic levels (introductory undergraduate, advanced undergraduate, and graduate courses)? The findings show significant variation in adoption. While some trauma-informed practices were common (92% of syllabi used them), others were rarely used (only 0.5% incorporated them). The study also found differences across subject areas, but relatively similar practices across academic levels. These results provide insight into the current state of trauma-informed teaching in college classrooms and highlight opportunities for further research and growth in support of all students' academic success.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Appendix A

Appendix B

Dedication

To Madison Randall Walters, my tiniest teacher and biggest joy.

Acknowledgements

Like every child, it takes a village to raise a dissertation. This work would not be possible without the support and help of many wonderful people in my life. I'd like to take this opportunity to recognize those members of my community whose contributions were instrumental in my success.

First, for my family. **Madison Walters**, your curiosity, compassion, and persistence inspire me. I believe you can do anything, and through believing in you, I found the determination, self-love, and patience to finish this for myself. Thank you for teaching me anything is possible. And **Barbara the imaginary dinosaur,** thank you for teaching us all to be a little less serious and for bringing a spark of fun and chaos to our lives along the way. To my husband, **Eric Walters**, you are the only person who saw what this journey took from beginning to end. Thank you for being my witness and for the many sacrifices you made to make this happen. Most importantly, thank you for always believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself. To my sister, **Dani Derringer-Zhang**, for providing perspective and balance. To my brother, **Jesse Derringer**, for being an inspiration in more ways than I can list here. And to my parents, **Dan and Beth Derringer,** for instilling in me a love of learning and fostering my curiosity from the beginning.

Second, to some dear friends who have walked this path with me. **Theresea Rusinko,** for all the magic you did to make this possible. **Angie Kane**, for engineering miracles during critical moments. **Joey Hoy**, for helping me problem solve and see things from a new perspective. **Danielle Allen**, **Karley Armpriester**, **Cheyanne Silver**, **Mollie Stein**, and **Hannah Walker**, thank you for keeping me sane, making me laugh, and for being such incredible resources for wisdom always. And to **Sarah Lasswell** and the many other friends and colleagues who supported me along the way, thank you. Completing a dissertation is a challenge that feels insurmountable at times, and having friends along the road makes all the difference.

Finally, I am indebted to **Dr. Vadim Dushkin**, who can fix anything. There are no words to express my gratitude to you. Without your help, this dissertation would not exist.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Dissertation

Trauma in College Students

Trauma is a single or ongoing physically or emotionally harmful event that has lasting repercussions on one or more areas of the person's life: mental, physical, social, or spiritual, and challenges the survivor's view of the world as a fair, safe, and predictable place (*About APA,* n.d.; SAMHSA, 2014). Because trauma relates not only to the event itself but also a person's emotional response to the event, trauma is deeply personal; what counts as a traumatic event to one person may not be traumatic for another person.

A majority of students entering college will have experienced at least one potentially traumatic event (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Darnell et al., 2019), and estimates suggest up to half of college students experience trauma during their time in college (Gunderson et al., 2023; Wells, 2023). Sources of college trauma include hazing, sexual violence, food insecurity, anxiety, depression, and discrimination, among others (Lynch & Wojdak, 2023). Students who have experienced trauma may find it challenging to succeed in academic spaces, as trauma may impact their ability to concentrate, remember, and learn (Arbour et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023; Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022).

Given the significant impacts encountered by students who have experienced trauma and the pervasive nature of trauma before and during college, most college instructors are likely to experience student-based trauma responses in their classes. These responses may take many forms, including risk aversion, disproportionate anger or withdrawal, attendance problems, or difficulty with focus, attention, recall, emotional regulation, or anxiety (Davidson, 2017). Such trauma-based responses can negatively impact students' academic performance (Davidson, 2017;

Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023). Academic anxiety may also manifest in more severe academic avoidance behaviors such as the inability to begin work, an inhibited ability to participate in class or group discussions, or avoiding the class entirely (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). The consequences of trauma have neurobiological impacts that affect cognitive, social, and behavioral functioning (Brown et al., 2022; SAMHSA, 2014), making the college classroom a challenging space for students who have experienced trauma and instructors who typically lack training on properly supporting these students (Gunderson et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2023).

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Trauma-informed pedagogy acknowledges and responds to the prevalence and impact of trauma on students' lives both inside and outside the classroom. Initially developed by Harris and Fallot (2001) and rooted in the four key assumptions and six key principles established by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), trauma-informed pedagogy prioritizes safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment in the learning environment. As a pedagogical approach, it recognizes the unique cognitive, emotional, and behavioral manifestations trauma causes in students. In response, trauma-informed pedagogy offers strategies for instructors to professionally and appropriately support student success by recognizing and responding to trauma and resisting re-traumatization in their classrooms (Blaisdell, 2024; Carello & Butler, 2014; Gunderson et al., 2023).

However, trauma-informed pedagogy is an emerging field with no unified definition (Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023). At the college level, it borrows from other fields such as social work and practices that have been implemented successfully in elementary and secondary schools (Avery et al., 2021). Consequently, no prescriptive trauma-informed

pedagogical program exists; rather, each trauma-informed classroom will look different depending on factors such as the needs of the students, the skills of the instructor, the resources available to the instructor, and the type of content being covered (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019).

Trauma-Informed Pedagogical Practices

Students who have experienced trauma may struggle academically, because trauma can impair cognitive functioning and negatively affect learning and memory (Perry, 2006). This impact extends to academic engagement (attendance, participation, assignment completion), working memory, and long-term memory skills such as self-regulation and organization (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Blanchette & Caparos, 2016; Gunderson et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Jones & Nangah, 2021; Perry, 2006).

Instructors can support trauma-affected students by incorporating trauma-informed pedagogical practices in their classrooms. Many trauma-informed pedagogical strategies align with empirically supported pedagogical practices, such as scaffolding, flexible attendance policies, and retrieval practice (Agarwal, 2017; Ancheta et al., 2021; Bergin & Ferrara, 2019; Carpenter, 2023; Crosby et al., 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2021; Inouye et al., 2017; Kruiper et al., 2022; Carello & Thompson, 2022; Vlach & Sandhofer, 2012; Wood et al., 1976), which are then applied through SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework (SAMHSA, 2014, 2023). These strategies can support students who struggle with engagement, a limited working memory, or long-term memory problems as a result of trauma exposure.

Additional trauma-informed pedagogical strategies involve ways to promote feelings of student safety and belonging in the classroom. These strategies include such things as clearly articulating expectations (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Perry, 2006), creating a predictable class

structure (Rahimi & Liston, 2023), incorporating flexibility when possible (Carello & Butler, 2014; Carello & Thompson, 2022; Tayles, 2021), clear and empathetic communication (Arbour et al., 2024), and building positive rapport (Arbour et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021; Crosby et al., 2020; Gunderson et al., 2023; Rahimi & Liston, 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). Each of these strategies can help instructors shift from blaming students for trauma-related behaviors, to approaching them with curiosity about why those behaviors are present. This shift allows the instructor to support the student while holding the them to high standards.

Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components

The syllabus frequently acts as one of the first points of contact between an instructor and their students (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010) and has been adopted nearly universally at the college level to serve organizational, administrative, and communicative functions. However, despite its widespread use, the components included within a college syllabus are not uniform (Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010). For instructors who want to incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy into their classrooms, no universal trauma-informed syllabus components or recommendations currently exist. The recommendations that do exist vary from research-informed recommendations (i.e., supported by data), theory-informed recommendations (i.e., explicitly linked to theoretical foundations) to practice-informed recommendations (i.e., derived from experience and student feedback).

References

About APA. (n.d.). https://www.apa.org. Retrieved April 17, 2025, from https://www.apa.org/about

Agarwal, Y. (2017). Educational aspirations of survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, *14*(2), 166–186.

Ancheta, R. F., Daniel, D., & Ahmad, R. (2021). Effect of class attendance on academic performance. *European Journal of Education Studies*, *8*(9). https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v8i9.3887

Arbour, M., Walker, K., & Houston, J. (2024). Trauma-informed pedagogy: instructional strategies to support student success. *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health*, *69*(1), 25–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmwh.13539

Avery, J. C., Morris, H., Galvin, E., Misso, M., Savaglio, M., & Skouteris, H. (2021). Correction to: Systematic review of school-wide trauma-informed approaches. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma,* 14, 3, 381-397, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-020-00321-1

Barros-Lane, L., Smith, D. S., McCarty, D., Perez, S., & Sirrianni, L. (2021). Assessing a trauma-informed approach to the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*, S66–S81.

Bergin, J., & Ferrara, L. (2019). How student attendance can improve institutional outcomes. *The Educause Review*.

Blaisdell, H. A. (2024). *The Right Time for Process (ing): Trauma-Informed and Student-Informed Care Pedagogy in FYC at the Two-Year College* [PhD Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University].

https://search.proquest.com/openview/554a0fe836ca8541810bf9babd82f613/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Blanchette, I., & Caparos, S. (2016). Working memory function is linked to trauma exposure, independently of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, *21*(6), 494–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2016.1236015

Brown, E. C., Freedle, A., Hurless, N. L., Miller, R. D., Martin, C., & Paul, Z. A. (2022). Preparing Teacher Candidates for Trauma-Informed Practices. *Urban Education*, *57*(4), 662–685. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920974084

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2014). Potentially Perilous Pedagogies: Teaching Trauma Is Not the Same as Trauma-Informed Teaching. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, *15*(2), 153–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867571

Carello, J., & Thompson, P. (2022). What Are We Centering? Developing a Trauma-Informed Syllabus. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies* (pp. 203–218). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92705-9_17

Carpenter, S. K. (2023). Encouraging students to use retrieval practice: A review of emerging research from five types of interventions. *Educational Psychology Review*, *35*(4), 96.

Crosby, L. M. S. W., Shantel, D., Penny, B., & Thomas, M. A. T. (2020). Teaching through collective trauma in the era of COVID-19: Trauma-informed practices for middle level learners. *Middle Grades Review*, *6*(2), 5.

Crosby, S., Somers, C., Day, A., Zammit, M., Shier, J., & Baroni, B. (2017). Examining school attachment, social support, and trauma symptomatology among court-involved, female students. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, *26*(9), 2539–2546.

Darnell, D., Flaster, A., Hendricks, K., Kerbrat, A., & Comtois, K. A. (2019). Adolescent clinical populations and associations between trauma and behavioral and emotional problems. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *11*(3), 266–273. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000371

Davidson, S. (2017). Trauma-informed practices for postsecondary education: A guide. *Education Northwest*, *5*, 3–24.

Doolittle, P. E., & Siudzinski, R. A. (2010). Recommended Syllabus Components: What Do Higher Education Faculty Include in Their Syllabi? *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, *21*(3), 29–61.

Gunderson, R. L., Mrozla-Toscano, C. F., & Mao, D. M. (2023). An Instructor's Guide for Implementing Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Higher Education. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, *37*(2), 11–17.

Harris, M., & Fallot, R. D. (2001). Envisioning a trauma-informed service system: A vital paradigm shift. *New Directions for Mental Health Services*, *2001*(89), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.23320018903

Harrison, N., Burke, J., & Clarke, I. (2023). Risky teaching: Developing a trauma-informed pedagogy for higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(1), 180–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1786046

Henry, A., & Thorsen, C. (2021). Teachers' self-disclosures and influences on students' motivation: A relational perspective. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *24*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1441261

Inouye, C. Y., Bae, C. L., & Hayes, K. N. (2017). Using whiteboards to support college students' learning of complex physiological concepts. *Advances in Physiology Education*, *41*(3), 478–484. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1152/ADVAN.00202.2016

Jones, C. S., & Nangah, Z. (2021). Higher Education Students: Barriers to Engagement; Psychological Alienation Theory, Trauma and Trust: A Systematic Review. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *25*(2), 62–71. ERIC.

Koslouski, J. B., Stark, K., & Chafouleas, S. M. (2023). Understanding and responding to the effects of trauma in the classroom: A primer for educators. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, *1*, 100004. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2023.100004

Kruiper, S. M. A., Leenknecht, M. J. M., & Slof, B. (2022). Using scaffolding strategies to improve formative assessment practice in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *47*(3), 458–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1927981

Lynch, R. J., & Wojdak, K. (2023). An exploration of trauma-inclusive pedagogy and students' perceptions of academic success. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, *42*(2). https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/tia/article/id/2634/

Miller, K., Flint Stipp, K., & Bazemore-Bertrand, S. (2023). Student trauma, trauma-informed teaching, and self-care in preservice teachers' clinical experiences. *Teacher Development*, *27*(1), 55–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2022.2146180

Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2006*(110), 21–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.215

Rahimi, R., & Liston, D. D. (2023). Supporting the Social/Emotional Needs of College Students through Trauma Informed Practice (TIP). *College Teaching*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2023.2236754

SAMHSA. (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*. https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/covid/7/

SAMHSA. (2023). Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach. *HHS Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005.* https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep23-06-05-005.pdf

Tayles, M. (2021). Feature: Trauma-informed writing pedagogy: Ways to support student writers affected by trauma and traumatic stress. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *48*(3), 295–313. https://doi.org/10.58680/tetyc202131200

Thomas, M. S., Crosby, S., & Vanderhaar, J. (2019). Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools Across Two Decades: An Interdisciplinary Review of Research. *Review of Research in Education*, *43*(1), 422–452. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821123

Vlach, H. A., & Sandhofer, C. M. (2012). Distributing learning over time: The spacing effect in children's acquisition and generalization of science concepts. *Child Development*, *83*(4), 1137–1144. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01781.x

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *17*(2), 89–100.

Wuest, D. A., & Subramaniam, P. R. (2022). Preparing Trauma-Informed Future Educators. *Strategies*, *35*(5), 16–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2022.2100535

Chapter 2

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: Strategies and Implications of Adoption in the College Classroom

Amanda D. Walters

Department of Educational Psychology, Virginia Tech

Preliminary Exam

January 15, 2024

Committee:

Peter Doolittle

Brett Jones

Markus Johnson

David Hicks

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in the College Classroom

A majority of students will have experienced at least one potentially traumatic event prior to starting college (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Darnell et al., 2019), a quarter will have experienced two or more (Felitti et al., 1998); for nontraditional students, who arrive on campus with more life experience, the number is likely higher (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Students who experience trauma before enrolling in college may find themselves struggling to adapt to the college environment (Rahimi & Liston, 2023; Wells, 2023). An especially susceptible group for college-based trauma is women who have experienced sexual victimization before entering college (Carello & Butler, 2014). Students who have experienced trauma may find it challenging to succeed in academic spaces, as the trauma may impact their ability to concentrate, remember, and learn (Arbour et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023; Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022). These significant consequences experienced by students who have experienced trauma, and the pervasive nature of trauma before and during college, means that most college instructors are likely to experience student-based trauma responses—students who are risk averse, show disproportionate anger or withdrawal, demonstrate attendance problems, or have difficulty with focus, attention, recall, emotional regulation, or anxiety—or have students who experience reduced academic performance as a result of trauma (Davidson, 2017). Being aware of the hallmarks of trauma responses, instructors can be more adaptive and inclusive in the classroom and employ strategies across three domains (classroom instruction, course planning, and classroom culture) to help de-escalate behaviors and avoid retraumatizing students; that is, they can engage in trauma-informed pedagogy (Avery et al., 2021; Henshaw, 2022; SAMHSA, 2014a). This leaves us with the question: What is trauma-informed pedagogy and how can it be implemented in the college classroom?

Trauma and the Classroom

What is Trauma?

Trauma is defined differently in different contexts. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed.; DSM-5-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2022) addresses trauma specifically in relation to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and defines a traumatic event as experiencing, witnessing, or being confronted with death or serious injury, or the threat of death or injury to self or others resulting in intense fear, helplessness, or horror. A broader definition of trauma, however, is often used when labeling trauma in the educational setting. Specifically, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as a singular or ongoing physically or emotionally harmful event that has lasting repercussions on one or more areas of the person's life: mental, physical, social, or spiritual (SAMHSA, 2014a); while the American Psychological Association (APA) defines trauma not only by the event itself but by the consequences, challenging the survivor's view of the world as a fair, safe, and predictable place. Trauma can result in long-lasting feelings of fear, confusion, and other disruptive emotions which ultimately negatively impact both a person's ability to function and their mental state ("trauma" APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). The variations in definitions illustrate that the current understanding of trauma and its impacts are not uniform (Wells, 2023). While many articles on trauma in education, or trauma-informed pedagogy, use SAMHSA's definition (Arbour et al., 2024; Gunderson et al., 2023), the APA definition tends to be more precise in that it includes not only the dimensions in which a survivor of trauma may experience an impact, but also identifies specific consequences of trauma, and thus will be the focus of this paper.

Thus, trauma can be used to describe an event and an individual's response to an event; further, trauma responses can be caused by direct or indirect exposure to a single emotionally harmful event (discrete) or ongoing events (chronic) such as abuse, neglect, violence, grief, and other emotionally harmful experiences (Cronholm et al., 2015; May & Wisco, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014a). For this reason, recognizing trauma as a potential root cause of a student's individual neurological, psychological, and emotional response to an overwhelmingly adverse experience can serve to highlight the individuality of trauma and the way it can present in the classroom (Koslouski et al., 2023). Responding to trauma requires mental and emotional resources, which can impact a student's behavior and cognition in the classroom. For a student who has experienced trauma, trauma can impact relationships, physical health, mental health, and academic proficiency (Arbour et al., 2024; Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023; Raby et al., 2019; Rahimi & Liston, 2023).

Students and Trauma

Severe or complex childhood trauma can impact or limit brain development (Davidson, 2017). For some students, traumatic events from childhood or adolescence still have an emotional impact on them in college (Im et al., 2020; Perry, 2006). Students whose trauma exposure results in PTSD have a greater chance of dropping out of college by senior year; students who have survived more types of traumas (e.g., grieving a death, sudden financial instability) are even more likely to drop out (Anders et al., 2012; Boals et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2016). For children and adolescents, the stress of a traumatic event can range from immediate consequences, such as agitation, anxiety, and disrupted sleep, (SAMHSA, 2014b) to long-term consequences, including mental and physical health, learning, behavior, and relationships (Avery et al., 2021; Felitti et al., 1998; Karatekin & Hill, 2019; Raby et al., 2019).

In addition, many students who have experienced trauma struggle academically (Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023). Trauma can impact students' ability to self-regulate, resulting in behaviors that disrupt the classroom and impede learning (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022). Additionally, students who have experienced trauma may experience academic related anxiety, causing them to exhibit more severe academic avoidance related behaviors such as inability to begin work, an inhibited ability to participate in class or group discussions, or avoiding the class entirely, impacting their attendance (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). Finally, these students who enter college having experienced trauma are at higher risk for retraumatization (Rahimi & Liston, 2023) and are more likely to experience health problems and participate in high-risk behavior, such as drug use and binge drinking (Boals et al., 2020; Counts & John-Henderson, 2023).

One way for instructors (and others) to support those who have experienced trauma is to adopt the trauma-informed care approach, developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrated in 2014. This seminal publication, *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* (2014), combined research with the experience of clinicians and victims of trauma to identify general practices public-facing organizations could adopt to become trauma-informed. This work differed from previous work in that it broadened the scope of trauma-informed care from mental health and counseling organizations to other general community organizations. As part of the framework, SAMHSA identified four key assumptions and six key principles which organizations should use to become trauma-informed (see Table 1).

Table 1.

SAMHSA's Four Key Assumptions and Six Key Principles Related to Education

Key Assumptions
Realizes Presence and Impact of Trauma
Instructors must be aware that trauma exists and impacts both students and the instructor inside the classroom. This includes past events, current traumatic events, or secondary traumatic stress.
Recognizes Trauma
Instructors must be aware of what signs of trauma that both students and instructors may display.
Responds to Trauma
Instructors must respond by applying the six key trauma-informed principles outlined below. This includes seeking training when necessary.
Resists Re-Traumatization
Instructors must avoid triggering trauma responses in students and instructors who have experienced trauma.
Key Principles
Safety
Create an environment that feels physically and psychologically safe to students who have experienced trauma. Both the learning space or classroom, as well as interpersonal interactions feel safe to people who have experienced trauma.
Trustworthiness and Transparency
Establish rapport and trust between the instructor(s) and student(s).
Peer Support
Use community building to connect students who have had similar experiences (i.e., other trauma survivors).
Collaboration and Mutuality
Reduce the power differential between instructors and students and make room for meaningful conversation and decision-making.
Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
Individuals and communities can heal and promote recovery from trauma. Where possible, grant students autonomy; by finding choice and practicing self-advocacy in the classroom, students are given the opportunity to regain ownership over their own lives.
Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues
Actively incorporate policies, processes, and protocols that respond to racial, ethnic, cultural, and identity-based needs of students.

Note: From "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," by SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2014a, (https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf). Copyright in the public domain.

Trauma and College Students

As indicated, college students are not immune to trauma. In fact, traditional college students are at an especially susceptible age for experiencing new trauma, as the rates of trauma exposure peak in 16–20-year-olds (Breslau et al., 1998). That said, estimates of the prevalence of trauma experiences in college students vary widely due to several factors, including how trauma is operationalized, the effects of trauma on the student, and whether the event happened before or during college (Frazier et al., 2009). In addition, the definition and conceptualization of trauma has changed and expanded over time (Anders et al., 2012); this broadening of the operationalization of trauma exposure may be responsible for the perceived increase in number of students who have experienced trauma (Mills et al., 2011).

Regardless, a majority of students entering college (up to 85%) have experienced at least one potentially traumatizing event, with a few of the most commonly reported traumatic events being: an unexpected death of a loved one, an accident, a loved one surviving a life-threatening event, experiencing family violence, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual assault (Frazier et al., 2009). In addition, estimates suggest up to one half of college students experience trauma during their time in college (Gunderson et al., 2023; Wells, 2023) and between 9%-12% of college freshmen enter college with symptoms of PTSD (Carello & Butler, 2015). Trauma experienced in college can be a result of hazing, sexual violence, food insecurity, anxiety, depression, and discrimination (Lynch & Wojdak, 2023). College students who have experienced trauma are more likely to participate in high-risk drug and alcohol consumption. These high-risk behaviors not only add more stress to the student, but also put students at higher risk for retraumatization during a blackout; additionally, those students are found to be at a higher risk for interpersonal violence. These factors (e.g., health compromising behaviors, drug use) also impact student

retention and success (Counts & John-Henderson, 2023), and increase the likelihood of academic failure (Wells, 2023).

Of a more specific nature, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many colleges to switch to virtual or remote learning. For many instructors and students, the change to fully remote learning was new (Hitchcock et al., 2021). For college students, the increased uncertainty, isolation, and potential loss of meaning caused some people to perceive the pandemic as traumatic (Imad, 2021). Additionally, many students had to balance academic success, concerns for the welfare of their loved ones, and professional obligations (Thompson et al., 2022). Even the fear of infection, both present and future, was a potentially traumatic event (Martínez-Líbano & Yeomans Cabrera, 2021). The impact of trauma during the change in instruction during COVID-19 may have a lasting impact on students' current experience in the college classroom (Wells, 2023).

Overall, the consequences of trauma have neurobiological impacts that affect cognitive, social, and behavioral functioning (Brown et al., 2022), which make the college classroom a challenging space for students who have experienced trauma, and instructors, who have never been trained to address trauma (Gunderson et al., 2023; K. Miller et al., 2023). Students who have experienced trauma may be risk-averse even in tasks such as participating in group discussion or starting a new assignment, and they may withdraw or miss class (Perry, 2006). When an instructor makes changes to the classroom environment and instruction to recognize these signs and support students who have experienced trauma, they are employing trauma-informed pedagogy.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in the College Classroom

The idea of creating a systematic framework to support people who have experienced trauma was not developed in the field of education, but rather, social work (Thompson et al., 2022). Fallot and Harris (2009) created the term "trauma-informed care" to transform the approach social workers took when working with clients. These practitioners who worked with trauma on a daily basis employed practice trauma-informed care, alternately called a trauma-informed approach, as a way to exhibit sensitivity to the needs of clients and patients who have experienced trauma (Rhodes, 2019). The principles of trauma-informed care include ensuring safety, establishing trustworthiness, maximizing choice, maximizing collaboration, and prioritizing empowerment (Fallot & Harris, 2009). The strategies practitioners use to support individuals who have experienced trauma vary and are often aligned with specific fields (e.g., counseling, social work), some requiring training and certification to implement (e.g., The Seeking Safely Model of treating substance abuse and PTSD; SAMHSA, 2014b). Some trauma-informed strategies are transferrable to across professional fields (e.g., offering opportunities for survivors of trauma to provide feedback) and can help victims of trauma outside the mental health fields (SAMHSA, 2014a). When adapting these strategies in the college classroom, college instructors who are not trained in clinical research methods should not overstep professional boundaries; instead, they should seek the support of trained clinicians when dealing with problems outside their professional scope (Carello & Butler, 2014).

The migration of concepts across different fields means there are sometimes multiple definitions for a single term (e.g., trauma), while other concepts may be referred to interchangeably by several words, such as trauma-informed approach and trauma sensitive (Thomas et al., 2019; Wells, 2023). Incorporating SAMHSA's four key assumptions and six key

principles (see Table 1) into the educational environment allows instructors to act in a trauma-informed manner (Wells, 2023). For instructors who want to introduce trauma-informed practices into their classroom, narrowing the focus to the adoption of trauma-informed pedagogy (or trauma-informed teaching practices) can be beneficial.

What is Trauma-Informed Pedagogy?

Trauma-informed pedagogy is the adoption of this trauma-informed care model in the educational environment. This educational approach first acknowledges, then responds to the prevalence and impact of trauma on students' lives both inside and outside the classroom. Developed by Harris and Fallot (2001) and rooted in the four key assumptions and six key principles established by SAMHSA (2014), trauma-informed pedagogy prioritizes safety, trust, collaboration, and empowerment in the learning environment. As a pedagogical approach, it recognizes the unique ways trauma can manifest in students, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges. By implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in their classrooms, instructors can support the resilience and academic success of all students, but especially those students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma-informed pedagogy considers the prevalence of trauma, as well as the clinical implications of trauma on learning and the educational environment and offers strategies for an instructor to professionally and appropriately support student success by recognizing and responding to trauma and resisting retraumatization in their classroom (Blaisdell, 2024; Carello & Butler, 2014; Gunderson et al., 2023). That said, trauma-informed pedagogy is an emerging field and there is currently no unified definition (Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023). This means no single prescriptive program exists; rather, each trauma-informed classroom will look different depending on factors such as the needs of the students, the skills of the instructor,

the resources available to the instructor, and the type of content being covered (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). However, trauma-informed pedagogy has the potential to positively impact survivors of trauma, including college students (Davidson, 2017; Henshaw, 2022; Wells, 2023).

Despite this lack of uniformity in defining and describing trauma-informed pedagogy, and in light of the prevalence of trauma in youth and young adults, higher education institutions have begun adopting trauma-informed pedagogy shaped to their specific needs (Avery et al., 2021; SAMHSA, 2024; Wells, 2023). In addition, trauma-informed pedagogy is not just for the classroom, but can be implemented from the classroom level to the administrative level in the college environment (Avery et al., 2021). In practice, instructors can implement trauma-informed pedagogy by adapting classroom instruction, classroom policy, and classroom culture with the goal of promoting resilience and academic success for all students (Henshaw, 2022).

The recent limited adoption of trauma-informed pedagogy in select college classrooms has followed the adoption of trauma-informed pedagogy in elementary and secondary education several years before (Henshaw, 2022; Thomas et al., 2019). Trauma-informed pedagogy at the college level is an emerging approach; it borrows practices established in other fields including practices that have been implemented successfully in elementary and secondary schools (Avery et al., 2021).

Trauma-Informed Classroom Instruction

Trauma can impact a college student's classroom engagement, behavior, and ability to learn (Jones & Nangah, 2021). A student who has experienced trauma may find their cognitive functioning impaired, which may impact their learning and memory (Perry, 2006). Instructors can adopt specific strategies to help students overcome the cognitive consequences of trauma

(see Table 2). Specifically, instructors may consider targeting three broad areas: engagement, working memory, and long-term memory through trauma-informed pedagogical strategies.

Engagement

Students who have experienced trauma may struggle to engage in academic settings (Gunderson et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Jones & Nangah, 2021). Broadly, engagement refers to a college student's commitment to their role as a student (Wong & Liem, 2022); it can refer both to cognitive engagement (e.g., psychological investment) or behavioral engagement (e.g., participation; Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2022). Cognitive engagement includes the use of self-regulation strategies such as time management and ignoring distractions, while behavioral engagement are the observable attempts at task completion such as time-on-task, persistence, number of attempts, intensity, and effort (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2022).

The Dual Component Framework of Student Engagement conceptualizes the different ways in which the student engages in the classroom (Wong & Liem, 2022). The framework breaks engagement in academic environments into two constructs: learning engagement and school engagement. Learning engagement refers to interactions with content (e.g., studying and learning), which describes how students engage with learning activities across three constructs: affect (e.g., being alert and participatory), behavior (e.g., giving effort), and cognition (e.g., focusing). School engagement refers to the student's participation in the school community (e.g., attendance, relationship building, and activities), which describes how the student fits into the school community across three constructs: relations (e.g., closeness), participation (e.g.,

Table 2.

Trauma-Informed Classroom Instructional Strategies

Engagement

Attendance

- Establish non-punitive attendance policies
- Monitor student attendance and reach out to students who miss class
- Refer students to campus resources when attendance impacts academic performance

Participation

- Communicate clear and explicit classroom rules, norms, and expectations
- Track and incentivize participation
- Allow low-stakes and anonymous participation, e.g., through interactive polling

Assignment Completion

- Encourage communication regarding requests for support on assignments
- Divide assignments into smaller, more manageable goals
- Provide quality feedback to address misconceptions and motivate students

Working Memory

Pacing

- Create predictable classroom routines
- Use meaningful and explicit transitions between lecture and activity
- Plan short processing breaks to help student attention spans

Chunking

- Help students group small units of information into larger more meaningful units
- Use mnemonics, acronyms, acrostics and other memory devices when available
- Use images and organizational tools to organize ideas

Scaffolding

- Remind students of task objectives and directions
- Circulate during class work; prompt students who are off task
- Demonstrate or model tasks for students

Long-Term Memory

Retrieval Practice

- Provide practice tests for students; code feedback into the test for students to review
- Use whole-class recall activities (e.g., whiteboards) to practice recall after learning
- Space out retrieval practice (e.g., days, weeks) to reinforce retrieval pathways

Self-Regulation

- Teach students to identify appropriate study goals and outcome expectations
- Identify strategies for seeking help on assignments when necessary
- Model how to reflect on completed work and identify ways to improve future work

Organization

- Incorporate visual organizers or advanced organizers to guide student note taking
- Use dual coding by activating two senses simultaneously to pair concepts during lecture
- Use concept mapping to develop relationships and schemata

---

attending class, doing homework), and psychological (e.g., identifying with the school; Wong & Liem, 2022).

Finally, in the context of trauma-informed pedagogy, academic engagement has been operationalized by student attendance, relationships, buy-in to the academic course or program, and aspiration to succeed (Gunderson et al., 2023; Jones & Nangah, 2021; Perry, 2006). Given the complexity of academic engagement, instructors may find it more practical and effective to focus on targeted strategies aimed at addressing specific aspects of learning engagement and/or school engagement. For example, an instructor may choose to adopt strategies to address student attendance, increase student participation in the classroom, and increase student completion of assignments.

Attendance. Some students who have experienced trauma struggle to attend class (Gunderson et al., 2023; Perry, 2006). This can stem from academic anxiety rooted in previous negative social exchanges in the academic space, resulting in academic avoidance (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Perry, 2006). Instructors can increase student academic engagement by encouraging students to attend class. Students who attend class are exposed to conversations, activities, and other contextual information that is not found online or in textbooks; being present also allows students to foster relationships with the instructor and other students (Bergin & Ferrara, 2019). Class attendance has a positive effect on students' academic performance (Ancheta et al., 2021). In addition, there is a positive relationship between behavioral engagement in course material, such as attending lectures and tutorial attendance, and final exam performance (Büchele, 2021). Regular attendance also allows instructors to learn students' preferences, motivations, and identify what learning strategies might work best (Bergin & Ferrara, 2019). While some reasons

for student absences are beyond an instructor's control (e.g., students' work schedules, illness) there are actions instructors can take to support students who miss class (Sloan et al., 2020).

Instructors can encourage students to attend class through a combination of (a) classroom expectations, setting a non-punitive attendance policy and communicate the expectation with students in the syllabus (Bergin & Ferrara, 2019); (b) pedagogical tools, monitoring student attendance regularly and reaching out individually when students miss class (Ancheta et al., 2021); and (c) interventions, considering referring students to student support systems on campus when student absences get in the way of academic performance (Ancheta et al., 2021).

Participation. Students who have experienced trauma may be in a more heightened emotional state in academic settings, resulting in anxiety, misconstrued social cues, and difficulty taking risks (Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). These emotionally aroused students can present as hypervigilant, aggressive, or even withdrawn into themselves, limiting a student's participation (Perry, 2006). Trauma responses may also cause students to have trouble beginning work (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Participation is a form of behavioral engagement, and happens when a student complies with rules, norms, or expectations established in the classroom (Heilporn et al., 2021). Participation does not guarantee student success but does encourage students to cognitively engage with the material, which can contribute to student success (Foster et al., 2009).

Instructors can help students participate through a combination of expectations and pedagogical tools: (a) begin the semester by communicating clearly and explicitly about rules, norms, and expectations for class participation; this helps reduce student anxiety and allows them to contribute if they are able (Heilporn et al., 2021); (b) track participation or assign point values to participation, incentivizing low-responding individuals to participate (Foster et al., 2009); and

(c) use interactive polls (e.g., Kahoot) to invite participation, even allowing anonymous participation to allow students to participation with a low-stakes option (Gunderson et al., 2023).

Completion. Exposure to trauma can impact a student's ability to self-regulate, control impulses, and limit distractions (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022). These students may also withdraw socially or avoid attending class entirely (Gunderson et al., 2023; Perry, 2006). These behaviors can result in students failing to complete course assignments and other academic tasks. Assignment completion has a positive effect on academic outcomes, including retention, achievement, test performance, and academic performance (Suamuang et al., 2020). In the college setting, many assignments are completed outside of the classroom, and several factors play a role in whether a student completes the assignment and turns it in on time. Instructors can employ pedagogical strategies to help students increase their rate of completion whether the assignments and activities are completed as a class in the classroom or assigned as homework.

Instructors can assist students to stay on-task and complete assignments by adopting several pedagogical strategies, including: (a) provide a method for students to reach out for homework help, and encourage students to use the instructor as a resource when necessary (Bembenutty & White, 2013); (b) break large assignments into smaller, more manageable goals to assist students with effective time management (Suamuang et al., 2020); and, (c) provide quality feedback as quickly as possible, which addresses student misunderstandings, motivates students to complete and submit assignments, and contributes to building a positive rapport between the instructor and student (Steiner, 2016; Suamuang et al., 2020)

Working Memory

Working memory may also be impacted in students who have experienced trauma (Blanchette & Caparos, 2016; Perry, 2006). Working memory is the brain's complex system for

actively processing and holding information during cognitive tasks, and is characterized by a limited capacity (processing only 3 or 4 ideas or concepts at a time) and limited duration (maintaining ideas or concepts for only 20-30 seconds; Cowan, 2014) which can present challenges in the academic environment. When the limited capacity of working memory is violated by tasks that require too many simultaneous cognitive resources (cognitive load), the ability to accomplish the tasks is impeded (Paas et al., 2003). Common mechanisms responsible for working memory violations in students who have experienced trauma may include task-irrelevant ruminations (e.g., current stressors, angry thoughts, worries) and intrusive thoughts (e.g., concern for loved ones, memories of traumatic events). These ruminations and off-task thoughts may contribute unproductively to the cognitive load, detracting from a student's available resources to complete the academic coursework (Blanchette & Caparos, 2016; Minahan, 2019; Perry, 2006). However, when instructors respect the limitations of working memory using thoughtful instructional design and pedagogical strategies, students can use their finite cognitive resources to attend to learning tasks more effectively (Hanham et al., 2023). The limitations of working memory are relatively inflexible over the lifetime; however, instructors can employ pedagogical strategies to help students avoid violations of cognitive load (Cowan, 2010). To help with the limitations of working memory, instructors can pace course material, chunk material, and practice scaffolding.

Pacing. Students who have a history of trauma may have difficulty with beginning work or may get distracted and fail to complete work (Gunderson et al., 2023; Perry, 2006). Students who have experienced trauma may have a negative association with school or have trouble interpreting social cues, preventing them from forming relationships with peers; this can make group projects especially hard. For these students, their discomfort may stem from heightened

arousal, anxiety, or fear of retraumatization in the classroom (Carello & Butler, 2014; Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). For those students, the extra working memory resources being used by non-academic trauma-related tasks may violate the limited working memory capacity, therefore impeding their ability to accomplish the task (Blanchette & Caparos, 2016; Paas et al., 2003). Instructors can help students manage the academic responsibilities by implementing intentional pacing, a pedagogical strategy that involves creating predictable classroom routine and structure for the students and giving students predictable transitions and breaks, so the working capacity is not violated (Arbour et al., 2024; Bradbury, 2016, 2016; Lim & Kwok, 2016).

Instructors can adopt various approaches to maintaining a classroom pace that respects students' working memory capacities: (a) creating a predictable flow that is followed each class period, week, or unit, thereby allowing the student to focus more cognitive resources on the content rather than classroom or social expectations (Arbour et al., 2024); (b) using meaningful and explicit transitions between lecture and activity to encourage student participation, (Bradbury, 2016); and (c) planning short breaks, during which time the student's brain continues to process and consolidate information, as well as recover the ability to sustain attention, getting ready for the next opportunity to learn (Ginns et al., 2023; Lim & Kwok, 2016).

Chunking. Chunking occurs when a student organizes several pieces of related information into a meaningful whole (Thalmann et al., 2019). This allows an individual to more efficiently use their limited working memory capacity (G. Miller, 1956). For chunking to work, however, the units must be meaningful to the individual; therefore, explicitly establishing meaningful groupings can help students remember and work with larger groups of information (e.g., grouping phone numbers by area code, prefix, and line number rather than listing 10 individual numbers without breaks; Akpan et al., 2021). For example, information can be

organized using hierarchical organization, where students take lower-level chunks and organize or nest the smaller chunks within larger chunks (Zhong et al., 2024), or through pattern recognition, where students are able to recognize familiar patterns and use previous knowledge and experience to identify and problem solve rapidly (Gobet, 2005). With practice, students may develop automaticity – where using larger chunks becomes rote or automatic, leaving more cognitive resources to complete other academic tasks (Logan, 1985). Instructors can help students overcome the limited capacity of working memory by explicitly grouping ideas and concepts into meaningful schema through the process of chunking (Akpan et al., 2021; Jordan et al., 2020).

Instructors may adopt several pedagogical practices to support students success through chunking, including: (a) identifying small units of information students must learn, then deliberately help students group those small units into larger more meaningful units (Xu & Padilla, 2013); (b) using mnemonics and other memory devices are available (e.g., acronyms, acrostics, visual clues), explicitly teaching students to use them to help group information without much effort (Akpan et al., 2021); and (c) when available, using visual images, organizational tools, or symbols to help students organize ideas; these visual images can help the student recall the image, which may in turn help them remember the rich content that is associated with that image (Akpan et al., 2021).

Scaffolding. Students who have experienced trauma may be hypervigilant or in a state of fear inside the classroom. When in such a state of arousal, attention to directions and attending to simple tasks can be challenging (Perry, 2006). The students' extraneous concerns can contribute to taxing the working memory's limited capacity. For students who are amenable to social supports, scaffolding leverages the benefits of sociocultural learning in the classroom, wherein

students are given enough support to be successful in a task with the guidance of an instructor or peer who is more proficient. Scaffolding describes the practice of adapting assistance to be one step above what the student can accomplish him or herself (Wood et al., 1976). That support occurs on a spectrum, ranging from encouragement to demonstration. The defining characteristic of scaffolding is intentional adaptive support; the supporter must tailor the support to be only just beyond what a student can achieve independently (Wood et al., 1976). Therefore, effective scaffolding requires that an instructor must be aware of a student's current mastery level, as well as the ability to adapt instructional strategies as the student requires more or less support (Kruiper et al., 2022). Scaffolding includes a wide range of pedagogical interventions (Kruiper et al., 2022; Rahimi & Liston, 2023), many of which are already used in college classrooms (e.g., modeling, instruction, explaining, providing hints, verification, verbal participation, and asking student questions). While most scaffolding techniques have historically been provided by an instructor or peer, certain scaffolding strategies can involve other tools, resources, or technology (Puntambekar, 2022). Ideally, as the student develops more mastery over the task or material, the amount of support the instructor gives in each of these scenarios is reduced. This can happen both intentionally, as when an instructor provides less support, or passively, as when a student resorts to using tools less frequently (Puntambekar, 2022).

Instructors who wish to employ scaffolding in the classroom can do so across three levels: (a) provide written or verbal prompts to remind students of task objectives, directions for the assignment, and reminders to keep students on task (Kruiper et al., 2022; Wood et al., 1976); (b) circulate to check and verify student work, and prompt students who are off task, off track, or provide hints to students who need help (Kruiper et al., 2022; Wood et al., 1976); and (c)

demonstrate or model for the student how to compete the task (Kruiper et al., 2022; Wood et al., 1976).

Long-Term Memory

Trauma can impact recall, or the retrieval of information students have previously learned and stored in their long-term memory (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Long-term memory is the brain's repository for organizing and retaining knowledge and skills; it does not seem to have the same restrictions in capacity or duration that limits working memory (Aryanto, 2020; Shiffrin & Atkinson, 1969). Learning begins when students construct knowledge or representations in their working memory and subsequently encode that knowledge into long-term memory (Aryanto, 2020). Students who have ready access to information stored in long-term memory can use that information to generalize and transfer knowledge and skills, which can lead to improved academic performance (Agarwal, 2017). This happens when students retrieve and use knowledge and information from long-term memory back into working memory, where they can use the information to complete complex cognitive processes, such as problem solving and organization (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974). While information in long-term memory can be retained indefinitely, long-term memory is not perfect, and students can forget what they have stored; additionally, there can be problems with recall and with organization (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). The longer information has existed in long-term memory without being called back into working memory, the more challenging it may be to recover (Shiffrin & Atkinson, 1969); however, recalling information is a skill that be practiced (Agarwal et al., 2021). While learning has traditionally seen as encoding information into the brain, the act of practicing recall itself can help reinforce the learning process (Roediger & Butler, 2011). There are several ways to support

students who need help overcoming the limitations of working memory; instructors can help students engage in retrieval practice, promote self-regulation skills, and organize course material

Retrieval Practice. For students who have experienced trauma, retrieving information from long-term memory can be a challenge (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Retrieval practice is the act of finding and recalling information within your mind, rather than recognizing it or finding it in your study materials (Roediger & Butler, 2011). Finding and retrieving information from long-term memory is a necessary step for students to strengthen and use information they have previously stored in long-term memory (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006) and is just as important in remembering as the initial encoding (R. Miller, 2021). Testing has long been viewed as a means to evaluate what a student has already learned; however, the value of testing during the learning process has been understated (Agarwal et al., 2021; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006). Retrieving information from long-term memory is a skill that can be practiced and improved; historically, teachers have improved these connections by testing trivial connections through repeated testing or quizzing (Agarwal et al., 2021). It is important to note that retrieval practice does not have to happen through classroom tests; instead, the act of mentally searching for the material is significant in the learning process. Therefore, any practice recalling the information, (e.g., in-class discussions, games, rereading course material) can act as retrieval practice in the classroom setting (Agarwal et al., 2021). At a baseline, retrieval practice is effective itself without feedback (i.e., corrections for incorrect answers), and increases in efficacy as students receive feedback (Roediger & Butler, 2011). Retrieval practice can be measured by volume (i.e., how much information is being practiced), timing (i.e., schedule followed for retrieval practice), and spacing (i.e., intervals between repeat practice sessions; Agarwal et al., 2021; Roediger & Butler,

2011). When supporting retrieval, allowing students to construct their own understanding is important, rather than simply recognizing the correct answer (Inouye et al., 2017).

Instructors can implement several pedagogical strategies to support student recall, including: (a) providing practice tests for students; when possible, code correct feedback in for students to review after they submit (Carpenter, 2023); (b) giving students an opportunity to retrieve the information shortly after they learn it, using a whole-class participatory activity (e.g. whiteboards; Inouye et al., 2017); (c) spacing out retrieval practice repeatedly over time, even days and weeks after information has been learned, reviewing major concepts (Agarwal, 2017; Vlach & Sandhofer, 2012).

Self-Regulation Skills. Trauma can limit a student's ability to effectively self-regulate and direct attention, which can hinder their academic success (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022). Self-regulation is especially valuable inside the classroom, when students must control impulses to engage with their environment or refrain from being distracted (Bruya & Tang, 2021). Distractions interrupt critical processing in working memory, ultimately impacting the ability to encode that information in long-term memory (Wang et al., 2022). When the brain is distracted, processing slows, and the student may struggle to retain information (Strom et al., 2023). Students frequently show they do not have the skills and strategies to overcome these challenges on their own (Carpenter, 2023). Reducing classroom distractions allows students to facilitate sustained attention on the classroom content; however, managing distractions adds another task for instructors to coordinate (Wang et al., 2022). If students are taught ways to plan, monitor, control, and reflect on their learning goals, they can take ownership in their learning process (Wang et al., 2022). Teaching students self-regulated learning strategies is a transferrable skill,

which can also benefit students in other contexts and with other distractions, such as when students are outside the classroom working on homework assignments.

Instructors can establish opportunities for students to learn and practice self-regulation using several pedagogical practices: (a) help students identify appropriate study goals, and outcome expectations for activities and assessments (Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2014; Steiner, 2016); (b) help students identify problem solving strategies for seeking help when they need help with a task or assignment (Bembenutty & White, 2013; Steiner, 2016); and (c) model reflection on completed work, and what modifications would be beneficial for future assignments (Steiner, 2016);.

Course Material Organization. Students who have experienced trauma struggle academically, especially with recalling information they have previously learned (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Bembenutty & White, 2013; Perry, 2006). One way to help students recall information is to organize the information in meaningful ways before and during encoding (Aryanto, 2020). Organizing small units of information into larger bits of information does not just maximize the capacity of working memory (Agarwal et al., 2021; Inouye et al., 2017; G. Miller, 1956); it can also help students recall information more readily from long-term memory. When information is stored in long-term memory in an organized way, students may find they can retrieve information more easily by using similar information as retrieval cues (Murphy & Castel, 2021). These groupings or schema can be developed by the student or taught explicitly by the instructor (Bolkan, 2016; Inouye et al., 2017).

Instructors can incorporate several pedagogical tools into their classrooms to organize information for students: (a) creating and using visual organizers or advanced organizers (e.g., frame notes for students to follow along in lecture and fill in with their own observations),

especially for topics where students have needed scaffolding in the past (Awidi et al., 2020); (b) use dual coding, or two sensory modalities (e.g., sight and sound) simultaneously to give students examples and opportunities to organize material (e.g., a PowerPoint graphic organizer or image paired with auditory content during a lecture; Azzam & Easteal, 2021); and (c) using concept mapping, or have students create visual representations of the concepts and objectives in class to help create relationships and schemata (Inouye et al., 2017).

Trauma-Informed Classroom Planning

An instructor can begin to implement trauma-informed pedagogy before the semester begins by examining and revising their syllabus. The syllabus frequently acts as the first point of contact between instructors and students (Carello & Thompson, 2022). Updating the syllabus to adopt trauma-informed pedagogical practices can involve additions to the syllabus (e.g., a topical outline), changes to course policy (e.g., introducing flexibility to the course; Avery et al., 2021), or revising the word choice (e.g., using "I" statements instead of "you"; Carello & Thompson, 2022). Even including a statement in the syllabus about trauma and explicitly stating the instructor's intention to create a safe space for victims of trauma can be beneficial (Gunderson et al., 2023). The statement can act as a disclosure about topics students may find triggering, as well as a reminder for students to focus on reflecting on and managing course-related stress (Carello, 2021). While there are ways instructors can provide support for students that falls within the professional prevue of an instructor, many times students who have experienced trauma need support beyond the training or capacity of a college instructor. In those instances, seeking out the help of mental health professionals (e.g., counselors) is prudent. For this reason, instructors should also include information about locally run or campus run counseling programs or therapeutic hotlines on the syllabus (Rahimi & Liston, 2023).

Where possible, the instructor must communicate explicitly and clearly, setting clear and well-defined classroom expectations and following a predictable routine. It is typical for a victim of trauma to experience anxiety in the classroom (Perry, 2006). A set of clearly articulated expectations can help make the classroom a more predictable, and safer space (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Perry, 2006). Predictability does not necessarily mean rigidity; rather, consistency (Perry, 2006). When students can predict what teachers will do next, they feel safer in the classroom, which creates more room for flexibility. Establishing a predictable class structure may involve posting a class agenda, opening or closing class with a predictable activity, or providing a reliable sequence of activities in the classroom (Rahimi & Liston, 2023). Additionally, instructors may consider setting up a question forum or other method for students to use to ask questions during the semester. Having an explicit space to ask questions provides students an opportunity to collaborate, as well as potentially ask questions anonymously – helping students who experience social anxiety (Carello & Thompson, 2022).

In addition to explicitly communicating course material, instructors who want to implement trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom should consider auditing the course material for accessibility and inclusivity. This means, where possible, including diverse identities and perspectives in the course material (Carello & Thompson, 2022). When a course includes challenging and potentially traumatizing topics, the instructor should pay special attention to what value is gained by using the content. Explicitly communicating these potentially triggering topics and their value through a disclosure statement or topical outline empowers a student to be proactive when they identify potentially triggering content. Providing this information up front allows the student time to communicate their needs with when possible or plan to recuse themselves during triggering topics (Carello & Thompson, 2022).

Where possible, instructors should balance predictability with flexibility. This balance can be challenging to obtain. Flexibility may include opportunities for students to have control over modality (e.g., in-person lecture or synchronous/asynchronous recording), opportunities for alternative assessments to avoid triggering topics (e.g., suicide, sexual abuse, painful/shameful memories, poverty, racism, genocide, war), flexible due dates, or flexibility in course modality (Carello & Butler, 2014; Carello & Thompson, 2022; Tayles, 2021). Providing this flexibility does not mean instructors must lower their standards. There are ways to engage in trauma-informed pedagogy and still hold students accountable. In the case of attendance, trauma-informed pedagogy suggests students not be required to bring written excuses for class absences; instructors can balance this flexibility with an interview after a specific number of absences or providing an alternative assignment for missed classes (Carello & Thompson, 2022).

Trauma-Informed Classroom Culture

The changes described above may be implemented before the semester begins, but they will have an impact well into the semester. The impact trauma has on the classroom also goes beyond impacting the learning; it can impact student behavior, in turn affecting the classroom's environment (Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). Students who have experienced trauma may have difficulty with controlling impulses, resulting in emotional outbursts or withdrawal when faced with academic stress, anxiety, triggering content, or perceived social pressure (Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). When those behaviors occur, trauma-informed pedagogy encourages instructors to approach students with curiosity, caring, and compassion, rather than assumptions or blame (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). This shift from blame to curiosity is meant to allow instructors to respond to maladaptive behaviors in an emotionally neutral and predictable way, helping de-escalate otherwise distracting behaviors, and help the student return to a learning-ready state as

soon as possible. This attitudinal shift may seem small; an instructor need not stop there when establishing a trauma-informed classroom culture. Instructors can establish a trauma-informed environment in the classroom by focusing on communication, empathy, and relationships, as well as introducing contemplative practices.

Instructors can begin establishing classroom culture through direct and frequent communication. This communication can happen in class or online. Plan each communication with a purpose; communicate the purpose directly so as to not confuse or overwhelm students (Imad, 2021). Clear and empathetic communication can allow students to feel safer, build trust, and contribute to relationships in the classroom (Arbour et al., 2024). The communication can begin as whole class communication, but switch to one-on-one check-ins as the instructor begins to build relationships. This frequent communication allows instructors to be open about their understanding about trauma and its impact on students, which can help instructors connect students to on-campus resources if necessary (Gunderson et al., 2023).

A positive rapport may also be established by showing care for students and practicing empathy (Arbour et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021). Showing care for students includes refraining from judgement, holding unconditional positive regard for students, communicating respectfully, and showing respect for students' experiences (Mikkonen et al., 2015). Teachers can also build rapport with students by prioritizing good interactions over negative interactions, demonstrating interest in students' personal interests, and speaking positively about students (Koslouski et al., 2023). Teachers can practice empathy by being nonjudgemental, treating students with kindness and compassion, normalizing the effects trauma has on students in the classroom, validating students' feelings, and helping students who demonstrate the need for support (Arbour et al., 2024; Gunderson et al., 2023). Empathy can foster constructive learning experiences and foster

motivation, whereas a lack of empathy can cause mental distress and demoralize students (Mikkonen et al., 2015).

A key element of trauma-informed pedagogy is the instructor recognizing the importance of cultivating positive relationships inside the classroom (Avery et al., 2021; Crosby et al., 2020; Gunderson et al., 2023; Rahimi & Liston, 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). Trauma-informed pedagogy prioritizes all relationships within the classroom, including both instructor-student and student-student relationships (Henry & Thorsen, 2021; Imad, 2021). Building relationships with students is seen as a crucial approach to addressing student needs in the classroom (Crosby et al., 2017) and any attempt at building relationships with students is worthwhile (Imad, 2021). Building relationships with students in a trauma-informed classroom may take many forms (e.g., greeting students, being responsive to emails, demonstrating sensitivity, meeting with students). The goal of building relationships in a trauma-informed classroom is to promote the feeling of trust, safety, and empowerment in the classroom for students who have experienced trauma. Feeling safe can help prevent retraumatization and get students into the best mental space to learn (Gunderson et al., 2023). Relationship building can come in the form of a smile, greeting, or a friendly response to an email (Imad, 2021). Instructors may also practice checking in with students, either by email or by meeting with them regularly (Rahimi & Liston, 2023). Instructors can also show sensitivity to anniversaries, and express unconditional positive regard when engaging with students. In some cases, the instructor can help coach students through building positive relationships in the classroom, and helping students foster positive relationships with their peers (Davidson, 2017). Additionally, the intentional disclosure of shared experiences can help students relate to the instructor, helping them build a relationship (Avery et al., 2021).

Finally, contemplative practices are introspective practices used in the classroom to help students center themselves in the educational space, de-escalate when feeling aroused, and regulate themselves so they can get back to learning (Muir & Mathieu, 2022). Generally, students engage in activities that focus not on the past or future, but only the present (Ginns et al., 2023). These mindfulness exercises can be incorporated into existing class activities (e.g., mindful journaling) or be intentionally added to the class agenda (e.g., a moment of silence, a brain dump, breathing exercise, stretching exercise, or walk). While the instructor should participate authentically in these practices and must model how to do these activities with the students, these practices allow the student to have some ownership over their mindful presence in the classroom (Muir & Mathieu, 2022).

Making Change: Trauma-Informed Professional Development

Since many college instructors enter the classroom without formal training on instructional delivery, it is critical to provide professional development to instructors about pedagogical practices that would benefit their teaching and their students' learning (Carello & Thompson, 2022). At the college level, students may participate in assignments that result in them disclosing a previous traumatic event to the instructor (Carello & Butler, 2015). Being trained both in how to handle such disclosures as well as teach challenging topics with sensitivity would benefit both instructors and their students (Carello & Thompson, 2022). Professional development on trauma-informed practices is central to creating change (Avery et al., 2021).

Addressing trauma-informed pedagogy requires instructors to know what trauma is, the impact trauma can have on the learning brain, what specific strategies will benefit students who have experienced trauma, the risks associated with adopting trauma-informed pedagogy (i.e., vicarious traumatization), and when and where to refer students for additional support (Carello &

Butler, 2014; Davidson, 2017). In addition to focusing on the impact of trauma on the classroom environment, instructors should be made aware of consequences that may impact them as instructors. For example, instructors should be made aware of the risk of secondary traumatic stress (also referred to as compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma), wherein individuals who work closely with people who have experienced trauma may develop or exhibit symptoms similar to PTSD (Carello & Butler, 2015; May & Wisco, 2016; Sprang et al., 2019).

Access to trauma-informed pedagogical training at the college level varies from institution to institution, but may include workshops, courses, and online resources. For example, the University of Michigan provides a Planning Inclusive Classroom online resource (ethowe, n.d.). This resource defines trauma, provides a brief explanation of how trauma effects students' minds and bodies, and lists eight strategies instructors can take to practice trauma-informed pedagogy. The resources also caution teachers about secondary trauma or empathy fatigue, a potential consequence of interacting daily with students who share their traumatic experiences. Similarly, the University of Oregon provides a Teaching Support and Innovation online resource (Bastian, n.d.). The resource defines trauma, justifies the use of trauma-informed pedagogy in the college classroom, and identifies 21 teaching practices aligned with their coordinating principles. In addition, it offers recommendations on handling "potentially charged course content", navigating current traumatic events, and includes information and scripts for where, when, and how to refer students to professional mental health resources if necessary.

To make informed decisions about what trauma-informed pedagogical strategies will work effectively in their classroom, instructors must understand how trauma impacts learning and behavior. The goal of trauma-informed pedagogy is not to prevent trauma from happening, but instead to mitigate the consequences of exposure to trauma by reducing the risk of

retraumatization (Carello & Butler, 2014). While some elements of trauma-informed pedagogy may vary depending on content, there are several practices that can be implemented regardless of discipline (Davidson, 2017). Examples of these strategies include intentionally chunking course material and giving students breaks to process information (Ginns et al., 2023; G. Miller, 1956). In any case, the instructor need not know what traumatic events impacted their students, nor which students have experienced trauma; while trauma-informed pedagogical strategies benefit students who have experienced trauma, all students can benefit from the pedagogical approaches (Rahimi & Liston, 2023).

When implementing trauma-informed pedagogy, instructors can select from an array of trauma-informed pedagogical strategies, curating a unique combination of pedagogical interventions to benefit students who have experienced trauma in his or her own classroom. Implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in the college classroom is an ongoing, iterative process, and there is always work to be done (Gunderson et al., 2023).

Barriers to Implementation and Criticisms

The principles of trauma-informed pedagogy, previously implemented by k-12 educators and specialties such as counseling education, are currently being transferred and adopted in the general college environment (Arbour et al., 2024). While implementing trauma-informed pedagogical approaches in the college classroom is a worthwhile endeavor, several barriers to implementation exist, including a lack of professional development, limited time and energy, and resistance to change (Gunderson et al., 2023).

Many college instructors may not understand what trauma is, the impacts it has on students, or what pedagogical approaches can be implemented to illicit positive change (Arbour et al., 2024). While some colleges provide professional development resources for instructors

who are interested in adopting trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, not all instructors have access (Gunderson et al., 2023). Professional development for college instructors is complicated by the fact that trauma-informed pedagogy is not prescriptive; instead, instructors must work to fit a list of strategies into their specific classroom (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023).

Implementing new strategies takes an investment on the part of instructors: both of time and energy. Even instructors who have professional development in trauma-informed practices can face challenges in implementing them; specifically, a lack of interest, lack of energy, and their own mental health (Gunderson et al., 2023). For instructors who put in the effort to create a classroom environment that is considered a safe space, the burden of responsibility falls overwhelmingly on the instructor to adopt appropriate behaviors and attitudes, as well as facilitate appropriate interactions between students (Barrett, 2010). Ultimately, instructors are limited by finite time; emotional, financial, and intellectual resources; and limited administrative support, which can limit an instructor's ability to implement trauma-informed pedagogy (Gunderson et al., 2023).

Outside informational and logistical limitations, some instructors may be oppositional to change (Gunderson et al., 2023). Change in college classrooms is usually a slow and non-linear process. Instructors may have anxiety about implementing changes or feel more comfortable and confident in the way they already do things. Change can also require time and energy, which the instructor must see as a fair investment to adopt changes in the classroom. Some professors may fear that adopting trauma-informed pedagogy or implementing contemplative practices in the classroom will result in a reduction of academic rigor (Muir & Mathieu, 2022). When implemented correctly, trauma-informed pedagogy should not result in lowered expectations for

achievement (Rahimi & Liston, 2023). This resistance to change can be challenging, but can be overcome with good leadership, clear and frequent communication, and a participatory change process (Lane, 2007).

Conclusion

The prevalence of trauma among college students, combined with its significant impact on learning, memory, and classroom behavior, supports the adoption of trauma-informed pedagogical practices in higher education. The path to creating trauma-informed college classrooms is iterative and ongoing. Success requires individual instructor effort, institutional support, and a larger societal recognition of the value and importance of trauma-informed pedagogical practices. As our understanding of trauma's impact on learning evolves, our pedagogical approaches should continue to shift. By implementing evidence-based strategies, instructors can create learning environments that support all students, including students who have experienced trauma.

Instructors can begin implementing trauma-informed pedagogy across three domains: classroom instruction, course planning, and classroom culture. Implementing trauma-informed classroom instructional strategies can support students who have experienced trauma because trauma can fundamentally alter a student's cognitive functioning and impact engagement, working memory, and long-term memory, which are areas critical for students' academic success. The effects of trauma on student engagement can manifest in challenges with attendance, participation, and task completion. To address these challenges, instructors can implement evidence-based strategies to increase student attendance, encourage participation, and encourage assignment completion. Working memory deficits represent an additional potential barrier for students who have experienced trauma. Students who have experienced trauma may

struggle with intrusive thoughts, heightened emotional states, and internal distractions, violating their cognitive load, and inhibiting them from attending fully to academic tasks. Instructors can support learning through evidence-based strategies to help students manage the cognitive load through pedagogical strategies that support the working memory, such as pacing, chunking, and scaffolding. Long term memory processes, especially retrieval, can also be compromised by trauma. Instructors can help students strengthen retrieval pathways through practice, as well as through helping students develop self-regulation skills and organizing course information during the encoding process, supporting both immediate learning and long-term retention. Once an instructor has committed to implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in their classroom, they can audit course materials for potentially triggering content and offer students alternative assignments, allowing those students to avoid retraumatization. Through a combination of explicit structure and flexible yet rigorous expectations, instructors can help students navigate challenging course material while providing support and minimizing the risk of retraumatization. Instructors need not do this work alone; including campus and community resources allows teachers to help connect students to more advanced care when necessary, without overstepping professional boundaries. Establishing trauma-informed classroom culture requires sustained attention, communication, effortful relationship building, and contemplative practices. Instructors can cultivate this environment throughout the semester and implement it within the scope of professional practices.

While implementing trauma-informed pedagogy requires significant investment from instructors, the potential benefits of student success make it a worthwhile endeavor. The strategies found above can benefit all college students; however, they may be especially beneficial to students who have experienced trauma and who are experiencing challenges in the

classroom as a result. Institutions can support the transition to a more trauma-informed future through comprehensive professional development opportunities, resource allocation, and recognition of the critical importance of trauma-informed pedagogy. Success requires not only individual teacher effort, but also institutional effort, institutional support, and acknowledgement of the value of those practices, and the importance in supporting student well-being in addition to student learning. Through continued research and practice, trauma-informed pedagogy can become an integral part of higher education, supporting both student success and well-being while maintaining current academic rigor.

References

Acosta-Gonzaga, E., & Ramirez-Arellano, A. (2022). Scaffolding matters? Investigating its role in motivation, engagement and learning achievements in higher education. *Sustainability*, *14*(20), 13419. https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013419

Agarwal, Nunes, L. D., & Blunt, J. R. (2021). Retrieval practice consistently benefits student learning: A systematic review of applied research in schools and classrooms. *Educational Psychology Review*, *33*(4), 1409–1453. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09595-9

Agarwal, Y. (2017). Educational aspirations of survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, *14*(2), 166–186.

Akpan, Dr. J., E. Notar, Dr. C., & Beard, Dr. L. (2021). The impact of mnemonics as instructional tool. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, *10*(3).

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5-TR: Vol. DSM-5-TR* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Association Publishing.

APA Dictionary of Psychology. (2018, April 19). Trauma. https://dictionary.apa.org/

Ancheta, R. F., Daniel, D., & Ahmad, R. (2021). Effect of class attendance on academic performance. *European Journal of Education Studies*, *8*(9). https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v8i9.3887

Anders, S. L., Frazier, P. A., & Shallcross, S. L. (2012). Prevalence and effects of life event exposure among undergraduate and community college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *59*(3), 449–457. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027753

Arbour, M., Walker, K., & Houston, J. (2024). Trauma-informed pedagogy: instructional strategies to support student success. *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health*, *69*(1), 25–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmwh.13539

Aryanto, C. B. (2020). Do you remember the words? Dual-coding method on long-term memory. *Jurnal Psikologi*, *19*(4), 314–322.

Avery, J. C., Morris, H., Galvin, E., Misso, M., Savaglio, M., & Skouteris, H. (2021). Correction to: Systematic review of school-wide trauma-informed approaches. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma,* 14, 3, 381-397, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-020-00321-1

Awidi, I. T., Paynter, M., & Evers, U. (2020). Visual organizers and scaffolding the student learning experience in higher education. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *48*(4), 518–538. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239519893051

Azzam, M. B., & Easteal, R. A. (2021). Pedagogical strategies for the enhancement of medical education. *Medical Science Educator*, *31*(6), 2041–2048. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-021-01385-w

Baddeley, A. D., & Hitch, G. (1974). Working memory. *Psychology of Learning and Motivation* 8, 47–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-7421(08)60452-1

Barrett, B. J. (2010). Is "safety" dangerous? A critical examination of the classroom as safe space. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.9

Barros-Lane, L., Smith, D. S., McCarty, D., Perez, S., & Sirrianni, L. (2021). Assessing a trauma-informed approach to the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*, S66–S81.

Bastian, L. (n.d.). Teaching support and innovation menu. *Trauma-Informed Pedagogy (TIP) Teaching Support and Innovation*. Retrieved October 3, 2024, from https://teaching.uoregon.edu/introduction-inclusive-teaching

Bembenutty, H., & White, M. C. (2013). Academic performance and satisfaction with homework completion among college students. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *24*, 83–88.

Bergin, J., & Ferrara, L. (2019). How student attendance can improve institutional outcomes. *The Educause Review*. =

Blaisdell, H. A. (2024). *The right time for process(ing): Trauma-informed and student-informed care pedagogy in FYC at the two-year college* [PhD Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Blanchette, I., & Caparos, S. (2016). Working memory function is linked to trauma exposure, independently of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, *21*(6), 494–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2016.1236015

Bloom, S. L., & Sreedhar, S. Y. (2008). The sanctuary model of trauma-informed organizational change. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *17*(3), 48–53.

Boals, A., Contractor, A. A., & Blumenthal, H. (2020). The utility of college student samples in research on trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder: A critical review. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, *73*, 102235. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102235

Bolkan, S. (2016). The importance of instructor clarity and its effect on student learning: Facilitating elaboration by reducing cognitive load. *Communication Reports*, *29*(3), 152–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2015.1067708

Bradbury, N. A. (2016). Attention span during lectures: 8 seconds, 10 minutes, or more? *Advances in Physiology Education*, *40*(4), 509–513. https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00109.2016

Breslau, N., Kessler, R. C., Chilcoat, H. D., Schultz, L. R., Davis, G. C., & Andreski, P. (1998). Trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder in the community: The 1996 Detroit Area Survey of Trauma. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, *55*(7), 626–632.

Brown, E. C., Freedle, A., Hurless, N. L., Miller, R. D., Martin, C., & Paul, Z. A. (2022). Preparing teacher candidates for trauma-informed practices. *Urban Education*, *57*(4), 662–685. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920974084

Bruya, B., & Tang, Y.-Y. (2021). Fluid attention in education: Conceptual and neurobiological framework. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, 704443. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.704443

Büchele, S. (2021). Evaluating the link between attendance and performance in higher education: The role of classroom engagement dimensions. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *46*(1), 132–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1754330

Carello, J. (2021). *TITL Annotated Syllabus* [Blog]. Department of Social Work, Edinburgh University of Pennsylvania. https://traumainformedteaching.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/carello-2020-titl-annotated-syllabus-example.pdf

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2014). Potentially perilous pedagogies: Teaching trauma is not the same as trauma-informed teaching. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, *15*(2), 153–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867571

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *35*(3), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059

Carello, J., & Thompson, P. (2022). What are we centering? Developing a trauma-informed syllabus. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies* (pp. 203–218). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92705-9_17

Carpenter, S. K. (2023). Encouraging students to use retrieval practice: A review of emerging research from five types of interventions. *Educational Psychology Review*, *35*(4), 96.

Counts, C. J., & John-Henderson, N. A. (2023). Childhood trauma and college student health: A review of the literature. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2130336

Cowan, N. (2010). The magical mystery four: How is working memory capacity limited, and why? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *19*(1), 51–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721409359277

Cowan, N. (2014). Working memory underpins cognitive development, learning, and education. *Educational Psychology Review*, *26*(2), 197–223. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-013-9246-y

Cox, B. E., Reason, R. D., Nix, S., & Gillman, M. (2016). Life happens (outside of college): non-college life-events and students' likelihood of graduation. *Research in Higher Education*, *57*(7), 823–844. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-016-9409-z

Cronholm, P. F., Forke, C. M., Wade, R., Bair-Merritt, M. H., Davis, M., Harkins-Schwarz, M., Pachter, L. M., & Fein, J. A. (2015). Adverse childhood experiences. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *49*(3), 354–361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2015.02.001

Crosby, L. M. S. W., Shantel, D., Penny, B., & Thomas, M. A. T. (2020). Teaching through collective trauma in the era of COVID-19: Trauma-informed practices for middle level learners. *Middle Grades Review*, *6*(2), 5.

Crosby, S., Somers, C., Day, A., Zammit, M., Shier, J., & Baroni, B. (2017). Examining school attachment, social support, and trauma symptomatology among court-involved, female students. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, *26*(9), 2539–2546.

Darnell, D., Flaster, A., Hendricks, K., Kerbrat, A., & Comtois, K. A. (2019). Adolescent clinical populations and associations between trauma and behavioral and emotional problems. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *11*(3), 266–273. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000371

Davidson, S. (2017). Trauma-informed practices for postsecondary education: A guide. *Education Northwest*, *5*, 3–24.

ethowe. (n.d.). *Trauma-Informed Pedagogy – Equitable Teaching*. Retrieved October 3, 2024, from https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/equitable-teaching/trauma-informed-pedagogy/

Fallot, R. D., & Harris, M. (2009). Creating cultures of trauma-informed care. *Washington DC: Community Connections*. https://aeoworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Creating-Cultures-of-Trauma-Informed-Care.pdf

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *14*(4), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8

Foster, L. N., Krohn, K. R., McCleary, D. F., Aspiranti, K. B., Nalls, M. L., Quillivan, C. C., Taylor, C. M., & Williams, R. L. (2009). Increasing low-responding students'

participation in class discussion. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, *18*(2), 173–188. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10864-009-9083-8

Frazier, P., Anders, S., Perera, S., Tennen, H., Tashiro, T., Park, C., & Tomich, P. (2009). Traumatic events among undergraduate students: Prevalence and associated symptoms. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *56*(3), 450–460.

Ginns, P., Muscat, K., & Naylor, R. (2023). Rest breaks aid directed attention and learning. *Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, *40*(2), 141–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/20590776.2023.2225700

Gobet, F. (2005). Chunking models of expertise: Implications for education. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, *19*(2), 183–204. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1110

Gunderson, R. L., Mrozla-Toscano, C. F., & Mao, D. M. (2023). An instructor's guide for implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, *37*(2), 11–17.

Hanham, J., Castro-Alonso, J. C., & Chen, O. (2023). Integrating cognitive load theory with other theories, within and beyond educational psychology. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *93*(S2), 239–250. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12612

Harris, M., & Fallot, R. D. (2001). Envisioning a trauma-informed service system: A vital paradigm shift. *New Directions for Mental Health Services*, *2001*(89), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.23320018903

Harrison, N., Burke, J., & Clarke, I. (2023). Risky teaching: Developing a trauma-informed pedagogy for higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(1), 180–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1786046

Heilporn, G., Lakhal, S., & Bélisle, M. (2021). An examination of teachers' strategies to foster student engagement in blended learning in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, *18*(1), 25. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-021-00260-3

Henry, A., & Thorsen, C. (2021). Teachers' self-disclosures and influences on students' motivation: A relational perspective. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *24*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1441261

Henshaw, L. A. (2022). Building trauma-informed approaches in higher education. *Behavioral Sciences*, *12*(10), 368. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12100368

Hitchcock, L. I., Báez, J. C., Sage, M., Marquart, M., Lewis, K., & Smyth, N. J. (2021). Social work educators' opportunities during COVID-19: A roadmap for trauma-informed teaching during crisis. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*, 82–98.

Im, S., Greenlaw, M., & Lee, J. (2020). Cumulative trauma exposure and mindfulness in college students. *Journal of College Counseling*, *23*(1), 30–43.

Imad, M. (2021). Transcending adversity: Trauma-informed educational development. *To Improve the Academy*, *39*(3). https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.17063888.0039.301

Inouye, C. Y., Bae, C. L., & Hayes, K. N. (2017). Using whiteboards to support college students' learning of complex physiological concepts. *Advances in Physiology Education*, *41*(3), 478–484. https://doi.org/10.1152/ADVAN.00202.2016

Jones, C. S., & Nangah, Z. (2021). Higher education students: Barriers to engagement; psychological alienation theory, trauma and trust: A systematic review. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *25*(2), 62–71.

Jordan, J., Wagner, J., Manthey, D. E., Wolff, M., Santen, S., & Cico, S. J. (2020). Optimizing lectures from a cognitive load perspective. *AEM Education and Training*, *4*(3), 306–312. https://doi.org/10.1002/aet2.10389

Karatekin, C., & Hill, M. (2019). Expanding the original definition of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *12*(3), 289–306. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-018-0237-5

Koslouski, J. B., Stark, K., & Chafouleas, S. M. (2023). Understanding and responding to the effects of trauma in the classroom: A primer for educators. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, *1*, 100004. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2023.100004

Kruiper, S. M. A., Leenknecht, M. J. M., & Slof, B. (2022). Using scaffolding strategies to improve formative assessment practice in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *47*(3), 458–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1927981

Lane, I. F. (2007). Change in higher education: Understanding and responding to individual and organizational resistance. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, *34*(2), 85–92. https://doi.org/10.3138/jvme.34.2.85

Lim, J., & Kwok, K. (2016). The effects of varying break length on attention and time on task. *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, *58*(3), 472–481. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018720815617395

Logan, G. D. (1985). Skill and automaticity: Relations, implications, and future directions. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, *39*(2), 367–386. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080066

Lynch, R. J., & Wojdak, K. (2023). An exploration of trauma-inclusive pedagogy and students' perceptions of academic success. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, *42*(2). https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/tia/article/id/2634/

Martínez-Líbano, J., & Yeomans Cabrera, M. M. (2021). Suicidal ideation and suicidal thoughts in university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica.* 30(2) 390-405.

May, C. L., & Wisco, B. E. (2016). Defining trauma: How level of exposure and proximity affect risk for posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *8*(2), 233–240. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000077

Mikkonen, K., Kyngäs, H., & Kääriäinen, M. (2015). Nursing students' experiences of the empathy of their teachers: A qualitative study. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, *20*(3), 669–682. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-014-9554-0

Miller, G. A. (1956). Human memory and the storage of information. *IEEE Transactions on Information Theory*, *2*(3), 129–137. https://doi.org/10.1109/TIT.1956.1056815

Miller, K., Flint Stipp, K., & Bazemore-Bertrand, S. (2023). Student trauma, trauma-informed teaching, and self-care in preservice teachers' clinical experiences. *Teacher Development*, *27*(1), 55–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2022.2146180

Miller, R. (2021). Failures of memory and the fate of forgotten memories. *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, *181*, 107426. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nlm.2021.107426

Mills, K. L., McFarlane, A. C., Slade, T., Creamer, M., Silove, D., Teesson, M., & Bryant, R. (2011). Assessing the prevalence of trauma exposure in epidemiological surveys. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *45*(5), 407–415. https://doi.org/10.3109/00048674.2010.543654

Minahan, J. (2019). Small changes in classroom interactions can make a big difference for traumatized students. *Educational Leadership*, *77*(2), 7.

Muir, A., & Mathieu, P. (2022). Contemplative pedagogy for health and well-being in a trauma-filled world. *Composition Studies*, *50*(2), 154–169.

Murphy, D. H., & Castel, A. D. (2021). Age-related similarities and differences in the components of semantic fluency: Analyzing the originality and organization of retrieval from long-term memory. *Aging, Neuropsychology, and Cognition*, *28*(5), 748–761. https://doi.org/10.1080/13825585.2020.1817844

Paas, F., Renkl, A., & Sweller, J. (2003). Cognitive load theory and instructional design: Recent developments. *Educational Psychologist*, *38*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3801_1

Panadero, E., & Alonso-Tapia, J. (2014). How do students self-regulate? Review of Zimmerman's cyclical model of self-regulated learning. *Anales de Psicologia*, *30*(2), 450–462.

Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *110*, 21–27.

Puntambekar, S. (2022). Distributed scaffolding: Scaffolding students in classroom environments. *Educational Psychology Review*, *34*(1), 451–472. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09636-3

Raby, K. L., Roisman, G. I., Labella, M. H., Martin, J., Fraley, R. C., & Simpson, J. A. (2019). The legacy of early abuse and neglect for social and academic competence from childhood to adulthood. *Child Development*, *90*(5), 1684–1701. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13033

Rahimi, R., & Liston, D. D. (2023). Supporting the social/emotional needs of college students through trauma informed practice (TIP). *College Teaching*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2023.2236754

Rhodes, B. E. (2019). Trauma-informed contemplative pedagogy: Implications for undergraduate course revision. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, *24*(1), 139–152. https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.24.1.139

Roediger, H. L., & Butler, A. C. (2011). The critical role of retrieval practice in long-term retention. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *15*(1), 20–27.

Roediger, H. L., & Karpicke, J. D. (2006). Test-enhanced learning: Taking memory tests improves long-term retention. *Psychological Science*, *17*(3), 249–255. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01693.x

SAMHSA. (2014a). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*. https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/covid/7/

SAMHSA. (2014b). *Tip 57: Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services*.

SAMHSA. (2024, May 24). *Understanding Child Trauma*. E and Mental Health Administration. https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma

Shiffrin, R. M., & Atkinson, R. C. (1969). Storage and retrieval processes in long-term memory. *Psychological Review*, *76*(2), 179–193. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0027277

Sloan, D., Manns, H., Mellor, A., & Jeffries, M. (2020). Factors influencing student non-attendance at formal teaching sessions. *Studies in Higher Education*, *45*(11), 2203–2216. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1599849

Sprang, G., Ford, J., Kerig, P., & Bride, B. (2019). Defining secondary traumatic stress and developing targeted assessments and interventions: Lessons learned from research and leading experts. *Traumatology*, *25*(2), 72–81. https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000180

Steiner, H. H. (2016). The strategy project: promoting self-regulated learning through an authentic assignment. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *28*(2), 271–282.

Strom, P. S., Strom, R. D., Sindel-Arrington, T., & Rude, R. V. (2023). Student attention and distraction in community college. *Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology*, *13*(1), 41. https://doi.org/10.5539/jedp.v13n1p41

Suamuang, W., Suksakulchai, S., & Murphy, E. (2020). Factors affecting assignment completion in higher education. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, *12*(5), 1251–1264.

Tayles, M. (2021). Feature: Trauma-informed writing pedagogy: Ways to support student writers affected by trauma and traumatic stress. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *48*(3), 295–313. https://doi.org/10.58680/tetyc202131200

Thalmann, M., Souza, A. S., & Oberauer, K. (2019). How does chunking help working memory? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, *45*(1), 37–55. https://doi.org/10.1037/xlm0000578

Thomas, M. S., Crosby, S., & Vanderhaar, J. (2019). Trauma-informed practices in schools across two decades: An interdisciplinary review of research. *Review of Research in Education*, *43*(1), 422–452. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821123

Thompson, C. N., Otts, J. A. A., Stuart, W. P., McMullan, T. W., & Williams, D. S. (2022). Trauma-informed pedagogy to foster resilience in graduate nursing education. *Nursing*

Education Perspectives, *43*(5), 303–305. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NEP.0000000000001006

Vlach, H. A., & Sandhofer, C. M. (2012). Distributing learning over time: The spacing effect in children's acquisition and generalization of science concepts. *Child Development*, *83*(4), 1137–1144. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01781.x

Wang, C.-H., Salisbury-Glennon, J. D., Dai, Y., Lee, S., & Dong, J. (2022). Empowering college students to decrease digital distraction through the use of self-regulated learning strategies. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, *14*(4), ep388. https://doi.org/10.30935/cedtech/12456

Wells, T. (2023). Creating trauma-informed higher education classrooms: Exploring undergraduate and graduate student perceptions. *Journal of Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, *6*(1), 97–111. https://doi.org/10.36021/jethe.v6i1.336

Wong, Z. Y., & Liem, G. A. D. (2022). Student engagement: Current state of the construct, conceptual refinement, and future research directions. *Educational Psychology Review*, *34*(1), 107–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09628-3

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *17*(2), 89–100.

Wuest, D. A., & Subramaniam, P. R. (2022). Preparing trauma-informed future educators. *Strategies*, *35*(5), 16–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2022.2100535

Xu, X., & Padilla, A. M. (2013). Using meaningful interpretation and chunking to enhance memory: The case of Chinese character learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, *46*(3), 402–422. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12039

Zhong, W., Katkov, M., & Tsodyks, M. (2024). Hierarchical working memory and a new magic number. *bioRxiv*, 2024–08.

Chapter 3

Recommended Syllabus Components: What Trauma-Informed Components Do Higher Education Instructors Include in their Syllabi?

Amanda D. Walters

Department of Educational Psychology, Virginia Tech

Dissertation Exam

December 15, 2025

Committee:

Peter Doolittle

Brett Jones

Markus Johnson

David Hicks

Introduction

A majority of students will have experienced at least one potentially traumatic event (e.g., abuse, neglect, violence, grief) prior to starting college (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Darnell et al., 2019; SAMHSA, 2014b), while a quarter will have experienced two or more (Felitti et al., 1998). For nontraditional students, who arrive on campus with more life experience, the number is likely higher (Barros-Lane et al., 2021). Students who have experienced trauma may find it challenging to succeed in academic spaces, as the trauma may significantly impact their ability to concentrate, remember, and learn (Arbour et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023; Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022).

The significant impacts encountered by students who have experienced trauma, and the pervasive nature of trauma before and during college, mean that most college instructors are likely to experience student-based trauma responses in their classes. These responses may take many forms, including students who are risk averse, show disproportionate anger or withdrawal, demonstrate attendance problems, or have difficulty with focus, attention, recall, emotional regulation, or anxiety (Davidson, 2017). Students experiencing these trauma-based responses may experience reduced academic performance (Davidson, 2017; Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023).

Being aware of the hallmarks of trauma responses, instructors can incorporate more adaptive and inclusive instructional strategies in the classroom and employ strategies to address students' difficulty with focus, attention, recall, emotional regulation, and anxiety; help de-escalate behaviors; and avoid re-traumatizing students; that is, they can engage in trauma-informed pedagogy (Avery et al., 2021; Davidson, 2017; Henshaw, 2022; SAMHSA, 2014b)—beginning with the syllabus. The syllabus frequently acts as the first point of contact between

instructors and students (Carello & Thompson, 2022). Instructors can leverage the syllabus to begin implementing trauma-informed pedagogy before the semester begins by examining and revising their syllabus to include trauma-informed pedagogical strategies. This leaves us with the question: What trauma-informed pedagogical strategies are college instructors currently including in their syllabi, and are there course characteristics (e.g., academic domain, academic level) which correlate with their inclusion? The present investigation will examine the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components in college syllabi.

Trauma and College Students

Trauma can be used to describe an event and/or an individual's response to an event; further, trauma responses can be caused by direct or indirect exposure to a single emotionally harmful event (discrete), such as sexual violence, threatened death, and traumatic injury, or ongoing events (chronic), such as abuse, neglect, violence, grief, and other emotionally harmful experiences (Cronholm et al., 2015; May & Wisco, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014a). For this reason, recognizing trauma as a potential root cause of a student's individual neurological, psychological, and/or emotional response to an overwhelmingly adverse experience can serve to highlight the individuality of trauma and the way it can present in the classroom (Koslouski et al., 2023). Responding to trauma requires mental and emotional resources from the student, which can impact their behavior and cognition in the classroom.

While the fields of clinical practice, public health policy, and psychological research have established definitions, within the field of education, no such consensus exists. That said, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's (SAMHSA) 2014 trauma-informed care framework, outlined in *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach,* has significantly shaped trauma-informed approaches in education. Although

education research has incorporated SAMHSA's public health principles, the field of education has not universally adopted any specific definition of trauma (Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023).

For this study, we adopt the American Psychological Association's definition, which defines trauma not only by the event itself but by its consequences, including impacts on an individual's world view, functioning, and mental state (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). The APA is a professional organization, representing the diverse interests of clinicians, consultants, researchers, educators, and students as they engage with the psychological sciences from research to practice (*About APA*, n.d.). This definition aligns with SAMHSA's trauma-informed framework, while avoiding clinical diagnostic criteria (see Chapter 2 for detailed discussion of trauma definitions).

This study draws on SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework, which includes four key assumptions (realize, recognize, respond, resist retraumatization) and six key principles (safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues). See Chapter 2, Table 1 for detailed descriptions. The key assumptions and key principles were created using the input of key stakeholders, including trauma researchers contributed evidence-based research and best practices, practitioners contributed trauma interventions, policymakers contributed behavioral health insights, and survivors of trauma contributed experiential insights. The result combines research with practice and experience to inform the framework for trauma-informed care (SAMHSA, 2014a).

While many articles on trauma or trauma-informed pedagogy in education use SAMHSA's definition (Arbour et al., 2024; Gunderson et al., 2023), the APA definition will be

used in this paper since it includes precise descriptions of the consequences of trauma (e.g., fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, long-lasting negative effects on attitudes, behavior, and functioning) as well as the impact of trauma (e.g., challenge an individual's world view as a just, safe and predictable place).

College Students and Trauma

Traditional college students are at an especially susceptible age for experiencing trauma, as the rates of trauma exposure peak in 16-20-year-olds (Cusack et al., 2019). Indeed, a majority of students entering college (up to 84%) have experienced at least one potentially traumatizing event, with a few of the most commonly reported traumatic events being: an unexpected death of a loved one, a serious accident, a loved one surviving a life-threatening event, family violence, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual assault (Boals et al., 2020; Cusack et al., 2019; Frazier et al., 2009). In addition, estimates suggest up to one half of college students experience trauma during their time in college (Gunderson et al., 2023; Wells, 2023) and between 9%-12% of college freshmen enter college with symptoms of PTSD (Carello & Butler, 2015).

Trauma experienced in college can be a result of hazing, sexual violence, food insecurity, anxiety, depression, and discrimination (Lynch & Wojdak, 2023). These college students who have experienced trauma are more likely to participate in high-risk drug and alcohol consumption (Counts & John-Henderson, 2023). These high-risk behaviors not only add more stress to the student but also put students at higher risk for re-traumatization during a drug- or alcohol-induced blackout, during which time new memories are not formed and inhibitions are lower (Counts & John-Henderson, 2023; Wilhite et al., 2018). This experience can be distressing, and can lead to emotional consequences, physical injury, cause a student to do something they later regret, or put the student at a greater risk for sexual victimization and sexual

coercion (Wilhite et al., 2018). Additionally, students who experienced some potentially traumatizing events (e.g., physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, mental illness in the home, incarceration of a parent, divorce of parents) are found to be at a higher risk for interpersonal violence during college (Counts & John-Henderson, 2023). These factors (e.g., health compromising behaviors, drug use) also impact student retention and success (Counts & John-Henderson, 2023), and increase the likelihood of academic failure (Wells, 2023).

The stress of a traumatic event can lead to immediate consequences, such as agitation, anxiety, and disrupted sleep (SAMHSA, 2014b), as well as long-term consequences, including mental and physical health, learning, behavior, and relationships (Avery et al., 2021; Felitti et al., 1998; Karatekin & Hill, 2019; Raby et al., 2019). In addition, many students who have experienced trauma struggle academically (Gunderson et al., 2023; Koslouski et al., 2023). Specifically, trauma can impact students' ability to self-regulate, resulting in behaviors that disrupt the classroom and impede learning (Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022). Additionally, students who have experienced trauma may experience academic related anxiety, causing them to exhibit more severe academic avoidance related behaviors such as inability to begin work, an inhibited ability to participate in class or group discussions, or avoiding the class entirely, impacting their attendance (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). Finally, these students who enter college having experienced trauma are at high risk for re-traumatization (Rahimi & Liston, 2023) and are more likely to experience health problems and participate in high-risk behavior, such as drug use and binge drinking (Boals et al., 2020; Counts & John-Henderson, 2023).

In addition, for students who have experienced trauma, circumstances that bear resemblance to the trauma they experienced can trigger painful memories and physiological,

psychological, behavioral, and cognitive responses (SAMHSA, 2014a; Perry, 2006). In some cases, circumstances can be re-traumatizing, when something in the present environment—sensory experiences, social interactions, physical situations, media exposure, or event anniversaries—activates memories or emotional responses associated with past trauma, causing the individual to re-experience aspects of the original traumatic event, which can interfere with healing and recovery from the traumatic event itself (SAMHSA, 2014a). Some content or experiences may be activating and therefore cause students to experience trauma-related symptoms (Carello & Butler, 2015). When instructors understand what might impact students who have experienced trauma, they can develop instructional strategies to prevent re-traumatization (Rahimi & Liston, 2023).

Overall, the consequences of trauma have neurobiological impacts that affect cognitive, social, and behavioral functioning (Brown et al., 2022; SAMHSA, 2014a), which make the college classroom a challenging space for students who have experienced trauma, and instructors who typically lack training on properly supporting trauma in the academic environment (Gunderson et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2023). For example, students who have experienced trauma may be risk-averse even in tasks such as participating in group discussion or starting a new assignment, and they may withdraw or miss class (Gunderson et al., 2023; Perry, 2006).

Trauma and Pedagogical Practice

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Trauma-informed pedagogy first acknowledges, then responds to the prevalence and impact of trauma on students' lives both inside and outside the classroom. Developed by Harris and Fallot (2001) and rooted in the four key assumptions and six key principles established by SAMHSA (2014), trauma-informed pedagogy prioritizes safety, trust, collaboration, and

empowerment in the learning environment. As a pedagogical approach, it recognizes the unique ways trauma can manifest in students, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Students who have experienced trauma may have difficulty with controlling impulses, resulting in emotional outbursts or withdrawal when faced with academic stress, anxiety, triggering content, or perceived social pressure (Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). When those behaviors occur, trauma-informed pedagogy encourages instructors to approach students with curiosity, caring, and compassion, rather than assumptions or blame (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). This shift from blame to curiosity is meant to allow instructors to respond to maladaptive behaviors in an emotionally neutral and predictable way, helping de-escalate otherwise distracting behaviors, and help the student return to a learning-ready state as soon as possible. By implementing trauma-informed pedagogy in their classrooms, instructors can support the resilience and academic success of all students, but especially those students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma-informed pedagogy considers the prevalence of trauma, as well as the clinical implications of trauma on learning and the educational environment and offers strategies for an instructor to professionally and appropriately support student success by recognizing and responding to trauma and resisting re-traumatization in their classroom (Blaisdell, 2024; Carello & Butler, 2014; Gunderson et al., 2023). That said, trauma-informed pedagogy is an emerging field and there is currently no unified definition (Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023). This means no single prescriptive program exists; rather, each trauma-informed classroom will look different depending on factors such as the needs of the students, the skills of the instructor, the resources available to the instructor, and the type of content being covered (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019).

Despite this lack of uniformity in defining and describing trauma-informed pedagogy, and considering the prevalence of trauma in youth and young adults, trauma-informed pedagogy has the potential to positively impact survivors of trauma, including college students (Davidson, 2017; Henshaw, 2022; Wells, 2023), and higher education institutions have begun adopting trauma-informed pedagogy shaped to their specific needs (Avery et al., 2021; SAMHSA, 2014a; Wells, 2023) in the form of trauma-informed pedagogical practices. In addition, trauma-informed pedagogy is not just for the classroom, but can be implemented from the classroom level to the administrative level in the college environment (Avery et al., 2021).

Trauma-Informed Pedagogical Practices

Students who have experienced trauma may struggle academically for various reasons. Trauma can impair their cognitive functioning, negatively affecting learning and memory (Perry, 2006). This impact extends to academic engagement (attendance, participation, assignment completion), working memory, and long-term memory skills such as self-regulation, and organization (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Blanchette & Caparos, 2016; Gunderson et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Jones & Nangah, 2021; Perry, 2006).

The challenges faced by trauma-affected students are often interconnected. These students may experience anxiety, heightened emotional arousal, and difficulty with self-regulation and impule control (Perry, 2006; Wuest & Subramaniam, 2022). These symptoms can lead to avoidance behaviors, hypervigialance, aggression, or withdrawl (Perry, 2006). Consequently, students might avoid class, have trouble beginning assignments or staying on task to complete them, or working with peers in the clasroom setting (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Carello & Butler, 2014; Davidson, 2017; Perry, 2006). Negative social exchanges in the academic space can result in further academic avoidance (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Perry, 2006).

Instructors can support trauma-affected students by incoporating trauma-informed pedagogical pracitices in their classrooms. Many of these strategies align with established pedagogical practices, like scaffolding, flexible attendance policies, and retrieval practice (Agarwal, 2017; Ancheta et al., 2021; Bergin & Ferrara, 2019; Carpenter, 2023; Crosby et al., 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2021; Inouye et al., 2017; Kruiper et al., 2022; Carello & Thompson, 2022; Vlach & Sandhofer, 2012; Wood et al., 1976), which are then applied through SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework (SAMHSA, 2014a, 2023). When viewed through SAMHSA's trauma-informed care lens, these approaches acknowledge that students who have experienced trauma may need special support to succeed academically.

Syllabus Components and Trauma-Informed Syllabi

The syllabus frequently acts as one of the first interactions between an instructor and their students (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010), and has been adopted nearly universally at the college level to serve organizational, administrative, and communicative functions. However, despite its widespread use, the components included within a college syllabus are not uniform.

In 2010, Doolittle and Siudzinski reviewed the components included in higher education syllabi across four categories: instructor information, course information, grading information, and policy information. They identified 24 distinct components and examined whether these appeared more frequently across certain domains (e.g., business, engineering, life sciences) or academic level (e.g., lower undergraduate, upper undergraduate, graduate). Their findings revealed that particular components (e.g., professor name, course name, required texts, grading policy) were more likely to be included in syllabi than other components (e.g., course

supplemental readings, late work policy, missed work policy, and student support services policy information).

Recent studies have examined whether syllabi have retained relevance in an era of online learning management systems, confirming separate syllabus documents are still preferred by both students and faculty at this time (Harrington, 2023). Specifically, researchers have provided general and domain-specific recommendations for syllabus components and best practices, as well as the function the syllabus plays (Gauthier et al., 2025; Lipnevich et al., 2021; Rahimpour, 2010; Rubio et al., 2022; Stanny et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2023). For example, it is recommended that instructors incorporate components such as graded participation in class discussion, two or more drafts of a paper or assignment, assignments or activities that help students develop strategies for regulating their own learning, presentations during class or online, and diverse perspectives in class discussions written assignments (Stanny et al., 2015) In some domains, such as pharmaceutical sciences, syllabus components have been divided between required elements (e.g., course name and number, faculty name and credentials, attendance policy, expected abbreviated classroom behavior, grading scale, paraphrased required institutional policies) and optional syllabus elements (e.g., course description, teaching qualifications, course objectives, ways to access resources, procedure for handling missed assignments, full required institutional policies, mental health resources, motivational messages; Wagner et al., 2023). In mechanical engineering, it has been recommended that the syllabus contain the following components: course and instructor identity; fit and function of the subject in the degree; calendar, and location; competencies; didactic units and teaching methods; evaluation systems and assessments; office hours; student teacher communication; and course materials (Rubio et al., 2022).

In addition, the syllabus has been proffered as a communication tool addressing three constituencies: students, teachers, and administrators. The components that are developed for students are learning tools (e.g., communicating and planning, establishing a contract, and socializing with students), for teachers are teaching tools (e.g., course teaching, collaborating with colleagues, and training about pedagogy), and for administrative professionals are administrative tools (e.g., documenting individual teaching competency, representing the planned curriculum, and serving as a permanent record)—these levels are not mutually exclusive (Gauthier et al., 2025).

All of that said, while there is some agreement as to which syllabus components should be included in the typical syllabus (e.g., course, communication, assessment, and policy information), there is little research or rhetoric to suggest which syllabus components are, or may be, important relative to supporting students of trauma. For instructors who want to incorporate trauma-informed pedagogy into their classrooms, no universal trauma-informed syllabus components or recommendations currently exist. Within the small corpus of trauma-informed pedagogy discussions of syllabus construction, the recommendations are primarily derived from three sources: research-informed recommendations (i.e., supported by data), theory-informed recommendations (i.e., explicitly linked to theoretical foundations) and practice-informed recommendations (i.e., derived from experience and student feedback). The strength of support for these recommendations varies across and within these sources, thus caution in implementation is warranted (see Table 2).

Research-Informed Components

Research-informed practices include syllabus components backed by empirical evidence. An examination of the trauma-informed pedagogy and syllabus literature revealed a dearth, a

desert, a paucity, even a vacuum of empirically supported syllabus strategies. After a series of database searches (e.g., EBSCOhost, ERIC, Google Scholar, Scopus) and consultations with AI bots (e.g., Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, Grok), only one research-informed component emerged: content warnings. Adding content warnings, alternatively called trigger warnings, involves explicitly communicating potentially activating topics through disclosure statements or topical outlines (Arbour et al., 2024). For example, instructors may choose to warn students about topics such as sexual assault, racial violence, disordered eating, and suicide (Ballestrini, 2022). These warnings are designed to (potentially) empower students to identify content that might be harmful or re-traumatizing and then to be proactive in preventing the harm (Arbour et al., 2024; Bryce et al., 2023). However, Kimble et al. (2024) found that content warnings do not seem to prevent students from avoiding potentially triggering material, although if triggering does occur it does not seem to be longstanding. As a whole, content warnings have received recent attention in both theory and practice as a contentious practice (Bryce et al., 2023; P. J. Jones et al., 2020; Nolan & Roberts, 2024), with Bryce et al (2023) conducting a systematic literature review on trigger warnings in higher education resulting in four broad and contradictory conclusions: trigger warnings acted as inclusive practice; trigger warnings were adopted as part of trauma-informed pedagogy; trigger warnings were ineffectual; trigger warnings were harmful. Thus, while recommendations for the implementation of content warnings vary, the research agrees that if they are implemented (for better or worse) it should be done with caution and as part of a systemic support for students (Bryce et al., 2023; Nolan & Roberts, 2024).

Theory-Informed Components

Theory-informed practices encompass any components that demonstrate explicit and substantiated connections to established trauma-informed theoretical frameworks or conceptual models (e.g., SAMHSA, ACEs, Fallot and Harris's Five Guiding Principles). These explicit connections must go beyond superficial labeling of a component as trauma-informed or a cursory identification of alignment with a theoretical framework. Rather, the theoretical underpinning must be justified and include relevant and theory-laden citations. In addition, the connection between the component and the theory must be explained (e.g., explain how the component integrates within the trauma-informed care framework, and establish a clear link how including that component in the syllabus helps students who have experienced trauma). Ultimately, eight theory-informed practices recommendations emerged from a trauma-informed prospective.

Attendance Information: Instructors should set clear expectations and accommodations for class attendance, demonstrate flexibility where possible, and reach out when students miss class (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Holovatenko, 2024; Howard & Finley20, 2024). Providing empowerment and flexibility is key, while still holding students to high standards. This can be done by allowing students to miss class without requiring a note to excuse the absence, or reaching out when students miss class (Carello & Thompson, 2022).

Grading Information: Instructors should set clear expectations for evaluation criteria such as rubrics, feedback speed, and grading scales (Holovatenko, 2024). When course grading expectations are clearly communicated it allows the student to establish clear expectations and plans. Implementing clear policies consistently ensures predictability throughout the semester, which aligns with Fallot and Harris's (2006) trauma-informed principle of *physical, emotional, social, and academic safety* in the classroom.

Inclusive Scholarship: Instructors should incorporate diverse identities and perspectives (e.g., backgrounds, gender identities, and sexual orientations) in course material and explicitly identify these identities (Carello & Thompson, 2022). Incorporating authors with diverse identities and backgrounds, and explicitly identifying those backgrounds on the syllabus, can help students see themselves in the course material and help them feel like they belong, are validated, and respected, which makes the classroom feel safe and inclusive (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Strayhorn, 2018).

Instructor Identity: Instructors should include instructor identification information, including name, preferred method of address, and preferred pronouns if culturally relevant (Holovatenko, 2024). Including information beyond the instructor's professional name allows instructors to demonstrate sensitivity to students' identities and backgrounds (Holovatenko, 2024) by communicating cultural norms for address within the specific culture of the department or institution to create a culture of inclusivity in the classroom for trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming students (Schendel, 2020).

Participation Guidelines: Instructors should establish and communicate a protocol for respectful academic discourse, engaging with differing opinions, frequency of participation, and options for flexibility to make participation accessible to students who have experienced trauma (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Holovatenko, 2024; Howard & Finley, 2024). By explicitly creating expectations for how to interact when disagreements happen in the classroom, the classroom can be transformed into a 'brave' learning environment (Arao & Clemens, 2023). The syllabus plays a key role in communicating expectations and policies to students to students before the semester begins (Holovatenko, 2024). Communicating high expectations (e.g., cold-calling, volunteers, regular groupwork) allows students to set their expectations accordingly

(Schendel, 2020). Having the policies communicated clearly and up-front contributes to Fallot and Harris's (2006) principle of *trustworthiness* between the instructor and students.

Student Support Services: Instructors should provide contact information for relevant student support services, including any on-campus or community resources (e.g., school counseling center, food pantry, dean's office, writing center), for when students need help beyond the scope of the classroom, which allows students to receive help without being ashamed of asking for support (Carello & Butler, 2014; Carello & Thompson, 2022; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Holovatenko, 2024). Sharing resources with students normalizes the act of getting assistance (Schendel, 2020), which helps students feel support and connection in the classroom (Holovatenko, 2024)., Including campus and community resources for students to use supports the principle of *support and connection*, which acknowledges that students must meet basic needs before learning, and they may need the support of campus or community resources to meet those basic needs (Fallot & Harris, 2006).

Setting a Warm Tone: Using warm language and a nonviolent communication style (e.g., I statements, positive directions, person-first language, gender-inclusive language) helps create a positive impression of the instructor (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Holovatenko, 2024; Hooper et al., 2023). By using intentional language, the instructor can create a favorable first impression and establish a collaborative atmosphere from the beginning (Holovatenko, 2024); all together, this promotes Fallot and Harris's (2006) principal of *physical, emotional, social, and academic safety* for students.

Time Commitment Expectations: Instructors should explicitly state the anticipated in-class and out-of-class time requirements for the course (Holovatenko, 2024 Schendel, 2020). Providing this information allows for students to plan ahead and account for and/or reduce

commitment stress. In addition, communicating the expected time commitments in the syllabus increases *trustworthiness and transparency* for students and helps establish a safe learning environment (Fallot & Harris, 2006).

Practice-Informed Components

Trauma-informed pedagogy is an emerging field. Many practitioners draw from experiential wisdom, practical knowledge, and domain-specific expertise. These practices may benefit students and align with trauma-informed principals but have not yet been empirically validated or theoretically grounded as trauma-informed pedagogical practices, or trauma-informed syllabus components. Thus, practice-informed components are components that emerge from frontline experience rather than from formal research. The following practice-informed components are included as they have emerged from the literature and represent evolving conceptualizations within trauma-informed pedagogical discourse and may foreshadow future theoretical and empirical developments in the field.

AI Usage Guidelines: Define parameters for artificial intelligence use on class assignments (Howard & Finley, 2024).

Assessment Structure: Scaffold assessments for students, including providing instructions and flexible due dates to facilitate effective planning (Hitchcock et al., 2021; Holovatenko, 2024; Howard & Finley, 2024)

Assignment Revision Options: Outline opportunities for students to revise and resubmit assignments after students have received feedback (Carello & Thompson, 2022).

Class Expectations: Clearly articulate rules and expectations (e.g., recording lectures, technology use, camera policy for online courses) to create a predictable and safe classroom environment (Hitchcock et al., 2021; Hooper et al., 2023).

Communication Protocol: Provide information for contacting the instructor of record (e.g. provide contact information, include anticipated response timeframe for student communications; Carello & Thompson, 2022).

Course Objectives: Include core knowledge and skill outcomes (Hitchcock et al., 2021)

Course Overview: Include essential course information such as the course title, semester, required supplies (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Hitchcock et al., 2021; Holovatenko, 2024).

Feedback Mechanism: Identify when and how students will get opportunities to give instructors feedback throughout the semester, including class surveys (Holovatenko, 2024).

Institutional Policies: Include institutional policies (e.g., academic integrity, Title IX, and SSD) to demonstrate support for students who require it (Carello & Thompson, 2022; Holovatenko, 2024)

Late Work Policy: Provide flexibility for students as much as possible with due dates (Arbour et al., 2024; Hooper et al., 2023).

Question Forums: Explain how course question forums work, especially related to course inquiries (e.g., asking clarifying questions, leaving anonymous questions; Carello & Thompson, 2022).

Self-Care Statement: Endorse the prioritization of self-care, with examples of how and when to implement self-care practices (Carello & Butler, 2014).

The incorporation of trauma-informed principles into syllabus components illustrates an evolving pedagogical framework. The research-informed, theory-informed, and practice-informed syllabus components are designed to support the academic success of students who have

experienced trauma. These trauma-informed practices aim to benefit students who have experienced trauma by creating more accessible, equitable, and supportive educational environments.

Major Criticisms and Challenges of Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Trauma-informed pedagogy's implementation comes from expressed empathy and concern for students who have experienced harm; however, several concerns and criticisms challenge its current implementation. These concerns include the lack of standardization, implementation difficulties, a need for more targeted approaches, and insufficient evidence base.

While trauma-informed pedagogy can be implemented incrementally, one concern is that hasty implementation to follow an educational trend without schoolwide systemic support and cultural integration can be detrimental for the student (Howard, 2024). As an emerging field, trauma-informed pedagogy currently lacks a unified definition (Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023). No standardized programmatic recommendations for implementation exist; rather, each trauma-informed classroom varies depending on student needs, instructor skills, available resources, and domain (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Gunderson et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). The field of education would benefit from a common, operationalizable definition across disciplines that implement trauma-informed care, leading to a more unified approach in supporting affected students (Berliner 2016).

Implementing new pedagogical strategies takes an investment on the part of instructors in both of time and energy. Even instructors with professional development in trauma-informed practices face implementation challenges due to lack of interest, energy depletion, and their own mental health (Gunderson et al., 2023). Ultimately, instructors are limited by finite time;

emotional, financial, and intellectual resources; and limited administrative support, which can limit an instructor's ability to implement trauma-informed pedagogy (Gunderson et al., 2023). The overlap between pedagogical strategies that target trauma-affected students and those that benefit all students raises an important question: What distinguishes trauma-informed pedagogy from simply "effective teaching?" Perhaps nothing. This effective teaching comes in many forms—one size does not fit all (Yan et al., 2024). Trauma-Informed Pedagogy, like Universal Design for Learning, is built upon efforts to support *all* students (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Merry, 2023; cf. Roski et al., 2021), and thus, overlaps "effective teaching" extensively. Specifically, trauma-informed pedagogy, currently in its infancy, provides an emerging cluster of approaches to teaching (e.g., strategies, policies, behaviors) that support the nuanced needs of students having experienced trauma. These approaches are not in addition to "effective teaching," but rather, like UDL, provide a focus *within* effective teaching. This trauma-informed pedagogy is based on the key assumptions and key principles of SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework (SAMHSA, 2014a), similar to UDL's basis on its three key principles (Merry, 2023). Ulitmately, instructors implementing trauma-informed pedagogy adopt a mindset that centers trauma as *a factor* in classroom decision-making, not as a determinant.

Finally, as an emerging field, trauma-informed pedagogy lacks robust evidence demonstrating its effectiveness for the students it aims to help. Much of the supporting literature remains theoretical, indicating a critical need for empirical studies to validate its approaches and outcomes. While there are modest benefits reported to its implementation, the evidence gap makes it unclear whether implementation of trauma-informed practices leads to measurable improvements (Berliner, 2016). This evidence gap makes it difficult for educators and institutions to make informed decisions about resource allocations and implementation priorities.

Rationale for the Study

A majority of students who enter college have experienced at least one potentially traumatizing event (Cusack et al., 2019; Darnell et al., 2019; Felitti et al., 1998). Trauma can impact individuals across multiple domains: physically, behaviorally, emotionally, cognitively, socially, or spiritually (SAMHSA, 2023). These impacts can manifest as academic challenges, particularly with engagement, working memory, and long-term memory (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Blanchette & Caparos, 2016; Gunderson et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023; Jones & Nangah, 2021; Perry, 2006). One aspect of addressing these academic challenges is the use of trauma-informed pedagogical practices. These practice may include instructional scaffolding, flexible attendance policies, and building positive relationships, as well as the inclusion of specific syllabus components or attributes.

Currently, the recommendations for trauma-informed syllabus components rely primarily on theoretically- and practically-grounded foundations, rather than empirically validated approaches. The impoverished state of these syllabus component recommendations is due, in part, to the nacent nature of trauma-informed pedagogy (Avery et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023). That said, trauma-informed syllabus components are appearing within higher education syllabi, whether or not there is strong theoretical or empirical support to justify their presence (Brown et al., 2022; Gunderson et al., 2023). To advance this emerging pedagogical practice, it would help to have a better understanding of the nature of the landscape itself. This study aims to identify which trauma-informed pedagogical practices are currently being codified syllabus components. The research questions of the study are:

1. What trauma-informed syllabus components do college instructors include in their course syllabi?

2. What differences exist in the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components across content area domains (e.g., engineering, life sciences, social sciences)?
3. What differences exist in the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components across academic levels (e.g., lower undergraduate, upper undergraduate, graduate courses)?

Method

The analysis seeks to identify what trauma-informed components are included across different academic domains and academic levels. This work was conducted under institutional review, IRB (25-637).

Syllabi Sampling

This study analyzed 1,000 higher education syllabi for classes delivered between Winter 2023 through Summer 2025 semesters, obtained through internet searches. Using publicly available syllabi on Google search engine, the research examined syllabi from eight academic domains (Art & Architecture, Business, Engineering, Liberal Arts, Life Sciences, Natural Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences), and three academic levels (lower undergraduate, upper undergraduate, and graduate). Each syllabus was evaluated for the presence of 16 trauma-informed components, all selected based on their alignment with SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework. The syllabi were collected using the Google search engine with structured search terms combining the search term *syllabus* with each of the eight academic domains in quotation marks (e.g., syllabus + "social sciences"). While Google's search algorithm considers meaning, relevance, quality, usability, and context in ranking results, making the results non-random, this approach allows for systematic sampling of publicly available syllabi (*How Does Google Determine Ranking Results - Google Search*, n.d.).

A comprehensive audit was conducted to ensure the each of the syllabi met the following requirements: (a) all syllabi were from Winter 2023 through Summer 2025 semesters, (b) each institution represented is a public or private four-year institution (e.g., not community college), (c) each of the eight domains is represented by 125 syllabi, and (d) within each 125 domain syllabi, each of the academic levels is represented by 50 undergraduate lower level courses (100-200 level), 50 undergraduate upper level courses (300-400 level), and 25 graduate level courses. As a result of the audit, non-compliant syllabi identified during the audit were removed and replaced with compliant ones to maintain the sampling structure. This ensured a balanced representation of each domain and academic level.

The resulting collection of syllabi involved a collection of 1,000 syllabi represented in the following manner: the 8 domains were represented by 125 syllabi, each academic level at the graduate level were represented by 25 syllabi, and each academic level at the undergraduate low and undergraduate high level were represented by 50 syllabi each (see Table 1). There were syllabi from a total of 87 unique institutions, 74 public (85.1%) and 13 private (14.9%). The institutions represented 37 states (Figure 1). The syllabi came from the following semesters: 1 Winter 2023 (0.1%); 61 Spring 2023 (6.1%); 2 Summer 2023 (0.2%); 74 Fall 2023 (7.4%); 5 Winter 2024 (0.5%); 644 Spring 2024 (64.4%); 27 Summer 2024 (2.7%); 123 Fall 2024 (12.3%); 1 Winter 2025 (0.1%); 50 Spring 2025 (5.0%); and 12 Summer 2025 (1.2%).

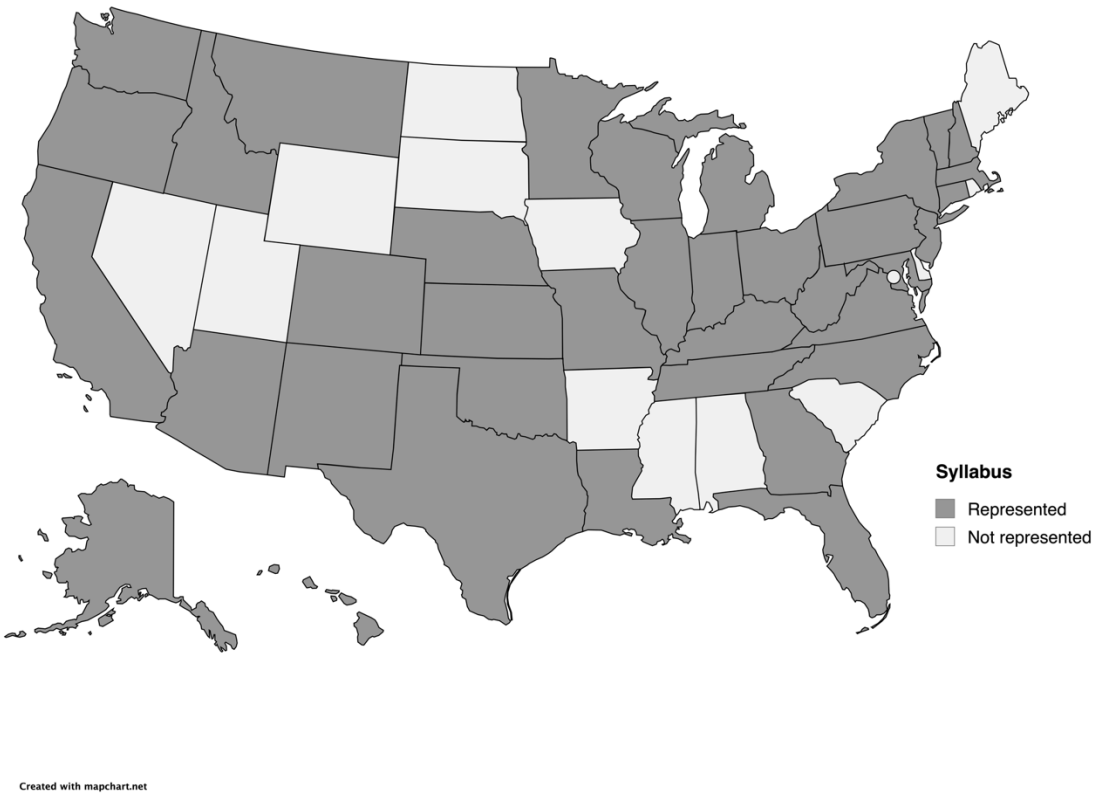
Table 1.

Syllabus Distribution Across Domain and Academic Level

	Art & Ar.	Bus.	Eng.	Lan. Art.	Life Sci.	Nat. Sci.	Phys. Sci.	Soc. Sci.
UGL	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
UGH	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
GRAD	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25

Figure 1.

Map of Syllabus Representation by State



Materials and Measures

Syllabus Components: At present, no standard framework exists to determine what syllabus components qualify as trauma-informed, thus the aforementioned research-informed, theory-informed, and practice-informed components were used as the starting point. Each research, theory, or practice-informed component was then evaluated using SAMHSA's comprehensive trauma-informed framework, specifically the four key assumptions or six key principles found in Chapter 2 Table 1 *SAMHSA's Four Key Assumptions and Six Key Principles Related to Education*.

As an exploratory study, the primary goal was to determine what trauma-informed syllabus components college instructors include in their course syllabi. For inclusion in the final analytical framework, components were required to be in clear alignment with at least one of SAMHSA's four key assumptions or six key principles as defined in the established trauma-informed care framework. This methodological approach ensured the resulting syllabus component inventory reflected conceptual alignment with an established research-based, trauma-informed framework. While some connections between syllabus components and SAMHSA's framework were identified in the literature, each determination for the purpose of inclusion in the current research was made independently from previous scholarly attributions by the researcher.

Based on these criteria, one research-informed syllabus component was included: content warnings, which aligns with SAMHSA's key principles resists re-traumatization and empowerment, voice, and choice. In addition, six theory informed syllabus components (with their SAMHSA alignment in parentheses) were included: attendance information (realizes presence and impact of trauma; empowerment, voice, and choice), inclusive scholarship (cultural, historical, and gender issues), instructor identity (collaboration and mutuality; cultural,

historical, and gender issues), participation guidelines (safety; peer support), student support services (resists re-traumatization; empowerment, voice, and choice), and warm tone (collaboration and mutuality). Two components were excluded: assignment framework and time commitment. While each of these were tied to theory, they were not supported by one of SAMHSA's comprehensive key assumptions or key principles.

Finally, eight practice-informed syllabus components were included: assessment structure (collaboration and mutuality), assignment revision options (empowerment, voice, and choice), class expectations (safety; trustworthiness, and transparency), communication protocol (trustworthiness and transparency; collaboration and mutuality), feedback mechanisms (trustworthiness and transparency; collaboration and mutuality), institutional policies (cultural, historic, and gender issues), late work policy (empowerment, voice, and choice), question forums (peer support; empowerment, voice, and choice), and self-care policy (responds to trauma). Three components were excluded: AI usage guidelines, course overview, and course objectives, as none of these were supported by one of SAMHSA's key assumptions or key principles. Thus, in total, 16 trauma-informed syllabus components were identified for inclusion in the study.

Syllabus Subcomponents: Each syllabus was evaluated for the presence or absence of each component. The evaluation focused solely on presence or absence, not on quality or effectiveness. When components appeared across multiple syllabi with discernable patterns, descriptive subcomponents were inductively created and tracked to capture common manifestations of the component's use. These subcomponents served to provide descriptive detail rather than variables for systematic analysis (see Appendix B).

Table 2.

Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components

Component	Practice-informed	Theory-informed	Research-informed	Alignment with SAMHSA's Framework
Course Information				
Content Warnings Warnings of potentially activating content (e.g., trigger warnings, course topic list)			✓	KA.4; KP.5
Feedback Mechanisms Opportunities for students to give feedback to instructor (e.g., course surveys)	✓			KP.2, KP.4
Instructor identity Instructor identification (e.g., instructor name, preferred honorific or method of address, preferred pronouns)		✓		KP.4; KP.6
Syllabus Design				
Setting a Warm Tone Uses warm language (e.g., I statements, positive constructive directions, person-first language, gender inclusive language)		✓		KP.4
Course Policies and Expectations				
Class Expectations Explicit rules and expectations for class (e.g., recording lecture, technology use, restroom breaks)	✓			KP.1, KP.2
Communication Protocol Expectations for academic correspondence (e.g., preferred method for contact, expected wait time for response)	✓			KP.2, KP.4
Question Forums Structured spaces for academic discussion or inquiry (e.g., rules for participation, inclusion of anonymous question board)	✓			KP.3, KP.5
Attendance Information Expectations and accommodations for class attendance (e.g., number of absences permitted, alternate assignments, whether a note is required)		✓		KA.1, KP.5
Participation Guidelines Protocols for respectful academic discourse (e.g., Create Brave Spaces, engaging with ideas that are different than our own)		✓		KP.1, KP.3

Self-Care Statement Prioritization of self-care (e.g., how and when to prioritize self-care)	✓		KA.3
Assessment Information			
Assignment Revision Options Opportunities for assignment improvement (e.g., allow students to revise and resubmit based on feedback)	✓		KP.5
Assessment Structure Scaffold tasks for students (e.g., instructions, due dates, and feedback structure)	✓		KP.4
Inclusive Scholarship Diverse perspectives in assigned readings (e.g., integrate readings from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, and sexual orientations)		✓	KP.6
Late Work Policy Submission accommodation without grade penalty (e.g., flexible due dates)	✓		KP.5
Resources			
Institutional Policies Campus policies that are in place to support students (e.g., Title IX, SSD, integrity statement)	✓		KP.6
Student Support Services Campus and community assistance resources (e.g., counseling centers, writing center, resources for housing and food insecurity)		✓	KA.4, KP.5

Note: KA = key assumption; KP = key principle (see Chapter 2 Table 1).

Academic Domains: Syllabi will be analyzed across eight academic domains: Art & Architecture (e.g., Architecture, Art History, Art Appreciation, Sculpture); Business (e.g., Accounting, Economics, Finance, Management, Marketing); Engineering (e.g., Aerospace, Electrical, Mechanical, Systems); Liberal Arts (e.g., Communication, History, Languages, Philosophy, Theater Arts); Life Sciences (e.g., Agriculture, Biochemistry, Dairy/Poultry, Entomology, Horticulture); Natural Sciences (e.g., Fisheries, Forestry, Geography, Wildlife, Science); Physical Sciences (e.g., Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Mathematics, Physics); Social Sciences (e.g., Anthropology, Education, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology). These eight domains were selected to demonstrate the domains represented at various institution types typical of US colleges and universities.

Academic Levels: Syllabi were analyzed across three academic levels: lower-level undergraduate courses (freshman, sophomore), upper-level graduate courses (junior, senior), and graduate-level courses (master's, doctoral).

Procedures

Each of the 1,000 syllabi were evaluated based on the components reported in Appendix A. The evaluation was made on the presence or absence of the component, not on the quality of the component. To ensure data integrity and facilitate analysis, the checklist was implemented as an online utility; this online utility prevented duplication of data and created an electronic database of components present in each syllabus. All evaluations were conducted by the researcher.

Results

This section addresses the results to three research questions: (a) What trauma-informed syllabus components do college instructors include in their course syllabi? (b) What differences exist in the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components across content area domains? and (c) What differences exist in the inclusion of trauma-informed syllabus components across academic levels?

Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components Included in Higher Education Syllabi

The frequency distribution of 16 trauma-informed syllabus components across 1,000 sampled syllabi is displayed in Table 3. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed the components varied significantly from the expected uniform distribution ($E(f) = 312.5$ per component, $\chi^2 = 4611.1$, $p < 0.001$). All 16 components showed significant deviations from the expected value ($p < .001$), with Set Warm Tone ($z = +31.57$) and Institutional Policies ($z = +29.84$) appearing most frequently, while Inclusive Scholarship ($z = -18.20$) and Self-Care Statement ($z = -18.09$) appearing least frequently.

To better understand this variation, a k-means clustering analysis was conducted and identified three distinct tiers of inclusion: most frequent (n = 2, M = 908, 89-92%), somewhat frequent (n = 5, M = 570, 49-65%), and least frequent (n = 9, M = 88, .5-24%). A Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed these tiers differed significantly from one another ($H = 11.89$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.003$).

Table 3.

Trauma-Informed Components Included in Higher Education Syllabi

Component	*Observed Frequency*	*Standardized Residual*	*Rank*	*Tier*
Set Warm Tone	924	+31.57 ***	1	1
Institutional Policies	892	+29.84 ***	2	1
Student Support Services	654	+16.95 ***	3	2
Participation Guidelines	618	+15.00 ***	4	2
Class Expectations	576	+12.73 ***	5	2
Instructor Identity	516	+9.48 ***	6	2
Communication Protocol	493	+8.23 ***	7	2
Attendance Information	243	-5.31 ***	8	3
Late Work Policy	227	-6.17 ***	9	3
Assessment Revision Options	86	-13.81 ***	10	3
Assessment Structure	65	-13.86 ***	11	3
Question Forums	78	-14.24 ***	12	3
Content Warnings	26	-17.06 ***	13	3
Feedback Mechanisms	26	-17.06 ***	13	3
Self-Care Statement	7	-18.09 ***	15	3
Inclusive Scholarship	5	-18.20 ***	16	3

Note: N = 1,000 syllabi across 16 components. χ^2 (15) = 4611.1, $p < .001$. Expected frequency for all components = 312.5; *** $p < 0.001$ ($|z| > 3.29$). Tier 1 = most frequently included, Tier 2 = somewhat frequently included, Tier 3 = least frequently included.

Examining Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components by Domain: To determine whether trauma-informed syllabus component inclusion varied across the eight content area domains, a series of 12 chi-square tests were conducted, one for each trauma-informed syllabus component, with four exceptions. Four syllabus component frequencies (content warnings, feedback mechanisms, self-care statement, inclusive scholarship) violated the chi-square tests' requirement of a minimum count of 5 in any given cell—these four components were analyzed using Fisher's Exact test. To control for familywise Type I error across multiple comparisons, a Šidák-Bonferroni correction was applied, adjusting the significance level to $\alpha = .003$ (familywise $\alpha = .05$). For components showing significant chi-square results, standardized residuals were examined using a post hoc Šidák-Bonferroni adjusted threshold of $\alpha = .002$ ($z = \pm 1.95$) to identify which specific domains contributed to a significant chi-square result.

The chi-square results revealed 6 of the trauma-informed components showed significant variability across domains, while none of the 4 Fisher's Exact tests showed significant variability across domains (see Table 4). Across the 6 trauma-informed components showing significant variability, only 14 of the 120 possible domain-level comparisons (11.7%) showed deviation from expected frequencies, indicating general consistency across the implementation or exclusion across most domains.

Four components demonstrated domain-specific patterns. Attendance Information showed significant variation ($\chi^2 = 67.23$, $p < .003$), with higher-than expected inclusion of Art and Architecture ($z = +3.38$) and Language Arts ($z = +4.831$), and lower-than-expected inclusion of Engineering ($z = -2.25$) and Natural Sciences ($z = -2.25$). Class Expectations also varied significantly ($\chi^2 = 64.47$, $p < .003$), appearing more frequently in Art and Architecture ($z = +2.59$)

and Language Arts (z=+2.00) and less frequently in Engineering (z=+2.00). Communication Protocol showed variation as well (χ^2=26.18, p<.003) appearing more frequently in the Business domain (z = +2.60). Instructor Identity varied (χ^2=49.33, p<.003), appearing more frequently in Life Science (z=+2.18) and Physical Science (z=+2.68), and less frequently than expected in Business (z=-2.93). Question forums demonstrated the strongest domain effect (χ^2=65.58, p<.003), with Engineering including this component at a higher rate than other domains (z=+6.17) and Natural Science including it less frequently (z=-2.48). Student Support Services (χ^2=29.94, p<.003) was found in Life Sciences more frequently than expected (z= +2.81). The remaining components showed no variation across the eight domains, suggesting these elements are implemented similarly regardless of disciplinary context.

Table 4.

Observed Frequencies of Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components Within Content Area Domains

		Content Area Domains - O(f)[a]								
Component	*E(f)* [b]	*AA*	*B*	*E*	*LA*	*LS*	*NS*	*PS*	*SS*	χ^2
Set Warm Tone	115.50	117	117	113	112	115	117	118	115	3.64
Institutional Policies	111.50	102	116	110	109	115	114	112	114	11.96
Student Support Services	81.62	77	80	80	77	107*	71	76	85	29.94**
Participation Guidelines	77.25	83	72	75	93	72	74	67	82	16.25
Class Expectations	72.00	94*	81	40*	89*	72	67	65	68	64.47**
Instructor Identity	64.50	52	41*	64	61	82*	60	86	70	49.33**
Communication Protocol	61.62	47	82*	56	53	70	59	62	64	26.18**
Attendance Information	30.38	49*	23	18*	57*	26	18*	20	32	67.23**
Late Work Policy	28.38	20	22	21	33	27	26	37	41	19.51
Assessment Revision Option	10.75	6	18	9	6	9	10	17	11	14.60
Assessment Structure	10.62	14	6	5	18	8	10	10	14	14.18
Question Forums	9.75	4	8	29*	4	6	2*	18*	7	65.58**
Content Warnings	3.25	7	2	0	7	0	1	5	4	0.0034[+]
Feedback Mechanisms	3.25	2	2	1	5	4	3	6	3	0.5702[+]
Self-Care Statement	0.88	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	3	0.4386[+]
Inclusive Scholarship	0.62	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	2	0.7949[+]

Note: For all χ^2 calculations, N = 1,000; df = 7; for all cells, n = 125.
AA = Art and Architecture; B = Business; E = Engineering; LA = Liberal Arts; LS = Life Sciences; NS = Natural Sciences; PS = Physical Sciences; SS = Social Sciences.
[a]O*(f)* = observed frequencies; [b]E*(f)* = expected frequencies.
[+] Fisher's Exact Test performed, p-value reported
*z > |1.96| ** p < .0

Examining Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components by Academic Level: To examine whether the inclusion of a trauma-informed component varied across academic level, a series of 14 chi-square tests were performed, one for each trauma-informed syllabus component, with two exceptions. Two syllabus component frequencies (self-care statement, inclusive scholarship) violated the chi-square tests' requirement of a minimum count of 5 in any given cell—these two components were analyzed using Fisher's Exact test. The Šidák-Bonferroni correction was applied ($\alpha = .003$ per comparison, familywise $\alpha = .05$), and standardized residuals were examined using an adjusted threshold of $\alpha = .01$ ($z = \pm 1.96$) to identify significant deviation from the expected values within academic levels. Only 2 of 14 trauma-informed components demonstrated via chi-square significant overall variability across academic levels, while neither of the Fisher's Exact tests showed significant variability across levels (see Table 5). Only 4 of the 48 possible level-specific comparisons (8.3%) showed significant deviations.

Specifically, Assessment Structure showed significant variation across academic levels ($\chi^2 = 51.53$, $p < .003$). Graduate included this component significantly more than expected ($z = +6.06$), while lower undergraduate courses included it significantly less than expected ($z = -2.92$). Institutional Policies also showed significant variation ($\chi^2 = 13.29$, $p < .003$). The undergraduate low syllabi included the component more than expected ($z = +2.62$ in the "absent" row, indicating a higher presence), and the undergraduate high syllabi included the component less frequently than expected ($z = -2.10$ in the "absent" row). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons revealed a significant difference between undergraduate high and undergraduate low inclusion of Institutional Policies ($\chi^2 = 12.10$, $p = 0.0005$).

The remaining components showed no significant variation across academic levels, indicating that most trauma-informed practices are implemented similarly regardless of whether

a course is designed for a graduate student, upper undergraduate student, or lower undergraduate student.

Table 5.

Observed Frequencies of Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components Within Content Academic Levels

			Content Academic Levels - O(f)[a]			
Component	*E(f G)* [b]	*E(f UG)* [c]	*Grad*	*UG High*	*UG Low*	χ^2
Set Warm Tone	184.8	369.6	181	365	378	4.29
Institutional Policies	178.4	356.8	175	343*	374*	13.29**
Student Support Services	130.6	261.2	133	254	266	0.95
Participation Guidelines	123.6	247.2	119	248	251	0.61
Class Expectations	115.2	230.4	107	230	239	2.14
Instructor Identity	103.2	206.4	101	215	200	1.25
Communication Protocol	98.6	197.2	93	191	209	2.40
Attendance Information	48.6	97.2	52	111	80	6.92
Late Work Policy	45.4	90.8	57	98	72	9.61
Assessment Revision Options	17.2	34.4	9	33	34	7.27
Assessment Structure	17.0	34.0	42*	26	17*	51.53**
Question Forums	15.6	31.2	10	29	39	4.46
Content Warnings	5.2	10.4	3	8	15	3.61
Feedback Mechanisms	5.2	10.4	5	10	11	0.06
Self-Care Statement	1.4	2.8	1	2	4	0.7105[+]
Inclusive Scholarship	1.0	1.0	2	1	2	0.4309[+]

Note: For all χ^2 calculations, N = 1,000; df = 2.
Grad = Graduate, for all cells n = 200; UG High = Undergraduate High, for all cells n = 400; UG Low = Undergraduate Low, for all cells n = 400.
[a]O*(f)* = observed frequencies; [b]E(f_G) = expected frequencies for Graduate column; [c]E(f_{UG}) = expected frequencies for Undergraduate High and Undergraduate Low column.
[+] Fisher's Exact Test performed, p-value reported
*z > |1.96| ** p < .003

Discussion

The investigation set out to determine what trauma-informed syllabus components were included in higher education syllabi and whether the inclusion varied by domain and academic level. The findings reveal that discipline influences syllabus content more considerably than academic level, as well as clear categorization based on frequency.

Syllabus Frequency

The 16 trauma-informed syllabus components clustered into three groups: most frequently included components, somewhat frequently included, and least frequently included (see Table 6). Beyond examining component frequency (see Table 3), descriptive subcomponents were also developed to capture the varied ways the component manifested across the syllabi. As outlined in the Methods section, these subcomponents emerged organically during analysis and were tallied to provide additional descriptive context rather than formal statistical analysis (see Appendix B for a complete list of subcomponents).

Table 6.

Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components Included in Higher Education Syllabi

Most Frequent[1]	*Somewhat Frequent*[2]	*Least Frequent*[3]
Set Warm Tone	Student Support Services	Attendance Information
Institutional Policies	Participation Guidelines	Late Work Policy
	Class Expectations	Assessment Revision Options
	Instructor Identity	Assessment Structure
	Communication Protocol	Question Forums
		Content Warnings
		Feedback Mechanisms
		Self-Care Statement
		Inclusive Scholarship

Note: [1] M = 908, 89-92%; [2] M = 570, 49-65%; [3] M = 88, .5-24%. Kruskal-Wallis test results (H =11.89, df =2, p = 0.003).

Most Common: Two components appeared in nearly every syllabus: Setting a Warm Tone and Institutional Policies. Setting a Warm Tone was typically conveyed through politeness markers (e.g., “please”, “thank you”, “sorry”) or using first person language (I statements), which may result from general writing conventions or expectations to be polite when making requests. However, this tone can help increase the students’ sense of belongingness and connection (Carello & Thompson, 2022). The Institutional Policies component included information mandated or provided by institutions; specifically, syllabi most often included statements regarding students with disabilities, although they also frequently included cultural or religious accommodations, evaluations of teaching, and Title IX information. The significant inclusion of disability statements (96% of syllabi that included Institutional Policies) may be at least partly attributed to universities requiring such a statement or link from the syllabus to the university’s policy page. Across the 87 schools represented in the current sample, 76 schools have some type of policy dictating what goes in the syllabus, and of those with policies 80% (n = 61) require or recommend the inclusion of such a disability statement. For example, the University of Florida’s Syllabus Policy (https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/) requires a link to the University’s policy page, which in turn has a link to the Disability Resource Center (https://disability.ufl.edu). Institutions adopting policies requiring instructors to include disability policies in their syllabi may be responsible for the increase in representation to 85.5% (n = 855), up from the 23.0% (n = 230) reported by Doolittle and Siuzinski (2010).

Frequent Inclusion: These components represent standard but not universally adopted syllabus practices, being included on 50-65% of the syllabi. The frequency of Student Support Services appeared on 65.4% of syllabi (654 of 1,000), a substantial increase from the 7.2% (72 of

1,000) reported by Doolittle and Siudzinski (2010); this increase may be due to efforts to support students through the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Hitchcock et al., 2021; Schendel, 2020). Student Support Services statements tended to provide students with information related to health and wellness support (counseling services, healthcare center, sexual harassment and assault centers, and food pantries/housing assistance) and academic performance support (technology support, writing center, tutoring and the library), with information regarding counseling services appearing on over 46% of the syllabi.

Three frequently included components are Participation Guidelines (61.8%), Class Expectations (57.6%), and Communication Protocol (49.3%). Communicating explicit expectations conveys transparency and makes the content more accessible to students struggling with the academic consequences of trauma (Carello & Thompson, 2022). Participation Guidelines most frequently involve grading students for class participation (61% of syllabi with this component) but also outlines expectations for respectful discourse. Class Expectations (57.6%) clearly outlines behavioral requirements, such as technology use, specific dress codes, or other behavioral requirements. Similarly, Communication Protocol guides student-instructor communication outside the classroom. In 2007, Doolittle and Lusk reported 70.8% of instructors including an email address on their syllabus; that number has grown in this sample. However, only 49.3% of instructors provide additional information, such as preferred method of communication, expected response timeframe or guidance on handling time sensitive queries.

While the instructor's name is one of the most included syllabus components (Doolittle and Siudzinski, 2010), simply listing the instructor's name is not sufficient to qualify as a trauma-informed component. For Instructor Identity (51.6%) to be considered trauma-informed, the component must include not only listing the professor's name, but also provide some

additional information, such as their honorifics (e.g., “Dr.”, “Professor”), preferred method of address, pronouns, nickname, or other identity information (e.g., pronunciation key for their name). Providing pronoun information can make the classroom welcoming for LGBTQ students, while information about honorifics and preferred method of address can guide first-generation students and students and others who are unfamiliar with academic conventions, helping to open lines of communication (Schendel, 2020).

Least Common: Ten components appeared in fewer than one-quarter of syllabi, which may represent specialized or emerging practices in trauma-informed pedagogy. Notably, while attendance policies and late work policies were common features in syllabi, not every syllabus that included these features did so in a trauma-informed way. To be considered trauma-informed, the policies must hold students to high standards (i.e., hold students accountable for attending class and submitting work on time), while also providing some flexibility without requiring documentation or excuses, as invasive requests for justification can contribute to retraumatizing students (Carello & Thompson, 2022; SAMHSA, 2014). Only 24.3% of syllabi included a trauma-informed attendance policies, such as allowing students some number of free absences without requiring a note, excusing students for religious observances, or providing other attendance considerations. Likewise, only 22.7% established trauma-informed late work policies, using strategies such as considering extension requests, excusing students for religious observances, or giving all students a number of free late days without requiring an excuse.

Two components focused on assessment flexibility and structure. While including assessment information (e.g., assignment names, due dates, grading information) has been documented as somewhat frequent syllabus components for a decade (Doolittle & Siudzinski, 2010), including flexibility in the assessment structure makes the component trauma-informed.

For example, Assessment Revision Options (8.6%) were represented by allowing students to take multiple attempts on an assignment or revise papers from previous course. Assessment Structure (8.5%) included ways instructors went beyond describing major assignments for students and scaffolded throughout the semester to promote students' success, including topic consultation/approval, peer review of a draft, providing optional draft revisions, and working with a research consultant.

Content Warnings (2.6%) represent a particularly interesting finding given recent discourse about their use in higher education (Bryce et al., 2023). Despite considerable debate about trigger warnings in academic settings, only 26 syllabi included content warnings that alerted students to potentially distressing material. Most provided general warnings (54% of syllabi with this component), while others provided specific triggers including acts of war, violence, bodily function, language, neurodiversity, personal identity, sexual behavior, and suicide.

The rarest component was Inclusive Scholarship (0.5%, n = 5) wherein an instructor explicitly identified diverse scholarly perspectives. The most common manifestation of inclusive scholarship was a general statement regarding the inclusion of diverse sources over the course of the semester; however, one syllabus did list specific readings along their citations, noting the tribal affiliation of Native Scholars (20%).

Domain Effects

Six of 16 components varied significantly across the eight content area domains, with 14 domain-specific deviations identified. These patterns reflect disciplinary norms, pedagogical traditions, and the nature of course content within different fields.

Several patterns emerged in domain-specific implementation of trauma-informed syllabus components. For example, Art and Architecture and Language Arts were more likely to include Attendance Information and Class Expectations, potentially reflecting pedagogical approaches that emphasize in-class participation, discussion, and collaborative work. Architecture's proportional high representation in the domain and accreditation standards requiring attendance in class may also influence the attendance policies in Art and Architecture. Art having a lab component and requiring specific dress, food, and materials may contribute to the increase in Class Expectations.

Engineering syllabi showed a lower inclusion of both components, but dramatically higher inclusion of Question Forums, perhaps suggesting a disciplinary culture of openly answering questions rather than answering them privately in email. This may be influenced by the fact that introductory STEM courses generally have large enrollments (Wasendorf et al., 2023), and answering questions publicly saves resources (e.g., time, energy) for the instructor. Similarly, Physical Science, another discipline with typically large introductory courses (Wasendorf et al., 2023), had similarly high inclusion of Question Forums. In addition, Business syllabi included more Communication Protocol, but less frequently included Instructor Identity Information – both of these may be because these norms are borrowed from professional communication norms rather than academic standards.

These domain differences may indicate that trauma-informed practices are adapted to fit disciplinary practices in some contexts rather than applied uniformly. The dramatic difference between the implementation of Question Forums usage (Engineering: 23.2% vs expected 7.8%) shows how disciplines can implement strategies to align with their domain's specific needs.

Academic Level Effects

In contrast to the domain findings, the academic levels demonstrated a remarkable consistency. Only two components varied significantly across academic levels. Assessment Structure appeared more frequently in graduate syllabi and less frequently in lower undergraduate syllabi, possibly because graduate students are more likely to be completing research assignments that require scaffolding. Institutional Policies also demonstrated a significant difference across undergraduate levels, with undergraduate low students (freshmen and sophomores) receiving this information more frequently than undergraduate high students (juniors and seniors). Instructors may deem explicit policy statements more beneficial for newer students, while expecting more senior students to have already familiarized themselves with the institutional guidelines. The absence of variation across the remaining components may indicate that once a trauma-informed syllabus component has been adopted by a professor or institution, it is applied with general consistency across academic levels.

Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

The study operates under two key assumptions. First, we assume that publicly available syllabi through Google are representative of all syllabi used in higher education classrooms. Second, we assume that the online versions of syllabi contain the same content posted directly to students through learning management systems or in class.

Several limitations arise from the methodology. The use of Google's search engine for syllabus collection introduces selection bias, as search results are influenced by Google's proprietary ranking algorithms and are not random. Limiting searches to syllabi from Winter 2023 through Summer 2025 creates a snapshot in time. This means that changes in culture, politics, and other influences may not be captured in the data. The quota sampling approach (125 syllabi per domain) may not reflect the actual distribution of courses across domains in higher

education. Finally, the analysis focuses solely on the presence or absence of a syllabus component, without evaluating their quality, intent, or effectiveness. For example, when determining the presence or absence of politeness markers (e.g., “please”), the presence was counted in the whole syllabus, even if it was in an institutional policy, as there was no way to know whether the instructor had a hand in authoring (or editing) the policy. Future research may address these limitations through alternative sampling methods or longitudinal approaches to syllabus analysis.

Conclusion

This study reveals that trauma-informed syllabus components vary considerably in their implementation across higher education, with some practices appearing nearly universally while others remain rare. The most frequently included components (Setting a Warm Tone and Institutional Policies) may owe their prevalence to established precedent and institutional mandates. Less frequently implemented strategies likely remain uncommon because they address domain-specific pedagogical needs (e.g., Question Forums) or remain subject to academic debate within higher education (e.g., Content Warnings).

Domain specific patterns reveal how disciplines adapt trauma-informed practices to align with their unique cultures and needs. For instance, Engineering’s dramatically higher use of Question Forums (23.2% vs 7.8% expected) may reflect both practical considerations for large courses and disciplinary norms favoring public knowledge-sharing. Similarly, Business syllabi may demonstrate professional communication norms rather than academic norms through increased Communication Protocol but decreased Instructor Identity Information. Art and Architecture showed elevated inclusion of Attendance Information and Class Expectations, likely reflecting pedagogical approaches influenced by accreditation requirements for

architecture students, as well as pedagogical approaches that emphasize participation and collaboration in the arts.

The relative consistency across academic levels suggests that once instructors adopt syllabi components (whether they are trauma-informed components or not), they apply them uniformly across the courses they teach, regardless of student level. The two exceptions are Assessment Structure and Institutional Policies. Assessment Structure appears more frequently at the graduate level than undergraduate low level, perhaps accounting for the differences in assessment types and output expectations between those student populations. Institutional Policies were more frequently found in undergraduate low syllabi than undergraduate high syllabi, perhaps reflecting different expectations for understanding institutional policies at different academic levels.

These findings suggest that trauma-informed syllabus practices in higher education are shaped more by disciplinary culture than by academic level, highlighting the importance of understanding a domain's pedagogical needs when implementing trauma-informed pedagogy. However, it is important to acknowledge that examining individual syllabus components captures only a snapshot of trauma-informed pedagogy. The true measure of trauma-informed practice extends beyond what appears on a syllabus and encompasses implementing the pedagogical practices, as well as the human connections that happen within the classroom.

References

About APA. (n.d.). https://www.apa.org. Retrieved April 17, 2025, from https://www.apa.org/about

Agarwal, Y. (2017). Educational Aspirations of Survivors of the 1984 Anti-Sikh Violence in Delhi. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, *14*(2), 166–186. ERIC.

Almeqdad, Q. I., Alodat, A. M., Alquraan, M. F., Mohaidat, M. A., & Al-Makhzoomy, A. K. (2023). The effectiveness of universal design for learning: A systematic review of the literature and meta-analysis. *Cogent Education*, *10*(1), 2218191. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2218191

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: Vol. 5th ed., text rev.* https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/book/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787

Ancheta, R. F., Daniel, D., & Ahmad, R. (2021). Effect of class attendance on academic performance. *European Journal of Education Studies*, *8*(9). https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v8i9.3887

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2023). From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In *The art of effective facilitation* (pp. 135–150). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003447580-11/safe-spaces-brave-spaces-brian-arao-kristi-clemens

Arbour, M., Walker, K., & Houston, J. (2024). Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: Instructional Strategies to Support Student Success. *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health*, *69*(1), 25–32. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmwh.13539

Avery, J. C., Morris, H., Galvin, E., Misso, M., Savaglio, M., & Skouteris, H. (2021). Systematic Review of School-Wide Trauma-Informed Approaches. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *14*(3), 381–397. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-020-00321-1

Awidi, I. T., Paynter, M., & Evers, U. (2020). Visual Organizers and Scaffolding the Student Learning Experience in Higher Education. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, *48*(4), 518–538. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239519893051

Azzam, M. B., & Easteal, R. A. (2021). Pedagogical Strategies for the Enhancement of Medical Education. *Medical Science Educator*, *31*(6), 2041–2048. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40670-021-01385-w

Ballestrini, C. (2022, March 21). *University of Connecticut Office of the Provost | Trigger and Content Warning Guidance*. https://provost.uconn.edu/trigger-warning/

Barros-Lane, L., Smith, D. S., McCarty, D., Perez, S., & Sirrianni, L. (2021). Assessing a Trauma-Informed Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*, S66–S81. Education Research Complete.

Bergin, J., & Ferrara, L. (2019). How student attendance can improve institutional outcomes. *The Educause Review*.

Berliner, L., & Kolko, D. J. (2016). Trauma Informed Care: A Commentary and Critique. *Child Maltreatment*, *21*(2), 168–172. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559516643785

Blaisdell, H. A. (2024). *The Right Time for Process (ing): Trauma-Informed and Student-Informed Care Pedagogy in FYC at the Two-Year College* [PhD Thesis, Middle Tennessee State University].

https://search.proquest.com/openview/554a0fe836ca8541810bf9babd82f613/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Blanchette, I., & Caparos, S. (2016). Working memory function is linked to trauma exposure, independently of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, *21*(6), 494–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2016.1236015

Bloom, S. L., & Sreedhar, S. Y. (2008). The Sanctuary Model of Trauma-Informed Organizational Change. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *17*(3), 48–53. ERIC.

Boals, A., Contractor, A. A., & Blumenthal, H. (2020). The utility of college student samples in research on trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder: A critical review. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, *73*, 102235. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102235

Brown, E. C., Freedle, A., Hurless, N. L., Miller, R. D., Martin, C., & Paul, Z. A. (2022). Preparing Teacher Candidates for Trauma-Informed Practices. *Urban Education*, *57*(4), 662–685. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920974084

Bryce, I., Horwood, N., Cantrell, K., & Gildersleeve, J. (2023). Pulling the Trigger: A Systematic Literature Review of Trigger Warnings as a Strategy for Reducing Traumatization in Higher Education. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *24*(4), 2882–2894. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221118968

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2014). Potentially Perilous Pedagogies: Teaching Trauma Is Not the Same as Trauma-Informed Teaching. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, *15*(2), 153–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2014.867571

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-Informed Educational Practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *35*(3), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059

Carello, J., & Thompson, P. (2022). What Are We Centering? Developing a Trauma-Informed Syllabus. In P. Thompson & J. Carello (Eds.), *Trauma-Informed Pedagogies* (pp. 203–218). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92705-9_17

Carpenter, S. K. (2023). Encouraging students to use retrieval practice: A review of emerging research from five types of interventions. *Educational Psychology Review*, *35*(4), 96.

Counts, C. J., & John-Henderson, N. A. (2023). Childhood trauma and college student health: A review of the literature. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2130336

Cronholm, P. F., Forke, C. M., Wade, R., Bair-Merritt, M. H., Davis, M., Harkins-Schwarz, M., Pachter, L. M., & Fein, J. A. (2015). Adverse Childhood Experiences. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *49*(3), 354–361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2015.02.001

Crosby, S., Somers, C., Day, A., Zammit, M., Shier, J., & Baroni, B. (2017). Examining school attachment, social support, and trauma symptomatology among court-involved, female students. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, *26*(9), 2539–2546.

Cusack, S. E., Hicks, T. A., Bourdon, J., Sheerin, C. M., Overstreet, C. M., Kendler, K. S., Dick, D. M., & Amstadter, A. B. (2019). Prevalence and predictors of PTSD among a college sample. *Journal of American College Health: J of ACH*, *67*(2), 123–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1462824

Darnell, D., Flaster, A., Hendricks, K., Kerbrat, A., & Comtois, K. A. (2019). Adolescent clinical populations and associations between trauma and behavioral and emotional problems.

Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, *11*(3), 266–273. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000371

Davidson, S. (2017). Trauma-informed practices for postsecondary education: A guide. *Education Northwest*, *5*, 3–24.

Doolittle, P. E., & Siudzinski, R. A. (2010). Recommended Syllabus Components: What Do Higher Education Faculty Include in Their Syllabi? *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, *21*(3), 29–61.

Fallot, R. D., & Harris, M. (2006). *Trauma-informed services: A self-assessment and planning protocol.* Community Connections. https://children.wi.gov/Documents/CCTICSelf-AssessmentandPlanningProtocol0709.pdf

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *14*(4), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8

Frazier, P., Anders, S., Perera, S., Tennen, H., Tashiro, T., Park, C., & Tomich, P. (2009). Traumatic Events among Undergraduate Students: Prevalence and Associated Symptoms. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *56*(3), 450–460. ERIC.

Gauthier, G., Banner, J., & Winer, L. (2025). What is the syllabus for? Revealing tensions through a scoping review of syllabus uses. *International Journal for Academic Development*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2025.2465363

Gunderson, R. L., Mrozla-Toscano, C. F., & Mao, D. M. (2023). An Instructor's Guide for Implementing Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Higher Education. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, *37*(2), 11–17.

Harrington, C. (2023). Is the Syllabus Passé? Student and Faculty Perceptions. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *23*(4), 19–32.

Harris, M., & Fallot, R. D. (2001). Envisioning a trauma-informed service system: A vital paradigm shift. *New Directions for Mental Health Services*, *2001*(89), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.23320018903

Harrison, N., Burke, J., & Clarke, I. (2023). Risky teaching: Developing a trauma-informed pedagogy for higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *28*(1), 180–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1786046

Henry, A., & Thorsen, C. (2021). Teachers' self-disclosures and influences on students' motivation: A relational perspective. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *24*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1441261

Henshaw, L. A. (2022). Building Trauma-Informed Approaches in Higher Education. *Behavioral Sciences*, *12*(10), 368. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12100368

Hitchcock, L. I., Báez, J. C., Sage, M., Marquart, M., Lewis, K., & Smyth, N. J. (2021). Social Work Educators' Opportunities During COVID-19: A Roadmap for Trauma-Informed Teaching During Crisis. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *57*(sup1), 82–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.1935369

Holovatenko, T. (2024). TRAUMA-INFORMED SYLLABUS DESIGN FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS. *Continuing Professional Education: Theory and Practice*, *80*(3), 7–18. https://doi.org/10.28925/2412-0774.2024.3.1

Hooper, A., Hyder, M., Colclough, T., & Mann, D. (2023). Re-Envisioning Learning through a Trauma-Informed Lens: Empowering Students in their Personal and Academic Growth.

Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, *23*(3). https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v23i3.35234

How Does Google Determine Ranking Results—Google Search. (n.d.). How Search Works. Retrieved February 13, 2025, from https://www.google.com/intl/en_us/search/howsearchworks/how-search-works/ranking-results/

Howard, A., & Finley, S. (2024). Is Your Syllabus Trauma Informed?: An Application of Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education in Teacher Education. *Journal of Trauma Studies in Education*, *3*(2), 69–89. https://doi.org/10.70085/jtse.v3i2.6436

Inouye, C. Y., Bae, C. L., & Hayes, K. N. (2017). Using whiteboards to support college students' learning of complex physiological concepts. *Advances in Physiology Education*, *41*(3), 478–484. Scopus. https://doi.org/10.1152/ADVAN.00202.2016

Jones, C. S., & Nangah, Z. (2021). Higher Education Students: Barriers to Engagement; Psychological Alienation Theory, Trauma and Trust: A Systematic Review. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, *25*(2), 62–71. ERIC.

Jones, P. J., Bellet, B. W., & McNally, R. J. (2020). Helping or Harming? The Effect of Trigger Warnings on Individuals with Trauma Histories. *Clinical Psychological Science*, *8*(5), 905–917. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702620921341

Karatekin, C., & Hill, M. (2019). Expanding the Original Definition of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *12*(3), 289–306. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-018-0237-5

Kimble, M., Dahlstrom, H., Furman, H., Nasi, E., & Flack, W. (2024). Trauma-Specific Reactions to Sexual Assault Content in College Students: Considerations for Content Warnings. *Human Arenas*, *7*(2), 371–388. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-023-00379-x

Koslouski, J. B., Stark, K., & Chafouleas, S. M. (2023). Understanding and responding to the effects of trauma in the classroom: A primer for educators. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, *1*, 100004. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2023.100004

Kruiper, S. M. A., Leenknecht, M. J. M., & Slof, B. (2022). Using scaffolding strategies to improve formative assessment practice in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *47*(3), 458–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1927981

Lipnevich, A. A., Panadero, E., Gjicali, K., & Fraile, J. (2021). What's on the syllabus? An analysis of assessment criteria in first year courses across US and Spanish universities. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, *33*(4), 675–699. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-021-09357-9

Lynch, R. J., & Wojdak, K. (2023). An exploration of trauma-inclusive pedagogy and students' perceptions of academic success. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, *42*(2). https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/tia/article/id/2634/

May, C. L., & Wisco, B. E. (2016). Defining trauma: How level of exposure and proximity affect risk for posttraumatic stress disorder. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, *8*(2), 233–240. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000077

Merry, K. (2023). Adopting Universal Design for Learning – It's Just Good Teaching. *AHEAD*, *13*. https://ahead.ie/journal/Adopting-Universal-Design-for-Learning-Its-Just-Good-Teaching

Miller, K., Flint Stipp, K., & Bazemore-Bertrand, S. (2023). Student trauma, trauma-informed teaching, and self-care in preservice teachers' clinical experiences. *Teacher Development*, *27*(1), 55–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2022.2146180

Nolan, H. A., & Roberts, L. (2024). Trigger warnings as tools for learning—Theorising an evolving cultural concept. *Medical Education*, *58*(2), 185–195. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.15172

Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2006*(110), 21–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.215

Raby, K. L., Roisman, G. I., Labella, M. H., Martin, J., Fraley, R. C., & Simpson, J. A. (2019). The Legacy of Early Abuse and Neglect for Social and Academic Competence from Childhood to Adulthood. *Child Development*, *90*(5), 1684–1701. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13033

Rahimi, R., & Liston, D. D. (2023). Supporting the Social/Emotional Needs of College Students through Trauma Informed Practice (TIP). *College Teaching*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2023.2236754

Rahimpour, M. (2010). Current trends on syllabus design in foreign language instruction. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *2*(2), 1660–1664.

Rubio, F., Llopis-Albert, C., & Zeng, S. (2022). Best practices in syllabus design and course planning applied to mechanical engineering subjects. *Multidisciplinary Journal for Education, Social and Technological Sciences*, *9*(2), 123–137. https://doi.org/10.4995/muse.2022.18230

SAMHSA. (2014a). 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*. https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/covid/7/

SAMHSA. (2014b). *Tip 57: Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services*.

SAMHSA. (2023). Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach. *HHS Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005.* https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep23-06-05-005.pdf

SAMHSA. (2024, November 8). *Trauma and Violence—What Is Trauma and Its Effects?* https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence

Schendel, S. (2020). The Pandemic Syllabus. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3720131

Stanny, C., Gonzalez, M., & McGowan, B. (2015). Assessing the culture of teaching and learning through a syllabus review. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *40*(7), 898–913. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.956684

Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315297293

Thomas, M. S., Crosby, S., & Vanderhaar, J. (2019). Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools Across Two Decades: An Interdisciplinary Review of Research. *Review of Research in Education*, *43*(1), 422–452. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821123

Vlach, H. A., & Sandhofer, C. M. (2012). Distributing learning over time: The spacing effect in children's acquisition and generalization of science concepts. *Child Development*, *83*(4), 1137–1144. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01781.x

Wagner, J. L., Smith, K. J., Johnson, C., Hilaire, M. L., & Medina, M. S. (2023). Best Practices in Syllabus Design. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *87*(3), ajpe8995. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8995

Wasendorf, C., McCombs, A., & Boury, N. (2023). Exploring the Role of Student Seating Preference and Performance in a Large Introductory STEM Course: Where to Sit? *Journal of College Science Teaching*, *52*(4), 70–77.

Wells, T. (2023). Creating Trauma-Informed Higher Education Classrooms: Exploring Undergraduate and Graduate Student Perceptions. *Journal of Effective Teaching in Higher Education*, *6*(1), 97–111. https://doi.org/10.36021/jethe.v6i1.336

Wilhite, E. R., Mallard, T., & Fromme, K. (2018). A Longitudinal Event-Level Investigation of Alcohol Intoxication, Alcohol-Related Blackouts, Childhood Sexual Abuse, and Sexual Victimization among College Students. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors: Journal of the Society of Psychologists in Addictive Behaviors*, *32*(3), 289–300. https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000353

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *17*(2), 89–100.

Wuest, D. A., & Subramaniam, P. R. (2022). Preparing Trauma-Informed Future Educators. *Strategies*, *35*(5), 16–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2022.2100535

Yan, V. X., Sana, F., & Carvalho, P. F. (2024). No Simple Solutions to Complex Problems: Cognitive Science Principles Can Guide but Not Prescribe Educational Decisions. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *11*(1), 59–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322231218906

Appendix A

Trauma-Informed Syllabus Components

The following table includes descriptions, examples, and non-examples of the trauma-informed syllabus components as they were found in the syllabi.

Description	Examples	Non-Examples
Assignment Revision Options Outlines opportunities for assignment improvement	"If you are not satisfied with the outcome of an assignment and think you can do better on a second try, this is acceptable. On your own time, you can complete a second attempt at the investigation. I will be happy to work with you as much on your re-do as your original. We can discuss the merits of both samples and accept one that demonstrates your best work"	"There are three required exams, Exams 1, 2, and 3. If you miss any one of these exams, for any reason, you must take the comprehensive makeup final. Your grade on the Makeup Final will replace a single missing exam grade."
Assessment Structure Scaffolds assignments for students	"Research Paper (25 points) (2500 words/approx. 8-10 pages) will be a on a topic of your choosing, to be decided in consultation with me by early March, which will be substantiated by research and should also include analysis of specific works of art." And "NOTE on DRAFTS: If you turn in a first draft by April 19, I will return it to you with comments in time for you to revise before the final due date on May 3."	"Each student will be asked to prepare one (undergrad students) or two (graduate students) 15-minute presentations for the class on a relevant topic."
Attendance Information Includes an attendance policy that holds students to high standards by requiring attendance, but also providing flexibility; does not require excuses for absences	"You can miss up to FOUR (4) classes (for whatever reason, no questions asked) without it impacting your grade. We believe this is flexible and fair, and do not want to be in the business of managing which absences are excused and which are not" And "Most class meetings will be devoted to lectures on key course content, so regular attendance and active participation are important. Students may miss three classes and/or lab sessions – for any reason without penalty. Each additional absence will lower a student's grade by 5%. Six or more absences will likely result in a failing grade for the course. Because time in class is limited, promptness is important, and students may be counted absent if you are late to class. Students should contact the teaching assistants if they expect to be late or miss class, or as soon as reasonably possible in the case of a medical emergency."	"That said, do not attend in-person class sick. A symptom's a symptom, no matter how small! If you have any symptoms, you are automatically excused from in-person attendance – no notice required." And "Attendance will be periodically taken for this course. You are expected to attend all lectures to do well. If you miss a lecture for any reason, it is your responsibility to catch-up on missed material. In keeping with UVM policy, students are excused due to any religious, illness, personal, or family emergency reasons. Students who miss class due to legitimate reasons should notify me as soon as possible, as well as make arrangements with the dean's office."

Class Expectations Communicates explicit rules and expectations for class behavior	"Dress for the class is business casual. This means that you CANNOT wear any of the following: t-shirts, tank tops, flip flops, athletic shoes, ripped jeans, or shorts. Keep in mind that you will be in animal areas and thus you must wear close-toed shoes. The classroom can be rather chilly so we advise bringing a sweater or light jacket." And "Please refrain from engaging in the following activities while the class is in session: texting, tweeting, cell-phone conversations, checking voicemails, social networking, on-line surfing, website browsing, checking your e-mail, sending Instagrams, Facebooking, Pinterest posts, Tik-Toking, e-shopping, etc."	"I expect the environment during class meetings to be conducive to learning." And "Candidates must undergo a criminal history background check prior to clinical teaching and prior to employment as an educator."
Communication Protocol Communicates explicit expectations for correspondence	e-mail: [name]@gmu.edu (best contact method) And "Emails must be sent from your official UF email address and must be sent to [name]@warrington.ufl.edu. Do NOT send messages through Canvas or from a non-UF email account (Gmail, etc.), as I will not respond." And "For all grades-related communications, and help with homework and quiz work, please contact the TAs directly through a Canvas message. Please type "CAD Student:" before your subject in the subject line. For all other class communications please attend office hours. Overall class progress will only be discussed towards the end of the semester (when there's progress to discuss)."	Email: [name]@gmu.edu And Telephone: [office number]
Content Warnings Identifies course topics which may cause distress	"Throughout history, theatre and performance have grappled with complicated subject matter, including violence, sex, and psychological and emotional conflict. To this end, much of the world's theatre and performance is "adult-themed" and includes references to or representations of violence, intimate sexual activity, and adult language (including coarse terms, obscenities, and slurs). Performance is a forum in which the world's conflicts can be contemplated and discussed, and performance can often even be a tool for positive change. As such, the School of Drama believes the formal classroom environment and related academic activities, including productions, lectures, and other events, should be respectful spaces where sensitivity to personal backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs can be balanced with rigorous and thoughtful discourse. If you believe material and/or experiences in the course will compromise the success of your learning, please consider one or more of the following options: approach your instructor and share your concern: you may be able to find a suitable alternative arrangement or assignment. 2. contact a Livewell Student Advocate in Health and Wellness who will help determine how a past incident may be impacting your academic success and will work with your courses and professors: [email]. 3. contact UW Student Coaching and Care, which has trained to help students in distress and in need of multiple levels of support: [email]." And "Please note that some of the screenings/songs/assigned content contain violence, sex, and depictions of racism, homophobia, and sexism. Before committing to this course, look through the following readings and screenings to make sure you are comfortable and willing to engage with the course material with an open and critical eye/mind."	"In this overview of the field of health psychology, we will study lifestyle and behavioral factors in health such as stress, exercise, diet, smoking, alcohol, and sleep. We will also study the role of psychological variables in the prevention and treatment of medical illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and AIDS. We will examine acute health problems such as the pain and distress from surgery and invasive medical procedures."

Feedback Mechanisms Outlines opportunities for students to give feedback to instructor outside of the end of semester evaluations	"All students are encouraged to provide informal feedback of their experience during the course to me (via email) as the course instructor; I welcome hearing your thoughts on the course and my instruction. I especially welcome any feedback (positive and negative) about how the online course is going and how you feel about the content." And "In addition to that end of the semester evaluation, we will be working on ways to improve the class experience for all. That will be an on-going process. Therefore, I will also provide a mid-semester class evaluation tool in which you can answer the following questions: What is going well? What could be improved and how? What do you enjoy and want more of in class? What would you like to see less of in class?"	"Student assessment of instruction is an important part of efforts to improve teaching and learning. At the end of the semester, students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course using a standard set of university and college criteria. Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at: https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/."
Inclusive Scholarship Explicitly identifies diverse perspectives in assigned readings	"A disproportionate amount of cognitive neuroscience research was conducted by cisgender, heterosexual white men and later by white men and women. I have done my best to represent diverse authors, organizations, and topics, but I also acknowledge that there may be covert and overt bias in the material, and this limits our understanding of the concepts we will discuss. We will acknowledge this limitation throughout the course and do our best to bring in diverse thought." And "In order to highlight the many different Indigenous cultures will be engaging with this semester, I have included the tribal affiliation of Native scholars next to their names. Why You Can't Teach United States History without American Indians edited by Susan Sleeper- Smith, Juliana Barr, Jean M. O'Brien (White Earth Ojibwe), Nancy Shoemaker, and Scott Manning Stevens (Akwesasne Mohawk) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) Ned Blackhawk (Western Shoshone), The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023)"	"Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Dover Publications edition" And "Edward Said- selection from 'Orientalism'"
Institutional Policies Includes institutional policies	"Know that pregnant and parenting students are guaranteed equal educational opportunities by Title IX; know your rights, the protections provided, and how to advocate for yourself." And "I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Indigenous land. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Carrizo & Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Lipan Apache, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, Tigua Pueblo, and all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in Texas, here on Turtle Island."	"Additional course guidelines can be found on the Canvas Home Page." And "This Canvas page is a supplement to all UT syllabi and contains University policies and resources that you can refer to as you engage with and navigate your courses and the university."
Instructor Identity Includes instructor identification (including honorific, method of address, preferred pronouns)	"Please address me as Dr. [Last Name] or Professor [Last Name]" And "Beth [Last Name], PhD (she / her); referred to as Dr. [Last Name]" And	"Ryan [Last Name], Ph.D."

	Link to the YouTube video "how to pronounce Sharad" And "Your instructor, Greg, is here and happy to help."	
Late Work Policy Provides flexibility to students who cannot meet deadlines as scheduled	"Every assignment will have a 24-hour grace period. Please don't use this grace period as a defacto due date because you may forget to submit the assignment. If you do this, then you effectively defeat the purpose of the grace period." And "Late assignments: Each student is given two "late days" for homework assignments. Each late day can be used to turn in one homework assignment one day late. You may not use both late days on one assignment. Late days may not be used on labs. If you are out of late days, no late homework will be accepted."	"Late assignments will be reduced in grade by one point for every day the assignment is late." And "In order to be able to make up the assignment, you must notify me beforehand *and* have supporting documentation from a relevant authority that the situation or event occurred. *NOTE: There is nothing in this syllabus that requires me to accept late work; if you submit work late, then receiving credit depends on my allowing you to turn it in. If I'd accept late work, it will likely be at half-credit."*
Participation Guidelines Identifies protocols for class participation, incentivizes participation, and outlines the expectations for respectful academic discourse	"You may not always agree with what your classmates say, but be sure to extend them the same courtesy that you would like in return. In addition, be sure not to interrupt others while they are speaking." And "Active engagement means being attentive and fully participating in all aspects of classroom activity – including raising questions in class, participating in class discussion and small group problem-solving, sharing insights from your own social policy research project, and taking part in class polling and brief in-class writing."	*"Negligent or unsafe practices that lead to safety risks to you or other students will also lead to deductions of final individual or team grades by at least one half letter grade.* ***No exceptions.*** Violation of procedures intended to avoid unsafe practices will be treated as unsafe practices."
Question Forums Provides structured spaces for academic discussion or inquiry	"I will likely do not answer questions on the course's content or assignments through individual emails, unless they are personal in nature. Instead, you will have to ask your questions (anonymously, if you would like) on the Discussion boards on Blackboard, and I will answer there. In this way, every question will potentially benefit every student." And "Encouraged (optional) anonymous questions. After each class, students will have the opportunity to ask questions regarding the material and their journey that can be discussed at the beginning of next class (e.g., points of unclarity/confusion, what people are processing/feeling stuck with). These will not be graded and will be anonymous. The purpose of these questions is to support students' learning journey."	
Self-Care Statement Promotes the prioritization of self-care	"Take time to thrive. It is important that individually and collectively we take time to take care of our minds, bodies, and spirits. If you are not feeling well and are struggling to do the work for this class, let me know so that we can come up with alternatives. Do not push yourself beyond your limits; invest in self-care and self-preservation. Take time to do things that nurture your body, mind, and soul." And "Take care of yourself. Do your best to maintain a healthy lifestyle this semester by eating well, exercising, avoiding drugs and alcohol, getting enough sleep and taking some time to relax. This will help you achieve your goals and cope with stress. All of	"Counseling and Wellness Center: Visit https://counseling.ufl.edu/ or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services."

	us benefit from support during times of struggle. You are not alone. There are many helpful resources available on campus and an important part of the college experience is learning how to ask for help. Asking for support sooner rather than later is often helpful. If you or anyone you know experiences any academic stress, difficult life events, or feelings like anxiety or depression, we strongly encourage you to seek support."	
Setting a Warm Tone Includes politeness markers, notes of encouragement to the students, or other personal notes	"I am here to help you and I want each of you to do well in this course! I am always available to meet with you. It is always best for you to make an appointment with me during my office hours or, if this does not fit your schedule, we can arrange an alternate meeting time." And "I want to take this opportunity to welcome everyone to the class, and to encourage you to come talk to me whenever you need. Do not limit yourself to just course-relevant topics. I have a wide range of experiences as an undergraduate student, medical school student, graduate student, academic advisor, instructor, researcher, etc. I am eager to listen to you and help in any way I can! I want you to have the best possible experience in this class, and at the University of Florida. Let's talk!"	"If you elect to wear a hat or cap during the lectures or class discussions, your decision will be respected. However, you should also respect the instructor's decision not to award you daily participation points based upon that decision."
Student Support Services Includes campus and community assistance resources for students who are struggling	"Counseling and Psychological Services (CaPS) is here to help: call 412-268-2922 and visit their website at http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/." And "Any student who has difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or who lacks a safe and stable place to live and believes this may affect their performance in the course, is urged to contact the Dean of Students for support. Please notify the professor if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable me to provide any resources that I may possess." And "I realize that student parents/guardians and caregivers face distinctive challenges in succeeding academically, and I'm committed to supporting those of you who are parents to achieve our course's learning outcomes. If you encounter challenges in meeting course expectations – for example, fulfilling attendance and participation requirements or submitting assignments due to a child or person in your care's illness, essential appointment, school closure, etc. – please contact me as soon as possible (beforehand if feasible or as soon afterward you reasonably can if not). We'll develop a plan for you to make up missed work. If you need to bring your child or person you care for to class, for example because you're nursing or planned childcare became unavailable, I encourage you to do so if it's feasible for you to participate in class and support your child or person in your care. Our group work assignments are designed to provide flexible approaches to participating, and all groups should develop plans that enable all members to contribute equitably. If your group encounters challenges in doing so, please reach out to me so we can work together to devise a solution."	"A list of resources related to health, wellness, and academic success is available on Canvas. It includes links for tutoring, writing help, counseling, and stress management."

Appendix B

Trauma-Informed Components and their Subcomponents

The following is a list of components and the subcomponents that emerged. Because a component could contain multiple subcomponents proportion percentages may exceed 100%.

Component	Frequency[1]	Proportion[2]
Assessment Revision Options	**86**	
multiple attempts allowed on assignment	79	92%
revision allowed of work for another course	7	8%
Assessment Structure	**85**	
topic consultation/approval	49	58%
peer review of draft	28	33%
optional draft revisions available	14	16%
work with research consultant	1	1%
Attendance Information	**243**	
free pass with no note	152	63%
religious exemption	117	48%
other	40	16%
Class Expectations	**576**	
using technology	344	60%
arriving on time	222	39%
coming prepared	204	35%
leaving classroom	117	20%
zoom etiquette	78	14%
dressing appropriately	46	8%
eating in class	46	8%
other	81	14%
Communication Protocol	**493**	
preferred method of communication	415	84%
response timeframe	237	48%
subject line	102	21%
email vs office hours	61	12%
time sensitive queries	20	4%
other	41	8%
Content Warnings	**26**	
general warning	14	54%
suicide	2	8%
other	11	42%
Feedback Mechanisms	**26**	

mechanism for anonymous feedback	5	19%
conducts midpoint survey	3	4%
other	11	14%
Inclusive Scholarship	**5**	
general inclusivity statement	4	80%
tribal affiliation of Native Scholars	1	20%
Institutional Policies	**892**	
disability statement	855	96%
religious policy	376	42%
Evaluation of teaching	295	33%
title ix policy	292	33%
non-discrimination statement	209	23%
diversity and inclusion statement	181	20%
land acknowledgement statement	33	4%
Instructor Identity	**516**	
honorific	467	91%
preferred method of address	157	30%
pronouns	53	10%
nickname	25	5%
other	15	3%
Late Work Policy	**227**	
extensions considered	132	58%
free pass with no note	30	13%
religious exemption	85	37%
other	31	14%
Participation Guidelines	**618**	
grading policies	377	61%
engaging in respectful disagreements	135	22%
respecting one another	284	46%
respect diverse backgrounds/points of view	194	31%
raising hands	5	1%
other	24	4%
Question Forums	**78**	
discussion board etiquette	31	40%
anonymous questions	5	6%
Self-Care Statement[3]	**7**	
Set Warm Tone	**924**	
use politeness markers	891	96%
use I-statement	625	68%
includes personal note	55	6%

Student Support Services	**654**	
counseling	462	71%
technology center	298	46%
writing center	244	37%
tutoring	235	36%
library	186	28%
sexual harassment/assault	153	23%
healthcare center	141	22%
basic needs	119	18%
other	275	42%

Note: [1]: n=1,000 [2]: subcomponent percentages represent the proportion of syllabi containing that subcomponent among those syllabi represented in the component [3] no subcomponents emerged from Self-Care Statements component

Chapter 4

Conclusion to Dissertation

Recommendations Based on Evidence

This study aimed to create a snapshot of what the current landscape of trauma-informed syllabus component implementation looks like in higher education. With 1,000 syllabi across 86 institutions represented, this research documents which syllabus components are most frequently implemented and what differences exist across academic domains and levels. The findings reveal significant variation in adoption rates, ranging from 92% of syllabi setting a warm tone to only 0.5% incorporating inclusive scholarship. While some trauma-informed practices have become widespread, others remain uncommon in college classrooms.

With a dissertation title containing "Recommended Syllabus Components," readers may expect a prescriptive list for implementation. However, no new recommendations appear in this work—and this is intentional. The title acknowledges existing recommendations in the literature (research-informed, theory-informed, and practice-informed components). At this time, it is impossible to determine which of the 16 components are most appropriate to endorse solely based on these results. This descriptive exploratory study documents current practice, not effectiveness.

For a syllabus component to be recommended for future instructors, empirical research must identify the efficacy of each component in classroom use. Such research would need to measure student outcome (e.g., academic performance, attendance, retention, engagement,) in relation to the selected components. Only through experimental design can the field move from documentation to prescription. This study provides the foundational data for such future work.

Awareness of Trauma-Informed Syllabus Design

While definitive recommendations are not yet possible, many instructors are currently implementing trauma-informed pedagogical practices in their syllabi, whether consciously or not. This occurs for several reasons: some practices are not inherent in higher education culture or institutionally required; some overlap with evidence-based pedagogy and benefit all students; and some instructors intentionally select trauma-informed practices based on their understanding of trauma's impact on learning.

Regardless of the reason, trauma-informed syllabus components are appearing on syllabi across higher education. This makes intentionality critical. Instructors should conduct self-audits on their syllabi, examining whether they communicate what they intend, both explicitly and in tone. Since the syllabus serves as the first opportunity to communicate with students, the communication must be clear but also has room for compassion, personality, and humor.

Institutional Considerations

As awareness grows, institutions may be tempted to mandate specific trauma-informed syllabus components. However, administrators should proceed thoughtfully. Top-down mandates without adequate empirical evidence to support the efficacy of individual components may result in superficial compliance rather than meaningful implementation. Institutions can better support trauma-informed pedagogy through comprehensive professional development, providing resources for implementation of trauma-informed pedagogical practices, and recognition that trauma-informed approaches extend beyond the syllabus into the classroom as well as into institutional policies and campus culture.

Emerging Practices

This study revealed emerging practices not yet in the literature. For instance, while recommendations suggested instructors include their own personal pronouns, 77 syllabi (8%)

invited students to share their pronouns. This practice has not yet been formally discussed in trauma-informed pedagogical literature. Future research should investigate such adaptions to determine whether they align with trauma-informed principles and should be incorporated into the framework.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher believes trauma-informed pedagogy is a promising, evidence-based approach that can support student success while maintaining academic rigor when appropriately applied. However, it requires careful implementation with clear professional boundaries, institutional support, and ongoing research. Implementation demands training, time, energy, and effort, which are all resources that can burden instructors and represent real barriers to effective implementation.

A critical misconception may be that "more components mean better trauma-informed pedagogy," The researcher does not believe this. The 16 components are not a checklist to complete, nor do more practices necessarily mean more trauma-informed. Instead, instructors should focus only on components they genuinely intend to implement accurately and faithfully implement throughout the semester. Each component an instructor puts in the syllabus creates an implicit promise between the instructor and student. Including a statement sets an expectation; implementing a different practice in the classroom may erode trust, which in turn may cause relational harm. Quality and authenticity matter, and should be the motivation behind including trauma-informed components in a syllabus.

Trauma-informed pedagogy offers a lens through which instructors can examine and refine their practices to better serve all students. Therefore, there is no single "correct" trauma-informed syllabus, just as there is no single correct way to teach.

Conclusion

This dissertation documents the current state of trauma-informed syllabus component implementation, revealing both widespread adoption of some practices and significant gaps in the adoption of others. While this work cannot yet provide prescriptive recommendations, it establishes crucial baseline data for future effectiveness research. For those who wish to incorporate trauma-informed components into syllabi in the future, this can hopefully provide some guidance on how to intentionally implement select components.

Ultimately, trauma-informed pedagogy represents a shift in higher education toward a greater awareness of student wellbeing as integral to academic success. As our understanding of trauma's prevalence and impact continues to grow, so too can our pedagogical responses. This work contributes to that ongoing evolution by documenting where we are, so that future research can help determine where we should go.