

## On the Path to Resiliency: How Supportive Community Colleges Address Student Trauma

### Why it matters

*Empty seats in lecture sessions. No responses to a question or request. Few assignments turned in on time. No one coming to office hours. Do these sound like familiar frustrations to you?*

As community college leaders, faculty, and staff, you know that students' abilities to navigate college life can vary dramatically, and the experience can be challenging for many, particularly for those who have experienced trauma. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated those challenges, and its traumatic effects may reverberate for years. Trauma—and its associated feelings of fear, hopelessness, and helplessness—can profoundly affect students' well-being, functioning, and academic performance, contributing to a range of negative social-emotional, behavioral, physical, and academic outcomes.<sup>i,ii</sup> ***How can community college leaders, faculty, and staff support students to reduce the negative effects of trauma and build resiliency?***

Get on the path to resiliency by **realizing** the impact of trauma, **recognizing** the signs, and **responding** with trauma-sensitive approaches.<sup>1</sup>



### Realize the impact of trauma

Before labeling students as being disengaged, performing poorly, or having behavior issues, realize that these concerns may stem from trauma rather than disinterest or lack of trying. Students may be dealing with overwhelming life circumstances, and student behaviors that seem problematic or irritating could actually be coping mechanisms to ease their suffering. Without proper training, community college leaders, faculty, and staff may misinterpret a student's behavior and symptoms of traumatic stress. The first step is for college leaders, faculty, and staff to realize the impact of trauma so they can ask better questions about student behavior, provide hopeful and healing learning environments, and be aware of supports available for students, to avoid punitive or harsh consequences that will only worsen trauma's effects.<sup>iii</sup>

### Practices to realize the impact of trauma

- **Ask a better question.** Seeing the world through a trauma-sensitive lens means stepping back to ask, “What happened to you?” rather than “What is wrong with you?” before labeling students as disengaged, underperforming, or unruly.
- **Be hopeful about healing.** Trauma can be a serious barrier to learning and thriving in a community college environment, in part because negative behaviors are a normal reaction to traumatic experiences. Instead of having a punitive response, realize that the right supports can help students learn better ways to think, react, and cope with their experiences. Helping students impacted by trauma requires helping them to change their thoughts and behaviors to those that are more adaptive in college and community environments.
- **Know what supports are available.** Your community college may offer opportunities to seek help at various levels, from tutoring and academic support to clinical behavioral and emotional support. Be aware of and able to direct students to the assistance available in and outside your community.

<sup>1</sup> The information presented in this fact sheet is based on selected literature, and does not represent a comprehensive review of all the research on this topic.



## Recognize the signs of trauma

Community college leaders, faculty, and staff can learn to recognize trauma symptoms<sup>iv</sup> to understand and respond appropriately to students' needs. Below is a list of symptoms you might observe in students who have experienced trauma, but remember that everyone experiences trauma differently. Some students may not exhibit all or any of these symptoms, and these symptoms may not always indicate trauma. By developing authentic and trusting relationships with students, you can gain insight and empathy, support their emotional and physical safety, and accompany them on the path to resiliency.

### Common signs of trauma<sup>iv,v</sup>

#### Physical

- Headaches, stomachaches, and other somatic complaints
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Excessive fatigue

#### Social and emotional

- Heightened emotions or alarm response
- Emotional numbness or depression
- Aggression or agitation
- Isolation, withdrawal, and detachment
- Risky or unhealthy relationships

#### Cognitive

- Inability to control impulses or self-regulate
- Difficulty listening and concentrating
- Disassociation—disconnecting from surroundings or “spacing out”
- Memory loss

#### Language and communication

- Difficulty expressing thoughts and feelings
- Difficulty understanding and expressing nonverbal cues
- Use of hurtful language and profanity

#### Learning

- Absenteeism and disengagement
- Decrease in academic performance
- Not completing assignments
- Heightened anxiety about deadlines, exams, group work, or public speaking



## Respond by applying trauma-sensitive approaches

College leaders, faculty, and staff can help students get on the path to resiliency by creating safe and supportive learning environments so students can focus on achieving their educational goals. Below are practices and policies that, if built with equity and a trauma-sensitive lens at the core, can support resilience in all students, particularly those experiencing traumatic stress.



### Practices and policies to support student resilience<sup>iii,v</sup>

- Campus policies and procedures are responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of students, and staff recognize and address historic trauma experienced by marginalized communities. For example, colleges provide mentoring and counseling programs that are individualized to students' needs and multigenerational traumas.
- Campus resources (e.g., orientation events, websites, flyers, signage) clearly identify campus facilities, student support services, and campus security and safety features.
- Leaders, faculty, and staff integrate trauma-sensitive practices and programs into daily routines by changing language, behaviors, and policies. For example, rather than punishing students when behavior incidents occur, faculty and staff connect with and seek to understand their students to support resiliency.
- Leaders, faculty, and staff build authentic and trusting relationships with students, are aware of students' college and career goals, and engage in students' interests and context beyond their academic pursuits.
- Leaders, faculty, and staff create a physically and psychologically safe environment, respecting students' needs for personal boundaries.
- Leaders, faculty, and staff work together to minimize actions that may cause students to re-experience trauma or activate painful memories, such as inconsistent or unpredictable schedules, unclear expectations, and alarming reactions/loud noises.



## Learn more about resilience-building and trauma-informed approaches

The [Virginia Community College System Student Success Center](#) offers trauma-informed certification courses, designed specifically for the community college context. These courses are free for all VCCS faculty and staff.

- **Course 1**  
“*Trauma Informed Campus and Classroom*,” is a synchronous virtual 6-hour certification course that will help you identify and respond to trauma using evidence-based strategies.
- **Course 2**  
“*Creating a Trauma Supportive Campus and Classroom*,” is a synchronous virtual 6-hour certification course that provides dozens of resilience-based strategies used by renowned trauma-informed practitioners, which can transform your classroom, office, department, or family.

The following resources are available to all and were developed for K-12 settings and may apply to community college and other postsecondary education environments.

- [Common Trauma Symptoms in Students and Helpful Strategies for Educators](#) *handout* from REL Appalachia.
- [Addressing Trauma in Educational Settings](#) *webinar series* from REL Appalachia.
- [Trauma-Informed trainings](#) from the Community Resilience Initiative.
- [Research-Based, Trauma-Responsive Education Practices](#) *event materials* from REL Southwest.
- [Trauma Support for Schools](#) *resources* curated by REL Appalachia’s Cross-State Collaborative to Support Schools in the Opioid Crisis.
- [Classroom Strategies to Support Students Experiencing Trauma](#) *blog post* from REL Appalachia.

<sup>i</sup> Ganzel, B. L., & Morris, P. A. (2011). Allostasis and the developing human brain: Explicit consideration of implicit models. *Development and Psychopathology*, 23(4), 955-974.

<sup>ii</sup> Perfect, M. M., Turley, M. R., Carlson, J. S., Yohanna, J., & Saint Gilles, M. P. (2016). School-related outcomes of traumatic event exposure and traumatic stress symptoms in students: A systematic review of research from 1990 to 2015. *School Mental Health*, 8(1), 7-43.

<sup>iii</sup> This approach is adapted from SAMHSA’s *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* (HHS Publication No. [SMA] 14-4884), by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014 (<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>).

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*, by National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008 (<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/child-trauma-toolkit-educators>).

<sup>v</sup> Adapted from *Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide*, by S. Davidson, 2017, Education Northwest (<https://educationnorthwest.org/resources/trauma-informed-practices-postsecondary-education-guide>).

To access this Fact Sheet and the linked resources digitally, follow this QR code.



Learn more about REL Appalachia and find additional resources: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/region/appalachia>