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More Than Mental Health: Trauma-Informed Care as a Framework for Equity and Institutional Change in Higher Education

CORRESPONDENCE

AUTHORS & AFFILIATIONS

Quintenilla Merriweather ¶*

¶ American University, Washington, United States

ABSTRACT

Trauma-informed care (TIC) has gained increasing attention within higher education as colleges and universities confront rising rates of student mental health concerns, social isolation, economic precarity, and the lingering impacts of systemic inequities. Yet trauma-informed initiatives are often narrowly conceptualized as extensions of counseling services or wellness programming, limiting their transformative potential. This article argues that trauma-informed care should be understood not merely as a mental health intervention but as a comprehensive framework for advancing institutional equity and organizational change. Drawing upon trauma theory, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, Healing Justice, and higher education scholarship on belonging and validation, this conceptual article examines how trauma operates not only at the individual level but also through institutional structures, policies, and cultural norms. The article explores the ways higher education institutions may inadvertently reproduce trauma through exclusionary practices, punitive policies, and inequitable systems of power. It further argues that trauma-informed care offers a pathway toward institutional transformation by centering on safety, trust, empowerment, relational accountability, and cultural responsiveness. Finally, recommendations are offered for faculty, student affairs practitioners, and institutional leaders seeking to move beyond trauma awareness toward systemic change. Reframing trauma-informed care as an equity-centered organizational framework positions higher education to better address the conditions that impede student thriving while creating more humane, just, and healing educational environments.

Index Terms: trauma-informed care • higher education • equity • institutional change • student success • healing justice • critical race theory • belonging • organizational transformation

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AUTHOR CONTACT QR LEDGER

Quintenilla Merriweather¶*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

More Than Mental Health: Trauma-Informed Care as a Framework for Equity and Institutional Change in Higher Education

Quintenilla Merriweather[¶*]

AFFILIATIONS

¶ American University, Washington, United States

Abstract

Trauma-informed care (TIC) has gained increasing attention within higher education as colleges and universities confront rising rates of student mental health concerns, social isolation, economic precarity, and the lingering impacts of systemic inequities. Yet trauma-informed initiatives are often narrowly conceptualized as extensions of counseling services or wellness programming, limiting their transformative potential. This article argues that trauma-informed care should be understood not merely as a mental health intervention but as a comprehensive framework for advancing institutional equity and organizational change. Drawing upon trauma theory, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, Healing Justice, and higher education scholarship on belonging and validation, this conceptual article examines how trauma operates not only at the individual level but also through institutional structures, policies, and cultural norms. The article explores the ways higher education institutions may inadvertently reproduce trauma through exclusionary practices, punitive policies, and inequitable systems of power. It further argues that trauma-informed care offers a pathway toward institutional transformation by centering on safety, trust, empowerment, relational accountability, and cultural responsiveness. Finally, recommendations are offered for faculty, student affairs practitioners, and institutional leaders seeking to move beyond trauma awareness toward systemic change. Reframing trauma-informed care as an equity-centered organizational framework positions higher education to better address the conditions that impede student thriving while creating more humane, just, and healing educational environments.

Keywords: *trauma-informed care, higher education, equity, institutional change, student success, healing justice, critical race theory, belonging, organizational transformation*

Correspondence: Quintenilla Merriweather

1 Introduction: Reframing Trauma as an Institutional Responsibility

Higher education institutions are increasingly confronted with the realities of trauma as a defining feature of contemporary student experience. Rising rates of anxiety, depression, housing insecurity, food insecurity, racialized violence, discrimination, and social isolation have prompted colleges and universities to expand counseling services, wellness initiatives, and crisis intervention programs. National studies consistently demonstrate that students are experiencing unprecedented levels of psychological distress, with mental health concerns emerging as significant barriers to academic success, persistence, and overall well-being (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2023; Healthy Minds Network, 2024). These trends have been further exacerbated by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, widening socioeconomic inequities, and increasing political and social polarization (Hurtado, 2012; Stewart, 2018; Kezar, 2018).

While these developments have heightened institutional awareness of student well-being, many responses remain grounded in an individualized understanding of trauma. Students are often referred to counseling services, encouraged to build resilience, or directed toward self-care interventions. Although such approaches provide important support, scholars have increasingly critiqued individualized interventions for failing to address the structural and institutional conditions that contribute to distress (Carello & Butler, 2015; Ginwright, 2018; Love, 2019; Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020). Consequently, higher education risks treating trauma as a personal deficit requiring intervention rather than a systemic phenomenon requiring organizational transformation.

This tendency reflects a broader pattern within higher education. Historically, institutions have approached student success through frameworks emphasizing adaptation, persistence, and personal responsibility (Tinto, 1993; Kuh, 2005). Students who struggle academically or emotionally are frequently encouraged to develop coping strategies while institutions remain largely unexamined as potential contributors to student distress. Such approaches overlook the ways organizational structures, policies, and campus cultures reinforce inequities and reproduce harm, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities (Bensimon, 2007; Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Patton, 2016).

Trauma does not emerge in a social vacuum. Experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, poverty, displacement, and other forms of systemic oppression shape how individuals encounter

educational environments long before they arrive on campus (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Ginwright, 2018; Love, 2019). For many students, higher education represents not only an opportunity for advancement but also a site where existing inequities are reproduced through exclusionary curricula, inequitable policies, hostile campus climates, and institutional practices that privilege dominant identities and ways of knowing (Harper, 2012; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Patton, 2016). Under such conditions, trauma cannot be understood solely as an individual psychological experience; it must also be understood as a structural and institutional phenomenon.

Trauma-informed care (TIC) offers a framework through which higher education can begin to address these realities. Originating within health and human services, trauma-informed care emphasizes the importance of recognizing trauma's prevalence and impact while creating environments that foster safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness (SAMHSA, 2014). Although increasingly adopted within educational contexts, trauma-informed care is often implemented through discrete initiatives such as faculty training workshops, wellness campaigns, or student support programs (Carello & Butler, 2015; Costa, 2020). These efforts, while valuable, frequently fail to challenge the organizational structures that produce and sustain harm.

This article argues that trauma-informed care should be understood not merely as a mental health strategy but as a framework for institutional equity and organizational transformation. When examined through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, Healing Justice, Validation Theory, and scholarship on belonging and equity-minded leadership, trauma-informed care emerges as a mechanism for interrogating power, addressing systemic inequities, and reimagining institutional culture (Rendón, 1994; Bensimon, 2007; Strayhorn, 2018; Kezar, 2018; Stewart, 2018). Rather than asking how students can better adapt to existing systems, trauma-informed approaches invite institutions to consider how systems themselves might change to better support human flourishing.

By reframing trauma-informed care as a systems-level equity framework, higher education institutions can move beyond reactive models of student support toward proactive strategies that foster justice, belonging, validation, and collective well-being. Such a shift requires not only new practices but also a fundamental reconsideration of institutional values, assumptions, governance structures, and definitions of educational excellence.

2 Understanding Trauma Beyond the Individual

Trauma has traditionally been conceptualized as an individual's psychological response to a deeply distressing or threatening event. Early trauma scholarship focused primarily on acute experiences such as abuse, violence, natural disasters, and military conflict. Contemporary scholarship, however, has expanded this understanding to recognize trauma as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing chronic, collective, historical, intergenerational, and structural dimensions (Felitti et al., 1998; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; van der Kolk, 2014; Ginwright, 2018). This shift is particularly important within higher education, where students' experiences are shaped not only by individual life events but also by broader social, economic, and institutional forces.

Research demonstrates that trauma can significantly affect neurological development, emotional regulation, memory formation, attention, executive functioning, and stress-response systems (Felitti, 1998; Anda, 2006; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Shonkoff, 2012; van der Kolk, 2014). Such impacts have profound implications for educational engagement and performance. Students navigating traumatic experiences may struggle with concentration, attendance, motivation, self-efficacy, interpersonal relationships, and help-seeking behaviors, all of which influence persistence and academic success (Carello & Butler, 2015; Davidson, 2017; Boyraz, 2016).

The landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study established a strong relationship between exposure to adversity and long-term educational, physical, and psychological outcomes (Felitti, 1998). Subsequent research has documented the widespread prevalence of trauma among college students and its association with diminished academic achievement, reduced persistence, increased mental health concerns, and lower levels of institutional engagement (Carello & Butler, 2015; Davidson, 2017; Boyraz, 2016).

Yet individual frameworks alone are insufficient for understanding trauma in higher education. Scholars increasingly argue that trauma is not solely psychological but also social, political, and structural (Ginwright, 2018; Menakem, 2017; Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020). Conventional trauma-informed approaches often emphasize pathology and recovery while neglecting the systemic conditions that produce harm. Healing Justice scholars similarly contend that trauma must be understood within systems of oppression that shape lived experiences across generations and communities (Ginwright, 2018, 2022). This expanded understanding requires institutions to recognize that trauma is often embedded within social structures themselves. Educational inequities, discriminatory policies, economic marginalization, and systemic violence are not merely contextual factors; they are mechanisms through which trauma is produced and sustained.

3 Trauma, Belonging, and Student Success

A substantial body of higher education literature identifies belonging as one of the strongest predictors of student success. Belonging refers to the perception that one is accepted, valued, respected, and connected within a community (Strayhorn, 2018). Across diverse student populations, belonging has consistently been associated with persistence, engagement, achievement, retention, and well-being (Tinto, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hausmann, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Strayhorn, 2018).

The relationship between trauma and belonging is particularly significant. Trauma frequently disrupts individuals' sense of safety, trust, predictability, and connection to others. Students who have experienced trauma may enter educational environments expecting rejection, exclusion, or harm. When institutions fail to foster inclusive and affirming climates, these expectations may be reinforced, further exacerbating isolation and disengagement (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018).

Belonging is not experienced equally across student populations. Research demonstrates that students from historically marginalized communities often encounter campus environments characterized by racial microaggressions, identity-based discrimination, curricular exclusion, and systemic barriers to participation (Harper, 2012; Museus, 2014; Patton, 2016; Stewart, 2018). Black students, Indigenous students, LGBTQIA+ students, first-generation students, undocumented students, and students with disabilities frequently navigate institutions that were not designed with their experiences in mind.

Museus' (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments framework provides an important lens for understanding these dynamics. Rather than attributing disparities to student deficits, Museus emphasizes the role of institutional environments in shaping educational outcomes. Educational settings that affirm identity, facilitate meaningful relationships, and foster cultural responsiveness are more likely to support student belonging and success (Museus, 2014; Harper, 2012;

Hurtado, 2012). This perspective aligns closely with trauma-informed principles by locating responsibility for change within institutional systems rather than within individual students.

4 Validation theory and Trauma-Informed Educational practice

Rendón's (1994) Validation Theory offers another critical framework for understanding trauma-informed educational environments. Validation occurs when institutional agents intentionally affirm students' experiences, capacities, and potential for success. Such affirmation is particularly important for students who have historically been marginalized within educational systems.

Research demonstrates that validation contributes to increased academic confidence, engagement, persistence, and achievement among historically underserved student populations (Rendón, 1994; Nora, 1996; Barnett, 2011). Validation theory challenges deficit-oriented perspectives by recognizing students as capable individuals whose strengths can be cultivated through supportive relationships and institutional affirmation.

Trauma-informed care similarly emphasizes empowerment, voice, choice, collaboration, and relational trust (SAMHSA, 2014). Both frameworks reject approaches that position students as problems to be fixed and instead emphasize the importance of creating environments where students feel recognized, respected, and supported. Together, Validation Theory and trauma-informed care provide a foundation for understanding educational success as a relational and institutional process rather than solely an individual endeavor.

5 Critical Perspectives on Trauma and Institutional Equity

Understanding trauma within higher education requires attention to power, oppression, and systemic inequity. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a valuable framework for examining how institutional structures contribute to the production and maintenance of trauma.

CRT scholars argue that racism is not aberrational but deeply embedded within social institutions and reproduced through policies, practices, and cultural norms that privilege dominant groups while marginalizing others (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). From this perspective, trauma experienced by racially marginalized students cannot be separated from the institutional structures that reproduce inequity. Experiences of racial profiling, stereotype threat, curricular exclusion, and hostile campus climates represent manifestations of broader systems of power rather than isolated incidents (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Harper, 2012; Patton, 2016).

Intersectionality further expands this analysis by recognizing that oppression is experienced through the interaction of multiple identities and social locations (Crenshaw, 1989). Students simultaneously navigate systems shaped by race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, and other dimensions of identity. Trauma-informed approaches that fail to account for these intersections risk reproducing inequities by overlooking the complex ways individuals experience institutional harm.

Healing Justice frameworks extend these conversations by emphasizing collective healing, community care, resistance, and liberation (Ginwright, 2018, 2022). Rather than focusing exclusively on reducing harm, Healing Justice seeks to create conditions under which individuals and communities can thrive. Within higher education, this orientation encourages institutions not only to mitigate trauma but also to cultivate environments characterized by dignity, belonging, joy, and collective well-being.

Taken together, CRT, intersectionality, Validation Theory, belonging scholarship, and Healing Justice challenge higher education institutions to move beyond individualized understandings of trauma and toward a more expansive recognition of institutional responsibility. Trauma-informed care, when grounded in equity and justice, becomes not merely a strategy for supporting students but a framework for transforming the systems that shape their experiences.

6 Trauma-Informed Teaching and learning

The classroom represents one of the most significant sites of interaction between students and institutions. Traditional pedagogical approaches often prioritize standardization, authority, and compliance, which may unintentionally reproduce experiences of powerlessness for students navigating trauma.

Trauma-informed pedagogy emphasizes relational teaching practices that foster trust, transparency, and engagement (Carello & Butler, 2015). Faculty can communicate expectations clearly while also providing flexibility when students encounter significant barriers. Course design can incorporate multiple pathways for participation and assessment, allowing students to demonstrate learning in ways that acknowledge diverse experiences and strengths.

Importantly, trauma-informed teaching does not require reducing academic rigor. Rather, it recognizes that rigor and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Students are most likely to engage deeply in learning when they feel respected, supported, and valued.

7 Trauma-Informed Advising and Student Support

Advising and student support services play a critical role in shaping student experiences. Traditional models often emphasize compliance with institutional requirements rather than holistic student development. Trauma-informed advising shifts this focus on relationship-building, empowerment, and collaborative problem-solving.

Advisors trained in trauma-informed approaches recognize the impact of adversity on decision-making, help-seeking behaviors, and academic performance. Rather than viewing students through a deficit lens, they work alongside students to identify strengths, navigate barriers, and access resources. Such approaches are particularly important for students from historically marginalized communities who may have experienced institutional distrust or exclusion.

Student support services must also examine administrative procedures that may inadvertently retraumatize students. Excessive documentation requirements, fragmented referral systems, and repeated disclosures of personal experiences can create unnecessary burdens. Trauma-informed systems seek to minimize these barriers while maintaining accountability and access.

8 Trauma-Informed Leadership and Governance

Leadership practices significantly influence institutional culture. Trauma-informed leadership prioritizes transparency, accountability, and relational trust. Leaders communicate openly about challenges, engage stakeholders in decision-making processes, and demonstrate responsiveness to community concerns.

Shared governance is particularly important within trauma-informed institutions. Students, faculty, and staff should not merely be recipients of institutional decisions but active participants in shaping policies and practices. This approach aligns with trauma-informed principles emphasizing empowerment, voice, and collaboration.

Institutions committed to trauma-informed transformation must also consider representation within leadership structures. Historically

marginalized communities should have meaningful opportunities to influence institutional priorities and resource allocation. Equity cannot be achieved when decision-making remains concentrated among those least affected by institutional harm.

9 Barriers and Risks in Implementing Trauma-Informed care

Despite growing interest in trauma-informed approaches, implementation efforts often encounter significant challenges. One of the most common barriers is the tendency to treat trauma-informed care as a checklist rather than a transformational framework. Institutions may offer professional development workshops or create wellness initiatives while leaving underlying systems unchanged.

This superficial adoption creates a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. Students may encounter messaging emphasizing care and belonging while simultaneously navigating policies that prioritize surveillance, punishment, or exclusion. Such inconsistencies can undermine trust and diminish the credibility of trauma-informed efforts.

Another challenge involves the unequal distribution of emotional labor. Faculty and staff from marginalized communities frequently bear disproportionate responsibility for supporting students, addressing equity concerns, and advancing institutional change. Without adequate recognition, compensation, and support, trauma-informed initiatives risk reproducing the very inequities they seek to address.

The influence of neoliberalism within higher education presents an additional obstacle. Contemporary institutions often operate within environments emphasizing efficiency, productivity, competition, and market-based outcomes (Giroux, 2014; Brown, 2015). These priorities can conflict with trauma-informed values that emphasize relationship-building, reflection, and collective well-being. As a result, institutions may struggle to sustain trauma-informed commitments while remaining beholden to performance metrics and resource constraints.

Perhaps the greatest risk, however, is the depoliticization of trauma. When trauma is framed exclusively as a mental health issue, institutions may focus on resilience training, mindfulness programs, or individual coping strategies while ignoring the systemic conditions of producing distress. Such approaches may provide temporary relief but fail to address underlying inequities.

Trauma-informed care cannot be separated from questions of power, justice, and institutional accountability. Without explicit attention to these issues, trauma-informed initiatives risk becoming mechanisms of adaptation rather than transformation.

10 Discussion: from Individual Resilience to Institutional Accountability

The dominant discourse surrounding student success has historically emphasized resilience, grit, persistence, and personal responsibility (Tinto, 1993; Kuh, 2005). While these concepts can contribute meaningfully to student development, they often obscure the structural conditions shaping educational experiences. Students are frequently encouraged to adapt to institutions rather than institutions adapting to students. Such approaches risk framing educational inequities as individual shortcomings rather than institutional failures.

A trauma-informed equity framework challenges this logic by shifting attention away from individual adaptation and toward institutional accountability (Bensimon, 2007; Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2018; Kezar, 2018). Rather than asking how students can become more resilient, institutions must examine why resilience is necessary in the first place. What policies, practices, and cultural norms contribute to student distress? Whose experiences are centered within institutional decision-making? Whose voices remain marginalized?

These questions move trauma-informed care beyond student support services and into the realm of organizational transformation. They require higher education institutions to confront uncomfortable realities regarding power, privilege, exclusion, and historical inequity. Such work is consistent with equity-minded approaches that call upon institutions to examine how organizational structures produce disparate outcomes across student populations (Bensimon, 2007; Stewart, 2018; O'Meara, 2020).

From this perspective, trauma-informed care becomes inseparable from broader commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice. Institutions seeking to become trauma-informed must also examine governance structures, leadership practices, resource allocation processes, assessment systems, and organizational cultures (Kezar, 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Patton, 2016). Without such examination, trauma-informed initiatives risk becoming symbolic gestures that address symptoms while leaving underlying causes untouched.

This discussion further suggests that trauma-informed care offers a framework for redefining educational excellence. Traditional indicators of success—including enrollment, retention, graduation rates, and institutional rankings—remain important but insufficient. Trauma-informed institutions recognize that educational quality must also be evaluated through experiences of belonging, validation, dignity, safety, and well-being (Rendón, 1994; Strayhorn, 2018; Museus, 2014). Such a perspective broadens institutional accountability beyond performance metrics to include the quality of human experiences occurring within educational environments.

Ultimately, trauma-informed care represents a shift from transactional models of education toward relational models of community. This transformation requires sustained leadership commitment, adequate resources, cultural humility, and a willingness to challenge long-standing assumptions regarding power and success (Senge, 1990; Kotter, 1996; Kezar, 2018). While the work is complex, the potential benefits are substantial: institutions that not only educate students but also cultivate environments where individuals can heal, thrive, and contribute meaningfully to collective flourishing.

Trauma-informed care therefore should not be understood as an ancillary initiative or specialized intervention. Rather, it represents a comprehensive framework for institutional responsibility, equity-minded leadership, and organizational transformation. In an era marked by persistent inequities and increasing student distress, higher education institutions must move beyond reactive support models and embrace more expansive visions of care, justice, and collective well-being.

11 Conclusion: a Call to Courage and Institutional Transformation

Higher education stands at a pivotal moment. Rising levels of student distress, persistent inequities, and growing demands for institutional accountability have exposed the limitations of traditional approaches to student support. Incremental reforms and isolated interventions are no longer sufficient. What is required is a fundamental reimagining of how institutions understand trauma, equity, and responsibility.

This article has argued that trauma-informed care should be understood not as a mental health intervention alone but as a framework for institutional transformation. Grounded in principles of safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed care offers higher education a pathway toward more equitable and humane practices. When informed by Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, Healing Justice, and organizational change theory,

trauma-informed care becomes a mechanism for examining power, disrupting harm, and fostering collective well-being.

The question facing higher education is not whether trauma exists within our institutions. The evidence is clear that it does. The more pressing question is whether institutions are willing to confront their own role in producing and perpetuating harm. Trauma-informed care invites colleges and universities to move beyond symbolic commitments and toward meaningful transformation.

Ultimately, the goal is not merely to help students survive higher education. The goal is to create institutions where all members of the campus community have the opportunity to thrive. Such a vision requires courage, accountability, and a steadfast commitment to equity. It requires institutions to recognize that care is not ancillary to education—it is fundamental to it. When practiced with intention and justice, trauma-informed care becomes more than a strategy. It becomes a blueprint for a more equitable future in higher education.

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