

Trauma-informed Workshops Aiding Student Success

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The journey of a young person from high school to college is one of uncertainty, independence, and exploration. Student orientation is a vital part of acclimating to college. In this essay, I will argue that communication centers should employ trauma-informed pedagogy in incoming student orientation efforts. I will start by elaborating on student struggles, touch on the importance of trauma-informed pedagogy, then introduce concepts for how the communication center can use trauma-informed pedagogy to give students the tools for success. Trauma, defined by the Center for Disease Control, is a “set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that can have lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional well-being” (CDC, 2021). Trauma-informed pedagogy is “pedagogical practice that keeps trauma, its prevalence, and how it affects an individual, in mind” (UCI). In this context, trauma-informed pedagogy ensures that communication centers are knowledgeable and understanding of trauma because it’s something new students are often struggling with when entering college.

The newest generation of college students is facing a widespread mental health crisis. Incoming students have on average higher levels of anxiety and depression than ever before, with the rate of anxiety increasing to 8.0% in males and 9.1% in females. Depression percentages have climbed to 3.2% in males and 4.4% in females. In addition,

the added stress of COVID-19 has made the transition to college more intimidating for many students (Kella, 2021). With many students coming into university traumatized by dealing with a pandemic and mental illnesses, support is desperately needed. The communication center can help provide support.

Communication centers have been proven to increase student retention (Yook, 2012), grades, and attendance (Stewart, Broeckelman-Post, & Rossheim, 2021). Partnering with student orientation is beneficial for three reasons: first, it introduces students to the communication center early on, so it feels like a normal, approachable part of the college experience instead of something they’ve never heard of before. Second, it helps students become familiar with consultants and see them as helpful and non-intimidating. Third, it equips students early on with essential communication skills needed for college. Students who are confident in their communication abilities will most likely be able to talk to their professors and peers more easily. The hope is that by coming to the communication center, students will feel more comfortable asking questions and exploring their new environment, thereby reducing anxiety and increasing student engagement in the university setting.

Students do not have intrinsic motivation to go to places like the communication center (Stewart, Broeckelman-Post, & Rossheim, 2021). Instead, we should reframe the focus

on asking: how should the communication center come to them? There are several possibilities. Communication center employees could show up on move-in day with communication center merchandise to hand out, such as t-shirts and water bottles, then help students move their things into their dorms. Communication center employees could also set up booths around campus with free merchandise. Students could come to the booths to get free merchandise and information about the communication center. Perhaps the communication center could also text students in classes with grade-heavy presentations coming up. The consultant could introduce themselves, give background on who they are, then tell them how the communication center could help. The important thing in these interactions is for students not only to become aware of the communication center but also to feel connected to it.

Social media is also an avenue that could be beneficial for communication centers to connect with students (Morris, Lehman, & Dvorak, 2019). For instance, employees of the center can make TikToks highlighting quick communication tips, then share them with other university students. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter would provide important platforms for the communication center to reach different student groups. These platforms could be used to inform students of the center alongside providing useful information relating to communication. This could be both done in serious posts and meme posts to encourage student interactivity. Students can also use these platforms to communicate with consultants about any questions they have. The center's social media account can also profile

the employees working at the center, showing students that the center is full of approachable peers, making it less intimidating. The center should have multiple employees in charge of the account in order to diversify consultants' skill sets with outreach while also avoiding burnout.

Another concept is for communication center employees to enter orientation and other first-year classrooms and speak with new students face-to-face. At my university, incoming students must take an orientation class to help them adjust to college life. Communication center employees could possibly be guest speakers in this class. They could teach the class about communication tips they may find helpful when adjusting to university life. For example, they could go over how to communicate with professors, how to form study groups, and perhaps even how to make friends in this new environment. With many students suffering from loneliness, these tips will hopefully connect with them. The employees could then stay for a freeform Q&A with students about communication skills, then leave the students with the communication center's contact information.

The communication center can use trauma-informed pedagogy to help give students the tools they need to succeed. There are multiple ways to motivate students to come to the communication center, including but not limited to: social media campaigns done by the center, pop-up communication center booths around campus, having employees of the center visit students on move-in day, and partnering with student orientation. The hope is that events like these will encourage students to come to the communication center, thereby increasing student success while

simultaneously decreasing feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

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