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## Responding to Trauma in our Educational Practice

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# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP ABSTRACTS

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COVID-19 thrust most higher education institutions into 100% online learning during the Spring of 2020 with a ready or not approach. Despite the many obstacles faculty and students faced, the end result was a valiant effort that afforded students the opportunity to continue to access education in the face of many uncertainties. With the initial rush to move coursework online behind them, academic administrators turned toward planning for the future. What should learning look like long term while working through COVID-19? How do we adequately support full and part-time faculty and staff? Should learning be kept online indefinitely? If there is a return to campus in the fall, what will it look like?

In addition to grappling with the

## Responding to Trauma in our Educational Practice

serious issues outlined above, it is important for academic administrators to keep in mind that we are working with in an emotionally traumatized space. “Trauma confronts schools with a serious dilemma: how to balance their primary mission of education with the reality that many students need help in dealing with traumatic stress to attend regularly and engage in the learning process.” — Ko et al. (2008, p. 398). COVID-19 complicates this premise further, since it is not only the students who are experiencing trauma, but indeed, the faculty, administration, and professional support staff. This is why it is critical to engage in professional development with faculty and staff that informs educational practice. This professional development can be as structured or informal as you choose. It should really reflect your campus culture.

What is certain, no matter where you are with Fall 2020 re-entry planning or professional development processes, communication and calmness, consistency, creativity, and compassion should be pillars within your framework that are employed and regularly practiced.

### Communication and Calm

This concept might seem trite, but it is important to take deep breaths and engage in regular communication with your faculty and professional support

staff. Regular may mean more than our traditional monthly Deans meetings or bi-weekly staff updates. Yes, in the endless cycle of WebEx Conference calls, Zoom Meetings, and Blackboard Collaborate sessions, you may need to carve out additional time to meet with your teams individually or collectively at least twice per week. During the course of any given day students might be confronted with homelessness or job loss, while our faculty and professional support staff might be dealing with sickness or death of a loved one.

Regular communication will keep you cognizant of the day-to-day emotional well-being of your faculty and staff, but also allow you to support them by helping to direct students to emergency resources. You could also provide decision making context and assist with having a policy relaxed or modifying an existing practice. The following is an excerpt from an article by Dr. Ricia Anne Chansky, *Trauma Can Interfere with Students’ Learning. Here’s Something Professors Can Do To Help.*, that discusses some of her classroom practices after the hurricane in Puerto Rico.

She “asked students, on a voluntary basis, to write what their hurricane experience was, what they had survived and what they were continuing to survive.” She also had them

connect that experience back to readings from the course. Her goal: to help students re-establish a sense of agency, something they would need in order to learn.

Initially, Chansky envisioned the project as a bridge, a way back into her interrupted plans for the two sections of honors English and one of Anglophone Caribbean literature she was teaching. Instead, it became the primary assignment for the semester. Chansky told students that they could complete the project with paper and pencil if they needed to, and that she would not penalize them for opting out of it. Every student completed the assignment, she said — and most of them did so by hand. “What that says to me,” Chansky says, “is that my students — and possibly every student everywhere — are desperate to be listened to.” (2018).

Like Chansky’s students and their essays, it has been my experience that these meetings allow my faculty and support staff to be heard. Trauma produces a need to express one’s feelings. Trauma and isolation impact people in different ways. Communication via formal meetings or even informal virtual celebrations and happy hours provide space for voices to be heard and reinforces the existence of a community that is still ours—we are vibrant members and participants within it.

### Consistency

Now more than ever it is import-

ant to not only engage in routine, but to establish regular workplace habits that we commit to in the midst of crisis and abnormality. Even if a meeting is changed or canceled or you are triple booked, reach out to your faculty and support staff and stakeholders. Let them know. Set up or modify meeting times immediately. Check in. The main message, remain connected and consistent. This provides for one less unknown/uncertainty in everyone’s world.

### Creativity

As an academic administrator we need to give faculty and professional support staff freedom to get work done in support of our students and their success. This might mean changing an assignment, deleting a few, establishing competency based or portfolio assessments in disciplines where such practices have not previously been employed. It might also mean allowing staff to engage in more holistic evaluations of transcripts and pre-requisites, allowing access to learning or continued learning.

This is not the time to hold fast to our traditions, practices, and rules. We need to embrace alternatives as not only necessary, but in some ways a forced move into areas that should have been engaged years ago, but we simply could not get out of our own way and make these options available for our students. Necessity has created an opportunity for us to seize and never look back. We should continue to push the boundaries of what is possible.

### Compassion

In our current environment, people all over the world are mentally and physically exhausted. Our faculty

and support staff are not exempt. They feel isolated, scared, and are extremely stressed about the future. What will happen next? As academic administrators we play a critical role in demonstrating compassion. We will not have all the answers and we will make missteps, but we will also approach every encounter with genuine concern and kindness. We must remember to exercise fairness and equity with decency and grace.

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