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Toward a Trauma-Informed Campus: Reflections on Fostering Student Success through San Juan College's Trauma Literacy Project

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Abstract

During its Fall 2020 semester, San Juan College instituted a trauma literacy project (TLP) in response to the disproportionate effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on its student population, 32% of whom identify as Native American. The purpose of the TLP was to infuse equity and student support throughout the programming, which consisted of professional development events aimed at increasing trauma awareness on campus as well as a trauma literacy designation pathway for instructors. Participants in the TLP reported better understanding of how to support students through trauma-informed practices. Although there was substantial participation in the programming, several steps need to be taken to catalyze an institutional cultural shift regarding trauma and equity issues moving forward.

Keywords: trauma-informed pedagogy, community college student success, equity, retention, community college student support, Critical Trauma Theory, faculty development

San Juan College, located in Farmington, New Mexico, along the border of the Navajo Nation, is a Native American Serving Non-tribal Institution (NASNTI). When the campus shut down in mid-March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were disbursed across the region. Many returned to their homes on the Navajo Nation, where internet and cell phone reception are sporadic, and in some areas, non-existent, thus making attending courses that had been moved entirely online impossible for many students. Within a month, issues far more significant than spotty internet were occurring. The Navajo Nation implemented a strict lockdown that prohibited travel across the vast rural area. About 15,000 of the 75,000 homes on the Navajo Nation do not have electricity, constituting 75% of unelectrified homes in the United States (American Public Power Association, 2020), and up to 40% have to haul water (Krol, 2020), creating challenges for Navajo students who were living in remote areas to get food, water, and other supplies. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was announced on the Navajo Nation on March 17. Within weeks, the Navajo Nation had more per capita cases and deaths than anywhere in the U.S. Moreover, the Nation comprised 75% of the COVID-19 deaths in New Mexico, despite comprising just 9% of the total state population (Shah et al., 2020). San Juan faculty members and staff shifted from scrambling to help students locate essential resources to finding ways to support students who had lost family members or were caretaking infected loved ones. Many of us who were working with students recognized that they were not only

experiencing the collective trauma of the pandemic, but that the pandemic had exacerbated many forms of trauma that our students regularly battle. We knew that something had to be done to address these issues by the time students returned in the fall.

In response to students' needs, San Juan College began its Trauma Literacy Project (TLP) in the Fall 2020 Semester as part of a two-year project designed to acknowledge the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic and offer necessary student supports. The TLP has four main objectives:

- To clarify referral processes for counseling and other resources and contextualize them in in the effects of trauma so that educators and other campus community members not only understand what to do, but why they should do something.
- To train current college employees, particularly those labeled as educators (faculty, coaches, tutors) who work closely with students either in the classroom or through activities and coaching, on trauma-informed approaches, the effects of trauma on learning, and cumulative and historical trauma.
- 3. To support and expand existing student groups regarding mental health awareness.
- 4. To create a trauma-informed campus culture that is committed to continually learning and acknowledging the effects of trauma and providing resources and a safe environment for all members of the community.

Two major components of the TLP in its first year included 1) the delivery of trauma literacy sessions with a focus on equity through examination of identity as both a source of trauma and of healing and resilience and 2) the development of a trauma literacy certificate.

This article is a narrative of the development of the TLP and the program's first year activities at San Juan College. It includes highlights from an informal discussion with participants in the TLP. The first author, Danielle, was the leader of the TLP at San Juan College. The second author, Rick, serves as Danielle's doctoral dissertation chair. Together, they collaborate on trauma literacy efforts in higher education. In the following sections, we present the rationale of the program, the format and participants' reactions to the program, and next steps for future implementation. When we discuss trauma, we are using a broad definition including multiple forms of trauma to fully represent the communities we serve, such as individual trauma, historical and collective trauma, and oppression-based traumas.

Addressing Student Success through Trauma-Informed Practices Trauma-informed pedagogy is a framework for operating in the classroom based on the concept of trauma-informed care, which was developed in social services and health care (Carello, 2016; Davidson, 2017). Trauma-informed educators are not placed in official roles as mental health professionals and do not "teach trauma," but instead develop skills to recognize signs of trauma on the part of students, make referrals to counseling services or other appropriate resources, and implement practices that soothe traumatic displays and support mental health. There is not a one-size-fits-all trauma-informed framework because, ideally, each campus should design a program to specifically address its population's needs. However, most trauma-informed frameworks are built on the concepts of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment and are

modeled on the principles of trauma-informed care developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) for health care and social work.

The TLP at San Juan College was developed in response to the COVID-19 catastrophe; however, students at San Juan College struggle with other forms of trauma. Many are firstgeneration college students and face myriad issues associated with growing up in poverty, such as food and housing insecurity. The student body forms a minority-majority institution: 19% of the student body identifies as Hispanic, 32% as Native American, 40% as White, and 9% as other races (San Juan College Institutional Research, 2020). Racial and ethnic minorities and those living in poverty are at greater risk of trauma exposure and report diminished mental health compared to middle class White students (Larson et al., 2017; McBride, 2019; Smith et al., 2014). Over the past three years, San Juan College has increased its focus on student success through the implementation of Guided Pathways, a student success initiative that helps students navigate degree paths and focuses on ameliorating equity gaps. While the College has made a concerted effort to examine inequities, it, like many other higher education institutions, has not focused on the role that mental health disorders (MHDs) and trauma exposure play in hindering student success. Without examining the connections between trauma and its outcomes, those who service students are often not aware of root causes of students' hardships and are illequipped to help students address their challenges in a supportive manner (Carello & Butler, 2014; Davidson, 2017).

The prevalence of MHDs in the U.S. college-age student population has increased in the past twenty years (Oswalt et al., 2018), and suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students in the U.S. (Turner et al., 2013). Katz and Davidson (2014) found that community college students report a higher prevalence of severe MHDs, such as diagnoses of bipolar conditions, schizophrenia, and substance abuse addiction, than do traditional college students, while at the same time reporting receiving less mental health information and treatment than traditional university students. Trauma has a strong association with MHDs (Larson et al., 2017), and community college students face greater risk of trauma exposure than their four-year institution counterparts (Davidson, 2017). Depression, substance abuse, and other MHDs are causally associated with dropping out of school (Arria, 2013), as is entering college with posttraumatic stress disorder (Boyraz et al., 2015). MHDs also impact students' grades and other areas of academic performance in higher education (Bishop, 2015). While a lack of success in college hurts students professionally and financially, failure and dropout rates also harm the institutions themselves through the loss of significant revenue (Lipson et al., 2016). Trauma is associated with cognitive delays, chronic absenteeism, and a host of other issues that can impede academic achievement (Auerbach et al., 2018; Davidson, 2017). Trauma particularly damages the learning prospects of developmental education students, which is an alarming concern at San Juan College, since nearly 80% of our students begin in developmental education courses prior to moving to alternative developmental education placement based on multiple measures, primarily high school GPA, rather than placement based on test scores.

Addressing trauma on college campuses is also important from an equity stance. Minoritized students face trauma as a result of prolonged exposure to racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, issues that may not necessarily result in a diagnosable MHD (Cote-Meke, 2014). For Indigenous students, colonialism and systemic oppression can contribute to trauma and student crises at the community college level. Cote-Meke (2014) explains that many Indigenous students "come to the classroom carrying with them not only their familial and community history of colonial and imperial imposition and the effects this has had, but also their ongoing experience of living in a society where racism and violence are perpetuated on many levels on a daily basis" (p. 113). Many Latinx students have similar experiences with anti-immigrant sentiment and systemic racism. Finally, students of color and linguistically and culturally diverse student populations who have been traditionally marginalized in public schools often experience similar oppression when entering college (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Cote-Meke, 2014).

San Juan College currently has mental health resources on campus through counseling services; however, the counselor-to-student ratio is low, and like many community college campuses, there are not enough mental health resources on campus to meet our students' needs. Currently, only one mental health counselor is available on campus to serve our student body of over 10,000. In response, cultivating a trauma-informed campus culture where everyone works together to destigmatize mental health issues and foster a sense of emotional safety was one way our College could mitigate a lack of resources for students who need support. Albright and Schwartz (2017) found that while 95% of community college faculty stated that a major aspect of their role as educators is supporting students who are experiencing mental health issues, only 58% felt prepared to recognize signs of distress in students. These findings support anecdotes from San Juan faculty and staff who began attending trauma literacy events as the COVID crisis unfolded. In fact, the most frequently cited reason for their interest in the programming was that they expressed feeling inadequate in their ability to help distressed students during the pandemic. The TLP was designed to be inclusive of all faculty and staff who play a vital role through consistent, frequent interaction with students.

Trauma Literacy Project Design

The first year of the TLP was designed to focus on providing educators with foundational information grounded in trauma-informed pedagogical frameworks. Most trauma-informed educational models do not prioritize culture and identity, instead treating these as aspects of the framework, if they are acknowledged at all; however, on San Juan College's minority-majority campus, Danielle felt that including oppression-based trauma was important because culture and identity are integral to San Juan's contexts and can play important roles in healing and resilience. Anna Nelson's (2020) micro-theory, Critical Trauma Theory (CTT), Figure 1, centers cultural identity in trauma and healing and accounts for emerging knowledge on cumulative, historical/cultural trauma, and ethnoviolence. This micro-theory also acknowledges the role that cultural resistance and resilience can play in healing by emphasizing Yosso's (2005) framework of cultural capital. Because CTT foreground's identity and culture as both sources of

oppression/trauma and of healing, important tenets for a campus such as San Juan College that serves a large population of marginalized students, it was selected as the foundational framework for the TLP. CTT draws from the SAMHSA's (2014) model, but rather than a linear framework, is circular with "cultural and other identity-based resilience, resistance, and radical healing" placed at the center (Nelson, 2020). The other guiding principles of CTT are 1) safety, including emotional, cultural, spiritual, cognitive, and physical aspects of safety; 2) trustworthiness and transparency; 3) circles of support; 4) collaboration and mutuality; and 5) pathways to power, voice, and choice (Nelson, 2020).

Figure 1
Nelson's (2020) Applied Critical Trauma Theory in Education Contexts



After identifying Nelson's theory as a central framework, we held a focus group comprised of a cross-section of faculty and staff over the summer to garner needs and concerns about TLP programming. To provide context and answer questions, Anna Nelson attended this focus group session as well. The feedback from the group was used to determine which types of informational sessions would be most beneficial and were coordinated with Nelson and the College's counselor.

Nine trauma literacy sessions, shown in Appendix A, were developed, and presented throughout the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. The event topics varied, and several were presented by campus faculty and staff. One session prioritized grief and the healing effects of creative writing. Another focused specifically on the Navajo Nation and the COVID-19

pandemic's disproportionate impact on its families. Another event featured a workshop centered around making online teaching trauma-responsive for learners, wherein our College counselor walked instructors through the referral process and described accessible on-campus and local resources. The TLP was given a modest budget, most of which was used to hire Nelson, who developed and presented a three-seminar series that contextualized CTT for San Juan's academic community. The first session offered a theoretical overview of how trauma affects learners and the role that identity can play in the healing process. The second session Nelson conducted was a required presentation for all faculty during spring convocation in which Nelson discussed how to apply CTT in the classroom and provided specific techniques for creating safe spaces and validating oppression-based trauma. Nelson's third session focused on evaluating the College's educational spaces to ensure that they were trauma-responsive and conducive to incorporating anti-oppression strategies during instruction. Most sessions were open to all members of the campus community and were publicized through the College's Center for Professional Development and High-impact Practices Center. While attendance varied at each event, with 94 present for addressing grief through creative writing and 37 for implementing CTT, the collective participation in the seminars was positive, with over 300 members of the San Juan community attending at least one session.

In addition to increasing trauma awareness on campus, another goal of the TLP was to codify and validate training in trauma-informed practices. Danielle and the counselor collaborated to determine criteria so that interested faculty and staff could earn a trauma literacy designation. This designation was modeled on other programs on San Juan College's campus, such as the Safe Zone and Indigenous Zone credentials whereby College personnel can attend training and display a placard in their workspaces indicating their awareness and support of student-centered issues and allyship. Danielle and the counselor determined that earning a trauma literacy designation would require attendance at four sessions: the convocation session on CTT and the session on referrals and resources, which was recorded for those who couldn't attend in-person, and any two additional sessions. A graphic designer on campus created a logo and placard, Figure 2, for the trauma literacy designation so that they could be displayed by anyone who completed the trainings and serve as a symbol of solidarity for students, demonstrating faculty and staff awareness of trauma's detriments to learning and willingness to provide impactful resources. By April 2021, 31 College personnel had completed the trauma literacy designation, including 25 faculty, two administrators, and four staff. The trauma literacy designation pathway will continue throughout the 2021-2022 academic year through the provision of additional trauma literacy sessions.

Figure 2
Trauma Literacy Training Placard



Triumphs and Challenges of the TLP

In March 2021, Danielle held two follow-up discussions with nine College personnel who were active participants in the first year of the TLP through event attendance and completion of the trauma literacy designation. The purpose of these discussions was to explore the effectiveness of the program and what types of programming would be beneficial in the second year of the project. Several categories of responses emerged from this description, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Categories and Numbers of Responses from TLP Discussion Group Participants

	Respondents
Motivation for participation	
Professional development for annual review	0
Support students	9
Understand student trauma	9
Outcome	
Knowledge of campus resources	8
Need for flexibility with Students	5
Understanding of role of identity in trauma	5
Concerns/Barriers	
Lack of campus resources	8
Lack of administrative support	4
Lack of faculty concern/awareness of trauma	3
Educational experiences as traumatic	5

One aspect Danielle explored was participants' motivation for initially engaging in the TLP programming. To encourage participation in the trauma literacy designation early on, Danielle had asked the vice-president of learning if the designation could count as professional development in the annual reviews that all faculty must undertake. The administrator agreed, and this information was shared at the onset of the program in Fall 2021, when the list of trauma literacy sessions and criteria for the trauma literacy designation were shared. Despite this incentive, none of the participants Danielle interviewed indicated that this was a motive for participating. When asked why they wanted to complete this program, all nine reported that they recognized the prevalence of trauma with San Juan College's students and wanted to learn more about students' experiences and how to support them. The lead instructor of first-year experience coursework stated that students often share traumatic experiences in this course even before the pandemic and that "instructors of this class just don't know what to do or how to support our students." This desire to support students was most heavily emphasized by the four developmental education instructors who participated in the focus groups. All four felt that developmental education students were more likely to have experienced trauma and that many were in a continual state of crisis due to issues that the instructors felt compelled to support students through but were often unsure of how to do so. A reading instructor reported that trauma was a frequent topic in students' writing and that she felt "helpless and heartbroken" but did not always know how to help them despite wanting to. Two faculty members-one from nursing and one from human services—stated that they came from fields that required working with patients and clients who had experienced trauma and recognized that their students would likely

encounter trauma in their field work and perhaps even be triggered by it. They wanted to ensure that students were supported in these situations.

Discussion participants reported that they now had a better understanding of ways to support students, largely due to the counselor presentation and continuous sharing of resources for students. Several stated that they had developed a much better understanding of how important it is to be flexible and see students as whole human beings. A reading instructor said, "I find myself being more flexible, and now I know I'd rather err on the side of kindness rather than be too harsh." The first-year experience lead instructor stated that in the past she felt like she was often caught up in the technicalities "of rules" about late work and absences to ensure that learners understood how to be effective college students. She is now more accommodating about students' issues that may come up but admits that she struggles with "knowing where the line is and when I should enforce those rules."

Although many participants in the discussion stated that they now had a better idea of how to support students, about half said that they did not feel there exist enough resources on campus to prove the necessary support. They pointed out that the College has only one counselor, and the wait times for students to see her can be long. They also stated that there are not enough culturally relevant materials and resources available, which is crucial for addressing a student population that has diverse traditional approaches to mental health. One of the sessions that was most frequently cited as helpful was a session on working through grief with creative writing. Several students attended this session, as well as College personnel and community members. A developmental writing faculty member stated that this session helped to normalize grief, promote resilience, and helped students learn that they had important stories to tell. She explained that many students went on to explore their own grief and trauma in an upcoming essay and that similar events that reach students on a personal level could be especially helpful. Danielle agreed, explaining that culturally relevant, student-led activities such as art therapy would be a main focus of the TLP next year and that the campus just formed a chapter of Active Minds, a student-led national organization for college campuses that works toward destigmatizing mental health issues. Many group members stated that this was a positive start, but that more needed to be done and that it might be beyond the scope of the TLP and its \$2500 budget to effectively address these issues. Four participants stated that they needed to see more administrative buy-in to a program like this to help take it to an institution-wide scale, which would include providing adequate resource funding and actively encouraging and promoting trauma literacy concepts from the platform of College leadership.

Framing trauma as an equity issue is a cornerstone of the TLP, and Anna Nelson delivered three of the 10 sessions on trauma literacy, including one session to all faculty during convocation. Danielle asked discussion participants about the effectiveness of this approach. Overwhelmingly, discussion participants stated that this was very helpful and that the focus on identity as a source of resilience was especially useful. A developmental writing instructor stated that the CTT framework allowed for "the acknowledgement of the ongoing trauma of colonization, but at the same time, the embedded strength within individual cultural practices—

that's something powerful and important to emphasize." A human services instructor recalled Nelson's first session, which focused significantly on oppression-based trauma, when a student broke down in tears and stated that she never had words to ascribe to her experiences before. "That was a powerful moment, and we need to bring this kind of training to our students more," she stated. Again, the theme of institutional buy-in emerged, as a developmental writing instructor stated that sponsoring an intensive workshop for specific trauma-informed classroom strategies and advertising techniques for facilitating difficult conversations would be helpful for educators, and that the institution could invest similarly to how they have in other strategic objectives. Another developmental writing instructor concurred: "They [administrators] say equity is important. They say that social justice is important, but I don't often see that in the policies and actions on campus[...] Often it seems that they think it's only faculty's role to address this, but it has to be a campus-wide initiative."

Another theme that emerged from these discussions was the idea that education itself can be traumatizing for students whose sociocultural attributes and experiences do not perfectly align with status-quo institutional practices. A nursing instructor discussed how the No Child Left Behind-era push for high-stakes testing has instilled unrealistic expectations of near-perfection with grades and has created stressful situations for students. The nursing instructor added that many faculty sadly do not view trauma or equity as an issue that can be addressed in their programs. The developmental math and writing instructors emphasized that many students come to them feeling traumatized by their previous school experiences which impact their current academic efforts. Many doubt their ability to succeed, and these instructors spend substantial time just convincing students that they can be successful. Several participants stated that exploring trauma brought on by education should be an issue to address in the second year of the program.

Analysis for Future Implementation

A goal of the TLP is that it becomes sustainable beyond the two-year project time frame. To ensure that trauma awareness continues, trauma literacy will become a key component of new faculty training materials at San Juan College to foster institutional trauma awareness. This step, however, may not be enough.

The TLP has been effective in bringing awareness about trauma and equity to the San Juan College campus, but many of the participants were already predisposed toward exploring these issues. One indicator of the fact that exposure to new practices alone does not change mindsets was that no one who had not already decided to work toward a trauma literacy designation decided to work toward it after Nelson's all-faculty presentation in the spring. The session alone did not seem to inspire additional college personnel to "get on board." Changing the culture of the campus would likely take more institutional support in terms of time, money, and specific actions that model the importance of trauma issues. Another way to broaden the scale of trauma literacy and equity is to create more events that focus on students. Although the TLP sessions during the first year allowed for student participation, they were not geared toward students. Widespread student engagement could yield more faculty and staff interest and

eventually, comprehensive administrative buy-in could inspire an institutional cultural shift that acknowledges the role that trauma awareness plays in student success and equity issues.

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Appendix A

Trauma Literacy Series for the TLP at San Juan College

Trauma Literacy Series

What?

Earn an "endorsement" in trauma-literacy similar to Safe Zone or Indigenous Zone. You will learn how trauma, including oppression-based trauma, affects our students, how to mitigate that trauma with best practices, and how to refer students for help.

The goal of trauma literacy is not to become a mental health professional, but rather to learn about how trauma affects our students and how to get them help.

Why?

Many of us have worked with students who are in crisis or seem to become derailed after a hardship, but we aren't sure what to do to help them. Mental health issues were on the rise on college campuses before COVID-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated depression and anxiety in college students. Additionally, trauma goes beyond what many of us think of as a mental health issue to include oppression-based traumas such as collective and historic trauma. This

series explores all forms of trauma and emphasizes critical trauma theory, which centers identity as a source of resilience and healing. Trauma and other mental health issues are equity issues.

How?

During the 2020-2021 academic year, attend the winter convocation session during the learning session on trauma literacy, the referrals and resources session offered by Julia Dengel, and 2 additional sessions of your choosing. Upon completion of 4 sessions, you will earn the "trauma literacy" designation.

SESSIONS

Required

Referrals and SJC Resources, led by Julia Dengel. Julia is the counselor at SJC. In this session, Julia will discuss how to make referrals for help and the resources that are available for students at SJC. Friday, October 23, 12:00-1:30 (this session will also be offered in a session during spring convocation)

Spring Convocation Session: Critical Trauma Theory, led by Anna Nelson, the developer of critical trauma theory. Anna is a professor of social work at NMSU-Albuquerque. She has over 20 years of clinical and policy experience. In this session, she will give a theoretical overview of how trauma affects learners behaviorally and neurobiologically and of critical trauma theory, which acknowledges oppression-based trauma and the role of identity in trauma and healing. She will follow up with how apply critical trauma theory in a classroom setting. The purpose of this session is not to turn faculty into counselors, but rather to help them better understand our students' experiences and develop some simple classroom strategies.

Choose any two

FALL SESSIONS

Creative Writing as Window for Grief, led by Danielle Sullivan. Danielle will share her journey through grief and how creative writing helped her process and understand her emotions. She will share excerpts from her writing and general information about typical and atypical grief responses. Resources will be provided. Thursday, September 17, 3:00-4:00

The Navajo Nation and COVID, led by Elaine Benally, Director of SJC West Campus and cofacilitated by Danielle Sullivan. Participants will watch a short film (approximately 30 minutes long) that covered COVID on the Navajo Nation as well as historical and collective trauma. Following the film, there will be a discussion and sharing of stories and experiences. Friday, September 18, 1:00-2:30. **Friday, September 18, 1:00-2:30**.

Critical Trauma Theory, led by Anna Nelson, the developer of critical trauma theory. Anna is a professor of social work at NMSU-Albuquerque. She has over 20 years of clinical and policy experience. In this session, she will give a theoretical overview of how trauma affects learners behaviorally and neurobiologically and of critical trauma theory, which acknowledges oppression-based trauma and the role of identity in trauma and healing. Friday, September 25 2:30-4:30 pm

Anxiety, Coping and Stress: Help Students Manage and Overcome current Mental Health Challenges, an interactive webinar led by Dr. R. Kelly Crace, the Associate Vice President for Health and Wellness and the Director of the Center for Mindfulness & Authentic Excellence (CMAX) at The College of William and Mary. The session will offer crucial, actionable takeaways for helping students effectively cope, engage in healthy self-care and manage stress/fear effectively. Wednesday, September 30, 2020. 12:00-1:30 p.m.

SPRING SESSIONS

Referrals and SJC Resources, led by Julia Dengel. Julia is the counselor at SJC. In this session, Julia will discuss how to make referrals for help and the resources that are available for students at SJC. **Spring Convocation Session, time and date TBD**

Evaluating Your Practices/Department workshop, led by Anna Nelson. Anna will lead participants through an evaluation of current practices and develop plans to implement traumainformed practices. **Friday, January 29, 2:30-3:30.**

Can Online Teaching be Trauma Responsive? discussion facilitated by Danielle Sullivan, based on this article. Participants will read and discuss this article and develop trauma-responsive pedagogical strategies. Friday, February 19, 10 a.m.

Danielle Sullivan is an English and Education faculty member at San Juan College. Her research focuses on trauma-informed pedagogy and equity issues, and her research has been included in *Community College Review* and *Community Literacy Journal*. She is ABD in curriculum and instruction at New Mexico State University.

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