

**Integrating Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices in Higher Education:  
A Policy-Oriented Approach to Supporting Student Mental Health in Post-  
Secondary Classrooms**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the ethical, pedagogical, and institutional imperative of implementing trauma-informed teaching practices in higher education, with a particular focus on business and accounting education. Drawing from the author's lived experience and an extensive literature review, the paper examines the impact of trauma on cognitive functioning, student engagement, and academic performance. Thematic analysis reveals four critical themes: the shift from traditional to student-centered pedagogy, trauma's cognitive disruption through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, systemic faculty resistance examined through Systems Theory, and the strategic role of Transformational Leadership in institutional adoption of TIP. Ethical analysis underscores the moral consequences of failing to support trauma-affected students, while policy recommendations outline practical steps for integrating TIP into instructional design, departmental strategy, and institutional planning. Trauma-informed pedagogy is presented not as a soft skill but as a rigorously supported educational strategy vital for student success and institutional resilience in the 21st century.

*Keywords:* trauma-informed pedagogy, higher education, accounting education, transformational leadership, inclusive teaching, educational ethics, systems theory

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Literature Review .....	5
Introduction to the Literature Landscape .....	5
Pedagogical Shifts Toward Trauma-Informed Practice .....	6
Student Mental Health and Learning Science .....	7
Institutional Barriers and Policy Considerations .....	8
Synthesis of Emerging Themes and Literature Gaps .....	10
Summary of the Literature Review .....	11
Thematic Analysis .....	14
Ethical Implications .....	26
Policy Recommendations .....	29
Summary .....	32
References .....	36

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Higher education institutions are facing a growing mental health crisis among college students. In recent years, students have reported record levels of stress, anxiety, grief, and trauma, which significantly affect their ability to learn, participate, and thrive in academic environments. Despite this reality, teaching practices and institutional policies across many universities have not evolved to reflect the psychological needs of today's students. While trauma-informed approaches have been increasingly integrated into K–12 education and clinical settings, higher education, especially within professional disciplines like accounting and business, remains largely untouched by these pedagogical advancements.

The issue is especially relevant at small to mid-sized, private, four-year institutions such as Marywood University, where students often come from diverse socioeconomic and personal backgrounds. Without trauma-informed policies, faculty training, or institutional frameworks, students and educators are left to navigate emotional and cognitive challenges in isolation. This misalignment between student needs and institutional structures contributes to lower engagement, academic performance issues, and rising attrition rates.

This paper explores how trauma-informed teaching practices can be integrated into higher education to address the mental health crisis and foster better student mental health, academic performance, and retention. Through a multidisciplinary literature review, the paper will examine the issue from three key perspectives: pedagogical, psychological, and institutional. It will analyze emerging themes through four theoretical lenses — Transformational Leadership Theory, Critical Pedagogy, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Systems Theory — to

demonstrate the complex interplay between trauma, learning, and policy. The paper concludes with specific policy recommendations aimed at embedding trauma-informed practices into faculty development, curriculum design, and institutional leadership strategies, offering a path towards positive change.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction to the Literature Landscape**

Over the past decade, institutions of higher learning have grappled with the intensifying mental health crisis facing students. Reports from the American College Health Association (ACHA) reveal a dramatic increase in students reporting depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation, trends exacerbated by global crises such as COVID-19 and racial injustice (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Schroeder et al., 2024). These realities demand a transformation in how teaching is conceptualized and delivered.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy (TIP) offers a critical response to this crisis by shifting the educational lens from “What is wrong with this student?” to “What has this student experienced?” (Davidson, 2017). TIP draws from fields like social work, counseling psychology, and K–12 education, but its application to postsecondary institutions remains uneven and under-theorized (Wells, 2023). Unlike elementary and secondary educators who often receive formal training in trauma response, many college instructors are unaware of trauma-informed strategies, or they dismiss them as incompatible with academic rigor (Smith & Held, 2022). Understanding and acknowledging students' experiences is not only crucial but also a powerful way to foster empathy and connection in the academic environment.

This literature review synthesizes findings across three interconnected domains — pedagogy, mental health and learning science, and institutional leadership — and integrates four

theoretical frameworks: Transformational Leadership, Critical Pedagogy, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Systems Theory. In doing so, it establishes a foundation for policy reform and programmatic change.

### **Pedagogical Shifts Toward Trauma-Informed Practice**

Traditional higher education pedagogy is often shaped by implicit norms that focus on content mastery, punctuality, and uniform standards, often at the expense of student well-being (Gunderson & Mrozla-Toscano, 2023). In trauma-informed teaching, instructors reframe these assumptions by making flexibility and safety as essential as content delivery. This includes practices such as trauma-sensitive syllabi, flexible deadlines, collaborative learning, and presence-based teaching (Cooley & O'Neill, 2021).

Davidson (2017) emphasizes that trauma-informed instruction requires shifting the instructor's role from knowledge-gatekeeper to relationship-builder. For example, faculty may adopt class rituals that include emotional check-ins, provide alternative assignments for students in distress, or ensure content warnings before sensitive material. These approaches counteract the sense of helplessness many students experience.

“Predictability, empowerment, and connectedness are foundational elements of trauma-informed instruction — not extras” (Davidson, 2017, p. 14).

Empirical research supports the claim that trauma-informed classrooms foster greater academic engagement. For instance, Oehme et al. (2019) found that students in TIP-aligned courses reported higher levels of classroom belonging, especially among those with prior exposure to trauma. This sense of inclusion correlates with increased persistence and improved academic outcomes (Ginsberg, 2016; Palmer, 2020).

TIP also helps address equity issues, particularly for first-generation college students and students from historically marginalized backgrounds. Anzaldúa (2022) argues that trauma-informed design disrupts traditional hierarchies in academia that often alienate these students.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) laid the groundwork for what TIP would later adopt: the necessity of dialogue, trust, and shared authority in the classroom. Like TIP, critical pedagogy resists passive transmission of knowledge and instead encourages students to interrogate their lived experiences (Campbell, 2022).

Trauma-informed educators, much like Freirean teachers, understand that their role includes listening to students' realities and fostering classroom spaces that affirm resilience rather than punishing survival responses. "There is no such thing as a neutral education process" (Freire, 1970, p. 15). Trauma-informed pedagogy makes this point material by sprinkling emotional and cultural realities into curricular structures.

### **Student Mental Health and Learning Science**

Trauma is not simply an emotional disruption; it is a neurobiological event. Studies in neuroscience and education confirm that trauma interferes with the brain's ability to process, retain, and apply information (Bosse & Clark, 2021; Garrity, 2022). For instance, trauma often leads to chronic activation of the amygdala, the brain's fear center, reducing prefrontal cortex activity responsible for reasoning and focus (Langhout, 2020).

Schroeder et al. (2024) emphasize that trauma exposure compromises executive functioning, making it harder for students to complete assignments, manage time, or tolerate academic stress. Thus, trauma-informed teaching is not remedial or therapeutic; it is foundational to making learning cognitively possible.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) remains a relevant conceptual framework in trauma-informed education. In traditional classrooms, students are expected to operate at the "self-actualization" tier, producing original work and solving complex problems, even when basic emotional and psychological needs remain unmet. TIP enables students to ascend the hierarchy by prioritizing their safety and sense of belonging (Sinko et al., 2023).

This also has a practical function. When students are emotionally dysregulated, they are less able to process lectures or participate in discussions. Faculty who acknowledge this, through empathy, flexibility, and transparency, support the development of emotional regulation that makes learning sustainable (Jose et al., 2025).

Psychological safety refers to students' perception that they can express themselves without fear of ridicule or punishment. TIP classrooms promote this safety through intentional course design that includes collaborative guidelines, peer support, trigger warnings, and validation of student voice (Nguyen, 2025). Freeman and Simonsen (2020) show that classrooms structured for safety yield improved attendance and participation.

"If we want students to take intellectual risks, they must first feel emotionally safe" (Thompson & Waddell, 2021, p. 22).

TIP also redefines assessment strategies. Instead of high-stakes, performance-heavy evaluations, instructors can incorporate low-stress, mastery-based assessments to reduce anxiety and enhance actual comprehension.

### **Institutional Barriers and Policy Considerations**

A significant barrier to the widespread adoption of trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education is the resistance or uncertainty among faculty, particularly in high-content, professional disciplines like accounting, business, law, and STEM. Instructors in these fields



often operate within a paradigm of “content mastery,” where the pressure to meet accreditation standards reinforces rigidity in teaching methods and assessment (Campbell, 2022).

In accounting education specifically, there is a long-standing emphasis on technical competence, ethical standards, and professional preparation. While essential, this focus can lead to classroom environments where emotional and psychological realities are unintentionally ignored (Gunderson & Mrozla-Toscano, 2023). Faculty may perceive trauma-informed practices like deadline flexibility or content warnings as diluting rigor or undermining fairness (Smith & Held, 2022).

However, research indicates that such perceptions often stem from a lack of training rather than philosophical opposition. Palmer (2020) found that business faculty who received trauma-informed pedagogy workshops reported increased empathy, improved student evaluations, and no loss in academic integrity or course outcomes.

“Faculty don’t reject trauma-informed teaching because they oppose it ideologically — they reject it because they’ve never been taught how to do it within their own pedagogical frameworks” (Wells, 2023, p. 79).

This underscores the need for institutional structures that support, rather than expect, faculty to adopt these approaches on their own.

TIP implementation in higher education is often left to the discretion of individual instructors, creating inconsistent experiences across departments and courses (Thompson & Waddell, 2021). This patchwork approach is particularly evident in business schools, where faculty autonomy is high, but shared governance around pedagogy is limited.

Few institutions require TIP training as part of faculty onboarding or continuing education. Even fewer include trauma-sensitive criteria in course evaluations, syllabi review, or

tenure and promotion rubrics (Sinko et al., 2023). This creates a professional disincentive for faculty to invest in trauma-informed strategies — especially when such efforts are time-consuming and unrecognized in reward structures (Nguyen, 2025).

Leadership's silence on TIP also undermines momentum. Faculty often interpret administrative silence as implicit opposition or, at best, neutrality. For change to occur, business schools and academic departments must embed trauma-informed principles into strategic plans, teaching centers, and policy directives (Schroeder et al., 2024).

From a Systems Theory perspective, faculty resistance is not an isolated problem; it is a systemic outcome of institutional design. Trauma-informed reform cannot succeed without coordinated efforts across multiple levels: classroom, department, college, and university (Jose et al., 2025). For instance, aligning mental health services with academic affairs, especially in high-stress programs like accounting, creates referral pipelines and shared accountability.

Transformational Leadership Theory provides a conceptual map for how academic leaders can drive TIP adoption. Leaders who model trauma-informed values can cultivate a culture where faculty feel safe experimenting with new pedagogies (Sambrook & Stewart, 2019). Research shows that when business deans and department chairs articulate a clear trauma-informed vision, uptake increases across faculty levels (McChesney, 2024).

### **Synthesis of Emerging Themes and Literature Gaps**

Three critical themes emerge across the literature and are highly relevant to business and accounting education. First, professionalization can hinder pedagogical innovation. The strong orientation toward licensing exams, accreditation standards, and employability metrics often sidelines student-centered innovations like TIP. However, TIP may actually enhance professional readiness by supporting resilience, communication, and ethical reasoning — key skills for

business professionals (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2018). Second, emotional intelligence is a pedagogical asset. TIP aligns with business competencies such as emotional intelligence, adaptive leadership, and client-centered thinking. Students who learn in trauma-informed environments may be better prepared for emotionally complex workplaces, including auditing, consulting, or client service roles (Doughty, 2020). Third, equity is central, not peripheral. TIP's emphasis on inclusion and identity safety addresses long-standing issues of underrepresentation and retention among minority students in business schools. Trauma-informed teaching can serve as a retention and equity strategy, not just a wellness initiative (Anzaldúa, 2022; Wells, 2023).

Despite growing momentum, several gaps persist in the scholarly literature. The first is disciplinary-specific TIP research. Most trauma-informed education research is focused on nursing, social work, or K–12 education. There is a marked absence of studies focusing on business, accounting, or MBA-level instruction.

There is also a gap in the data regarding quantitative outcomes and longitudinal studies. While qualitative data on TIP effectiveness is strong, there is limited quantitative evidence linking TIP to grades, retention, or job placement — metrics that drive business school decisions (Smith & Held, 2022).

Finally, there is a gap for the faculty experience in high-stress courses. More research is needed on how accounting professors, in particular, experience the emotional labor of teaching, especially when balancing the need for compassion with the demands of professional standards.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

The body of literature on trauma-informed teaching in higher education reveals a growing recognition of the urgent need to shift pedagogical frameworks, especially in the wake of mounting mental health concerns among college students. While trauma-informed pedagogy

(TIP) originated in K–12 and clinical settings, its integration into higher education is increasingly viewed as both necessary and beneficial, albeit unevenly implemented and under-theorized.

Across the reviewed sources, three broad domains emerge as central to understanding the current state and future potential of TIP: pedagogical transformation, student psychological and cognitive functioning, and institutional leadership and policy structure.

At the pedagogical level, TIP challenges conventional college instruction by focusing on emotional safety, relational trust, and adaptability in teaching practices. Scholars argue that this shift is not antithetical to academic rigor but rather enhances student engagement, retention, and resilience, particularly for those with trauma histories. In high-demand disciplines such as accounting and business, where curriculum is traditionally rigid and high-stakes, TIP introduces a valuable corrective that centers the learner without compromising instructional goals (Gunderson & Mrozla-Toscano, 2023; Palmer, 2020).

The alignment between TIP and Critical Pedagogy was evident throughout the literature, with both frameworks rejecting one-directional, compliance-driven models of instruction. Instead, they emphasize reciprocal dialogue, cultural responsiveness, and shared authority, all of which support the needs of students impacted by trauma and stress.

The cognitive implications of trauma are well-documented in the literature, including disruption in working memory, focus, and executive functioning. Trauma interferes with the brain's learning mechanisms, underscoring the importance of cultivating classrooms that prioritize psychological safety. Scholars draw on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to argue that students must feel safe, connected, and supported before they can engage in higher-order learning tasks (Sinko et al., 2023; Garrity, 2022). TIP strategies such as flexible assessment,

mindfulness integration, and transparent communication serve not only to support student well-being but to enable learning itself.

These practices are especially relevant in business education, where students often face additional stressors tied to performance-based grading, competitive internship placement, and professional image-building. The literature calls for greater awareness of how these pressures interact with trauma histories to affect classroom behavior and academic success.

The most substantial barriers to trauma-informed transformation lie at the institutional level. Faculty across disciplines, particularly in high-content areas like accounting, often report uncertainty about how to implement TIP without lowering standards or losing classroom control. The literature reveals a lack of consistent TIP training in higher education, little institutional reward for pedagogical innovation, and minimal alignment between TIP and formal policies such as tenure, promotion, or curricular review (Smith & Held, 2022; Thompson & Waddell, 2021).

Systems Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory provide useful lenses to understand and address these barriers. Trauma-informed reform cannot be achieved solely at the classroom level; it requires leadership-driven cultural change, coordinated across academic affairs, student services, and professional development systems. Scholars recommend that TIP be embedded into strategic plans, faculty evaluations, and even accreditation reviews — especially in business schools that already emphasize continuous improvement and measurable outcomes (McChesney, 2024; Doughty, 2020).

Together, these bodies of literature suggest that trauma-informed education is not simply a compassionate add-on but a structural necessity, one that intersects with issues of equity, retention, academic success, and professional readiness. The most compelling insight from this

review is the possibility of reframing trauma-informed practices not as exceptions, but as the default design for responsive and inclusive higher education.

The next section of this paper will identify and analyze the major emerging themes from the literature across the three perspectives discussed — pedagogical, psychological, and institutional — using the following four theoretical frameworks: Critical Pedagogy, Maslow’s Hierarchy, Systems Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory. This theoretical lensing will provide the groundwork for the final section of the paper: policy recommendations tailored to institutional implementation and discipline-specific contexts like accounting and business education.

### **Thematic Analysis**

In traditional higher education, particularly in disciplines like business and accounting, the dominant pedagogical model centers on content delivery, standardization, and assessment of technical skills. This model is deeply rooted in the notion of academic rigor, which often equates success with endurance, precision, and mastery of discipline-specific language and frameworks. However, this approach tends to ignore the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of learning, which are critical for students who have experienced trauma (Gunderson & Mrozla-Toscano, 2023; Davidson, 2017).

Trauma-informed pedagogy challenges this paradigm by placing the student, rather than the content, at the center of instructional design. It reframes the role of the instructor from knowledge transmitter to facilitator of a relational and psychologically safe learning environment (Wells, 2023). This is not to suggest that content expertise becomes secondary. Instead, TIP insists that how material is taught can be just as important as what is taught, particularly when

learners are navigating emotional barriers that affect their ability to engage, process, and retain information (Garrity, 2022).

In professional programs like accounting, this shift requires careful consideration. Students are preparing for certification exams and careers that demand technical mastery. However, the intensity of these programs, coupled with high expectations and limited institutional flexibility, can trigger or exacerbate trauma responses, including perfectionism, anxiety, and emotional withdrawal (Smith & Held, 2022). TIP offers a way to preserve academic integrity while honoring the psychological realities that influence learning. Strategies such as formative feedback, flexible participation policies, and reflective writing assignments can provide alternative pathways for demonstrating understanding without sacrificing content rigor. Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy offers a compelling theoretical foundation for understanding trauma-informed teaching. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) argues that education must be dialogical, liberatory, and grounded in the lived experiences of learners. He critiques the "banking model" of education, in which students are treated as passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, he advocates for a model of co-creation, where students and teachers engage in mutual inquiry.

Trauma-informed pedagogy reflects this commitment to shared agency. Rather than viewing trauma as a pathology to be managed privately, TIP recognizes trauma as a context for learning, one that shapes identity, perception, and participation. Instructors are encouraged to view students not as "at risk," but as resilient individuals navigating complex internal and external landscapes (Harper & Neubauer, 2021). Classroom practices rooted in critical pedagogy, such as co-constructed norms, open dialogue, and inclusive content, help create a learning space where trauma can be acknowledged and integrated rather than denied or suppressed.

In business education, this lens is compelling. Business students are often taught to value objectivity, competition, and efficiency. However, these values can be reexamined through a trauma-informed and critical lens. For example, class discussions about ethics, leadership, or organizational behavior can be expanded to include topics like psychological safety, toxic workplace cultures, and trauma-informed leadership models. This not only deepens the curriculum but also prepares students for the emotional complexity of real-world professional environments (Sambrook & Stewart, 2019).

The application of TIP in business and accounting classrooms is still emergent in the literature, but several key opportunities have been identified. First, trauma-informed principles align well with efforts to diversify and humanize the business curriculum. For instance, incorporating case studies that reflect diverse lived experiences or inviting students to reflect on ethical dilemmas from their own perspectives supports TIP while meeting core business learning objectives (Bosse & Clark, 2021).

Second, TIP can address the hidden curriculum of emotional suppression often found in accounting education. Students are implicitly taught to detach from emotional content in favor of rationality and calculation. However, accounting professionals frequently deal with high-stakes decision-making, ethical conflicts, and interpersonal dynamics, all of which require emotional intelligence and resilience. Embedding trauma-informed practices into accounting pedagogy can help students build these competencies alongside technical skills.

Finally, TIP is relevant to faculty as well. Many business instructors carry their own unaddressed traumas, which may impact how they teach and respond to students. A trauma-informed classroom benefits not only students but also instructors by creating a culture of compassion, boundaries, and self-awareness (McChesney, 2024).



Trauma is not simply an emotional experience; it is a neurological event with significant cognitive consequences. Students exposed to trauma, whether acute or chronic, often experience cognitive symptoms such as impaired concentration, reduced working memory, hypervigilance, and emotional dysregulation (Garrity, 2022; Schroeder et al., 2024). These symptoms can severely impact academic functioning, particularly in cognitively demanding fields like accounting, where precision, logic, and sequential processing are essential.

Neuroscience research confirms that trauma activates the amygdala, the brain's emotional alarm system, and inhibits the prefrontal cortex, which governs decision-making and executive function (Bosse & Clark, 2021). As a result, students experiencing trauma may find it difficult to focus during lectures, organize complex tasks, or manage deadlines, all of which are central to success in higher education. These effects are often misinterpreted by faculty as laziness, disorganization, or lack of motivation.

“The inability to meet academic expectations is often seen as a character flaw, when in reality, it may be a physiological response to chronic stress” (Gunderson & Mrozla-Toscano, 2023, p. 86).

For accounting students, whose coursework often requires sustained attention, rapid recall, and strict adherence to procedural logic, trauma-related cognitive impairments can quietly derail academic trajectories. Without trauma-informed teaching, students may fail not because they lack aptitude, but because their brains are locked in survival mode.

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a powerful lens through which to understand how trauma affects learning. The hierarchy, often depicted as a pyramid, begins with physiological needs and safety needs. Only after these foundational needs are met can

individuals pursue higher-order needs such as belonging, esteem, and ultimately, self-actualization, the cognitive and creative capacities most valued in academic settings.

In trauma-affected students, those foundational needs are often unmet. Students may be experiencing food insecurity, housing instability, grief, anxiety, or interpersonal violence. When these conditions persist, the brain remains in a state of hyper-alertness, making it nearly impossible to engage in abstract reasoning, collaborative problem-solving, or reflective writing, all essential skills in business and accounting curricula (Sinko et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2025).

Trauma-informed pedagogy does not attempt to replace therapy, nor does it lower academic standards. Instead, it recognizes where students are in Maslow's hierarchy and designs learning environments that help them ascend it. For example, an instructor who builds in flexibility for assignment deadlines or offers multiple ways to demonstrate understanding is not making a course "easier"; they are creating conditions in which learning is neurologically possible.

Assessment is often the highest-stakes component of academic life, especially in professional programs like accounting, where midterms, finals, and capstone projects are weighted heavily. However, traditional forms of assessment can be retraumatizing for students who associate high-stakes evaluation with fear, inadequacy, or failure.

Trauma-informed assessment requires a shift from an "audit" mindset to a "learning" mindset, a framework familiar to accounting educators, who themselves distinguish between procedural compliance and analytical understanding. Oehme et al. (2019) advocate for low-stakes assessments and formative feedback loops, which allow students to build confidence and competence incrementally. Similarly, Garrity (2022) suggests that allowing students to choose between project formats enhances autonomy and reduces anxiety.

In business education, these approaches are highly compatible with the trend toward competency-based learning, which prioritizes skill mastery over seat time. Trauma-informed assessment does not reject accountability; it reframes it. Students are still required to meet learning outcomes, but the pathway to doing so is more inclusive, strategic, and supportive of individual variation in emotional and cognitive readiness.

Instructors might also consider incorporating reflective writing prompts that ask students to connect course content with personal values, life experience, or ethical dilemmas. These prompts serve dual purposes: they deepen content engagement and allow students to process emotions in an academically meaningful way. For accounting students, this might include reflections on ethical conflicts in financial reporting or emotional responses to case-based dilemmas.

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), though not one of the four primary frameworks used in this paper, provides an additional layer of relevance. The theory distinguishes between Intrinsic load (inherent to the task), Extraneous load (caused by poor instruction), and Germane load (beneficial mental effort for learning).

Trauma increases extraneous load, making it harder for students to manage even basic academic tasks. TIP aims to reduce extraneous load through clear instructions, supportive scaffolding, and emotional predictability, allowing students to focus on germane processing. For accounting faculty, this may involve breaking down complex journal entry tasks into smaller steps, offering modeling videos, or providing structured rubrics, all of which enhance clarity and reduce stress.

Theme two establishes that trauma impairs not just emotions but cognitive functioning, making it a direct obstacle to academic success. Drawing on neuroscience and Maslow's theory,

the literature supports trauma-informed strategies that rebuild safety, autonomy, and regulation, which are all precursors to higher-order thinking. In business and accounting classrooms, where cognitive rigor is essential, TIP is not a detour but a bridge to success.

Despite the growing evidence in support of trauma-informed pedagogy, implementation within higher education, especially in professional disciplines like accounting and business, remains sporadic and inconsistent. Faculty resistance, often perceived as individual reluctance, is more accurately understood as a systemic outcome shaped by institutional culture, disciplinary norms, and misaligned incentives (Smith & Held, 2022; Nguyen, 2025).

Business education, in particular, is governed by a culture that emphasizes outcomes such as job placement, accreditation standards, and professional preparedness. Instructors are often trained to prioritize technical competence, measurable learning objectives, and industry alignment, leaving little room for pedagogical experimentation or emotional consideration in course delivery (Campbell, 2022). Within this framework, trauma-informed strategies may be seen as "soft," unquantifiable, or inappropriate for the rigor expected in accounting and finance.

This is especially problematic because accounting students are among the most vulnerable to chronic academic stress. They face high stakes, such as CPA exam preparation, GPA cutoffs for internships, and structured program tracks, often with little emotional scaffolding from faculty. Without institutional endorsement or structured training, instructors may feel unsupported or unsure of how to incorporate TIP without compromising standards (Thompson & Waddell, 2021).

Faculty behavior is shaped not just by personal beliefs but by incentive structures embedded in departmental, college, and university systems. In many institutions, research output, student evaluations, and course rigor are prioritized in tenure and promotion reviews. At the

same time, pedagogical innovation, especially trauma-informed approaches, is undervalued or invisible in evaluation criteria (Harper & Neubauer, 2021).

In accounting departments, this is often more pronounced. Faculty are expected to maintain disciplinary expertise, industry credibility, and publication in peer-reviewed journals, which leaves little room for professional development in student mental health or trauma-informed teaching. Instructors who express interest in TIP may face implicit discouragement from peers or administration who view such work as outside the scope of accounting education (Palmer, 2020).

Moreover, there is a pervasive belief that trauma-informed methods compromise standards or coddle students. This misconception reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of TIP. As the literature shows, trauma-informed pedagogy does not lower expectations; it adapts learning conditions so that expectations can realistically be met by a broader and more diverse range of students (Davidson, 2017; Wells, 2023).

“Trauma-informed teaching is not about doing less — it’s about doing better. We stop asking, ‘Why aren’t students performing?’ and start asking, ‘What might be getting in the way of their performance?’” (Smith & Held, 2022, p. 97)

Until institutions change the metrics by which faculty are assessed, trauma-informed methods will remain marginalized as a “nice idea” but not a strategic priority.

Systems Theory, as applied in organizational studies, posits that institutions are composed of interdependent subsystems, such as faculty, administration, student services, and leadership, that must function in coordinated alignment to achieve meaningful change (Jose et al., 2025). Trauma-informed reform, therefore, cannot be implemented solely at the individual

classroom level. It must be supported by system-wide policies, values, and training infrastructure that reinforce and normalize such practices.

In business schools, this means aligning TIP with accreditation standards, curriculum design processes, teaching centers, faculty development workshops, and administrative messaging that values psychological safety and inclusive excellence.

Systems Theory also suggests that resistance to change is not necessarily a function of opposition, but often the result of misalignment between system components. For example, faculty may be interested in TIP but lack training, clarity about expectations, or support from chairs and deans. Alternatively, mental health services may exist on campus, but without integration into the academic mission, they remain siloed and underutilized (Freeman & Simonsen, 2020).

A systems approach emphasizes feedback loops and structural redesign. Institutions serious about trauma-informed education must embed TIP into faculty onboarding, curriculum review processes, and annual performance evaluations, not just through optional workshops but as part of strategic planning and accreditation compliance.

For trauma-informed pedagogy to gain traction in accounting and business programs, systems-level thinking is essential. The accounting curriculum is often delivered in compressed sequences, with little flexibility for students experiencing trauma. Faculty have limited time for training, and few teaching assistants or course designers to help implement changes.

However, these same programs are under increasing pressure to demonstrate student retention, inclusivity, and workplace readiness, outcomes that TIP can help deliver. Business education that embraces TIP not only improves classroom equity but also aligns with employer demands for emotional intelligence, adaptability, and ethical reasoning.

Systems change in this context might include faculty orientation modules on TIP and mental health literacy, curriculum committees that review syllabi for trauma-sensitive design, peer mentoring systems for implementing TIP in technical courses, and incentives or release time for TIP implementation projects. Without these system-level supports, TIP will remain an individual burden rather than an institutional solution.

Theme three reveals that faculty resistance to trauma-informed teaching is primarily systemic; a function of structural disincentives, disciplinary culture, and institutional misalignment. Systems Theory provides a roadmap for scaling trauma-informed approaches by aligning goals, resources, and incentives across university structures. In business and accounting programs, systemic change will be essential for TIP to move from the margins to the mainstream.

Transformational Leadership Theory describes a leadership style in which leaders motivate and inspire others by creating a vision, fostering intellectual growth, building trust, and modeling integrity (Bass & Riggio, 2006). This model is particularly suited to environments undergoing adaptive or cultural change, like higher education institutions moving toward trauma-informed teaching. In contrast to transactional leadership, which focuses on rewards and punishments, transformational leadership creates the emotional and strategic momentum needed to reimagine how teaching is done.

In the context of TIP, transformational leadership begins with recognizing trauma-informed teaching as a strategic, institutional priority, not just a personal choice of individual faculty members. Academic leaders must articulate a clear rationale for TIP, align it with institutional values, and provide resources for implementation. Without leadership buy-in, TIP remains a fragmented effort.

“Pedagogical change requires more than faculty goodwill. It requires leadership that is emotionally literate, structurally empowered, and politically strategic” (McChesney, 2024, p. 81).

Transformational leaders in academia can activate this shift by demonstrating vulnerability, cultivating empathy across organizational tiers, and leveraging their influence to remove barriers for faculty adoption of TIP.

The literature increasingly frames TIP as more than just a compassionate teaching model; it is a form of strategic innovation. As institutions face declining enrollment, rising dropout rates, and worsening student mental health metrics, trauma-informed approaches offer evidence-based methods for increasing retention, student engagement, and academic success (Davidson, 2017; Sinko et al., 2023).

In this sense, trauma-informed pedagogy aligns with institutional effectiveness goals, making it a valuable tool not only for student welfare but for strategic planning, accreditation, and mission fulfillment. For example, TIP can be linked to retention strategies, as students are more likely to persist when they feel seen, supported, and safe. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives can be moved forward, as TIP helps reduce the impact of systemic and interpersonal trauma that disproportionately affects BIPOC and first-generation students. Employer-readiness can benefit, as TIP cultivates emotional intelligence, adaptability, and ethical reasoning, all traits considered essential in the workplace.

Transformational leadership helps bridge the gap between TIP’s emotional logic and institutional logic, making the case that trauma-informed practice is not a disruption but a solution.



Leadership in business and accounting schools plays a particularly influential role in the adoption of TIP. As gatekeepers of curriculum, culture, and hiring, deans and department chairs are uniquely positioned to drive cultural change.

Several key leadership actions stand out in the literature. The first is modeling vulnerability and emotional intelligence. Business leaders who are willing to acknowledge the emotional realities of their faculty and students can shift the tone of the entire institution. When academic leaders share stories, normalize mental health challenges, or advocate for trauma-aware policies, they reduce stigma and create space for cultural transformation (Palmer, 2020).

The second is restructuring faculty development. Leadership must ensure that TIP is not just presented as a one-off workshop but integrated into faculty orientation, pedagogy institutes, and evaluation criteria. Business educators, particularly in accounting, need structured support to align TIP with content-heavy course requirements. Chairs can embed TIP into teaching goals, peer mentoring, or even merit review processes (Wells, 2023).

The third is strategic framing for accreditation and performance. Business schools must meet accrediting body standards, which increasingly value inclusive teaching and student-centered learning. Transformational leaders can frame TIP as a response to these demands, not as a soft or extracurricular initiative but as a tool for excellence and accountability. TIP can be embedded into strategic plans, program learning outcomes, and assessment metrics.

Finally, the fourth is creating cross-functional coalitions. Chairs and deans can foster collaboration between student services, mental health offices, and academic departments, ensuring that TIP is not siloed. These coalitions can support faculty in implementing TIP, provide referrals for students, and host events that normalize trauma-sensitive discourse.

An important insight from the literature is that TIP is not only a practice for current leaders but also a leadership development opportunity. Business education itself must begin to train future professionals to lead trauma-informed organizations. Courses in organizational behavior, human resources, and strategic leadership should include modules on psychological safety in teams, trauma-informed management practices, and the neurobiology of stress and performance. By embedding TIP principles into the curriculum, institutions both practice and teach transformational leadership.

Theme four demonstrates that institutional leadership is the linchpin of trauma-informed transformation. While individual instructors can take meaningful steps, systemic adoption requires vision, resourcing, and alignment, all of which fall within the scope of transformational leadership. In business and accounting education, deans and department chairs must champion TIP not as a pedagogical trend but as a strategic, inclusive, and evidence-informed model of leadership.

### **Ethical Implications**

The failure to acknowledge or address trauma in higher education is not simply a pedagogical oversight; it is an ethical breach. Institutions of higher learning, particularly professional programs like business and accounting, operate under moral obligations not to harm, foster equitable access to education, and prepare students for meaningful participation in both professional life and civil society. When trauma-informed principles are ignored, institutions risk compounding the psychological distress of students, reinforcing systemic inequities, and perpetuating environments that are cognitively and emotionally unsafe.

Trauma-informed teaching, therefore, is not only a compassionate response; it is an ethical imperative. This section explores the moral dimensions of trauma-informed pedagogy,

notably when such practices are excluded from faculty development, curriculum design, or institutional policy. The analysis centers on three core ethical implications: (1) the moral duty of care, (2) the ethics of equity and access, and (3) the consequences of retraumatization.

Faculty members and academic leaders hold a duty of care toward students. While they are not expected to serve as therapists, they are ethically obligated to create conditions conducive to learning, including addressing known barriers to academic success. As the literature has demonstrated, trauma is one of the most prevalent and under-addressed barriers to student engagement, retention, and achievement (Garrity, 2022; Wells, 2023).

In business and accounting education, where professional ethics are often emphasized in coursework, it is ethically inconsistent to teach integrity, transparency, and responsibility while ignoring the relational and emotional dimensions of the classroom itself. For example, asking students to engage in case studies on ethical leadership or decision-making while maintaining a classroom culture that is emotionally unsafe or rigidly punitive undermines the very values the curriculum seeks to promote.

Faculty who refuse to adapt their teaching in light of evidence on trauma and learning, whether out of habit, fear, or institutional neglect, risk violating their ethical responsibility to support diverse learners equitably. Just as educators are expected to make accommodations for physical disabilities, trauma-informed practices function as cognitive and emotional accommodations that enable students to meet learning objectives.

Trauma is not evenly distributed across student populations. Research consistently shows that students from marginalized groups, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation college students, and low-income students, are disproportionately impacted by trauma, both before and during college (Harper & Neubauer, 2021; Sinko et al., 2023).

To ignore trauma in the classroom, then, is to reinforce structural inequity. Trauma-informed pedagogy operates as a form of educational justice, ensuring that students affected by trauma are not silently excluded through rigid policies, emotionally indifferent faculty, or inaccessible learning environments. When TIP is absent, the classroom becomes a site of retraumatization and exclusion, particularly for those already on the margins.

For business and accounting students, the stakes are even higher. These programs are often the first steps to upward mobility, licensure, and professional networks. Students who drop out due to unaddressed trauma are not simply losing academic standing; they are losing access to the very systems that could improve their lives. Ethically, this creates an institutional responsibility to ensure that trauma-affected students are not systematically filtered out of programs that could offer economic and professional empowerment.

“Equity without trauma awareness is incomplete. A classroom that ignores trauma is a classroom that ignores who students are” (Nguyen, 2025, p. 144).

Perhaps the most immediate ethical concern is the potential for retraumatization; the experience of being re-exposed to trauma cues in a way that mirrors the original harm. This can occur when students are forced to engage with course content that is emotionally triggering without support, or when faculty respond to emotional distress with indifference, sarcasm, or punitive measures.

In accounting and business education, where case-based instruction, public speaking, simulations, and high-stakes testing are standard, the risk of retraumatization is often overlooked. For instance, a student who has survived a controlling or abusive relationship may find the rigid structure and power dynamics of traditional accounting education, with its emphasis on “correctness,” authority, and speed, emotionally overwhelming or paralyzing. Without trauma-

informed training, faculty may interpret a student's silence, lateness, or emotional expression as a lack of professionalism, rather than a trauma response.

Ethically, retraumatization in academic settings is preventable harm. Institutions and educators who know, or reasonably should know, that trauma interferes with learning, yet take no action to mitigate its effects, are complicit in creating unsafe environments. TIP functions as a protective measure, allowing faculty to anticipate trauma responses, set clear and compassionate boundaries, and maintain academic standards without emotional damage.

In sum, trauma-informed teaching is not only pedagogically effective but also ethically necessary. The failure to implement TIP practices implicates institutions in perpetuating harm, denying access, and contradicting their own professed commitments to equity, care, and student development. In business and accounting education, where ethical reasoning is part of the curriculum, there is an even greater responsibility to model ethical behavior in teaching practice. TIP is not an indulgence or a luxury; it is a reflection of educational integrity.

The following section will present a set of evidence-based policy recommendations grounded in the findings of this paper and designed to support the ethical, sustainable implementation of trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education institutions.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The research presented in this paper clearly demonstrates that trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) is not only supported by evidence but ethically and strategically necessary for student success in higher education. However, implementing TIP at scale requires clear policies, not just good intentions. The following policy recommendations aim to transition trauma-informed teaching from isolated faculty efforts to an institutional standard, particularly in professional programs like accounting and business, where traditional norms have limited TIP adoption.

These recommendations are structured at three levels: (1) instructional, (2) departmental/programmatic, and (3) institutional/policy infrastructure. Each tier offers practical, scalable steps to support trauma-informed education while preserving academic integrity and professional preparedness.

## 1. Instructional-Level Recommendations

### A. Embed Trauma-Informed Practices into Course Design

Faculty should be encouraged and supported in redesigning syllabi, assessments, and classroom interactions using trauma-informed principles. Institutions can provide sample trauma-informed syllabus language, include content warnings and flexibility options as best practices, and train faculty in inclusive and emotionally intelligent grading strategies. For accounting instructors, this might mean offering optional resubmissions of major assignments, using low-stakes practice quizzes to reduce performance anxiety, and replacing punitive late policies with structured grace periods.

### B. Integrate Reflective and Ethical Pedagogies

Accounting and business courses can incorporate reflection-based assignments that ask students to connect course content to ethical dilemmas, emotional decision-making, or stress management, all of which are relevant to real-world leadership. Faculty can be trained to use journaling prompts tied to accounting ethics or business cases and to encourage dialogue around failure, resilience, and well-being.

## 2. Program- and Department-Level Recommendations

### A. Require TIP Training in Faculty Development

Departments should mandate trauma-informed pedagogy training as part of new faculty orientation and continuing education. These trainings should be discipline-specific, developed in

partnership with counseling centers or teaching and learning centers, and built into annual teaching review cycles. Accounting and business departments should also integrate trauma-informed practices into adjunct onboarding processes, peer review of teaching forms, and mentorship structures for junior faculty.

#### B. Create “Pedagogical Equity” Standards for Curriculum Review

Departmental curriculum committees should adopt a “pedagogical equity audit” framework. This process reviews whether course content and delivery are trauma-aware, whether student needs are reflected in assignment timelines and class norms, and whether support services are embedded in syllabi. This approach ensures consistency across sections of high-stakes courses like Intermediate Accounting or Managerial Finance, so students receive support regardless of the instructor.

### 3. Institutional and Strategic Policy Recommendations

#### A. Include TIP in Strategic Plans and Accreditation Language

Institutional strategic plans should explicitly name trauma-informed teaching as a value, aligning it with broader goals related to retention, equity, and inclusion. For business schools, trauma-informed pedagogy can be written into Assurance of Learning goals for accreditation, learning outcome rubrics focused on emotional intelligence and leadership, and mission statements for program review. Leadership can advocate trauma-informed practice as a critical link between educational access, academic success, and professional readiness.

#### B. Incentivize and Recognize TIP Efforts

Institutions should implement reward structures that recognize faculty who adopt trauma-informed practices, including stipends for trauma-informed course redesigns, highlighting trauma-informed work in teaching awards and promotion files, and including engagement with

trauma-informed approaches in student evaluations. These policies send a clear message: trauma-informed pedagogy is part of institutional excellence, not personal charity.

Trauma-informed teaching cannot remain the responsibility of individual “compassionate” instructors; it must be structurally and strategically integrated into the way institutions function. These recommendations offer a roadmap for sustainable, measurable, and ethically sound implementation. For business and accounting programs in particular, TIP is a key strategy to balance academic rigor with emotional accessibility, ethical reasoning, and inclusive leadership development.

### **Summary**

This paper has explored the urgent and multifaceted need for trauma-informed teaching in higher education, with particular attention to its implications for business and accounting education. Grounded in a personal and scholarly understanding of trauma, the paper began with the premise that trauma is both commonplace and consequential in college classrooms, and that its effects on student learning, engagement, and academic performance demand a systemic, research-based response.

Through an extensive literature review and thematic analysis across pedagogical, psychological, and institutional perspectives, this paper has demonstrated that trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP) is not simply an instructional trend; it is a critical framework for academic equity, student success, and ethical educational leadership.

The central problem addressed by this paper is the absence of systemic trauma-informed teaching practices in higher education, particularly within professional disciplines such as accounting and business. Despite rising rates of mental health challenges, increased visibility of trauma’s impact on learning, and a growing body of evidence supporting TIP, many institutions



remain slow to adapt. Faculty lack training, departments lack incentives, and policies often fail to account for the cognitive and emotional barriers students bring into the classroom.

This paper sought to answer the following core questions:

1. What is the scope of trauma's impact on student learning in higher education?
2. How can trauma-informed pedagogy address that impact while preserving academic and professional standards?
3. What systemic changes are required to support implementation?
4. What are the ethical implications of failing to act?
5. How can business and accounting programs lead — rather than follow — in this shift?

The literature review revealed several significant findings. Trauma impairs cognitive functioning in ways that directly interfere with learning. Trauma-informed teaching practices, including flexibility, co-created classroom norms, inclusive content, and psychological safety, have a strong evidence base for improving academic engagement and retention. Professional disciplines like accounting and business education lag behind other fields in adopting TIP due to disciplinary norms, accreditation pressures, and misconceptions about rigor. Faculty often lack institutional support, training, or recognition for TIP implementation, creating a misalignment between student needs and structural conditions. Trauma-informed pedagogy is particularly relevant for marginalized student populations, making it essential to equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. These findings establish TIP not just as a compassionate innovation but as a strategic imperative for contemporary higher education.

The thematic analysis applied four major theoretical frameworks to interpret the findings. Critical Pedagogy illuminated how trauma-informed teaching disrupts hierarchical, “banking”

models of education, replacing them with collaborative, human-centered approaches. In business education, this model challenges overly transactional views of teaching and learning.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explained how students cannot achieve self-actualization or cognitive mastery without safety and belonging. TIP helps students ascend this hierarchy through relational trust and psychological scaffolding.

Systems Theory revealed that TIP cannot succeed as an isolated classroom practice. Without institutional coordination, trauma-informed strategies are unsustainable. Systems-level change is needed to align faculty development, curriculum design, and student support services.

Transformational Leadership Theory underscores the vital role of academic leaders, particularly in business schools, in modeling, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed initiatives. Leadership must frame TIP as a form of institutional innovation, not a private burden on individual faculty.

Together, these themes reinforced the need for a whole-institution approach, rather than fragmented or optional practices.

From an ethical standpoint, trauma-informed pedagogy is essential to any claim of educational justice. Failure to account for trauma in course design and faculty practice results in avoidable harm, deepens equity gaps, and undermines the integrity of the academic mission. The ethical implications are even more pronounced in business and accounting education, where professional ethics are taught but not always modeled in pedagogical environments.

Strategically, TIP aligns with broader institutional goals:

- Increasing retention and graduation rates
- Improving student mental health metrics
- Meeting accreditation standards related to inclusion and effectiveness

- Preparing students for the emotional complexity of the workplace

TIP is therefore not just ethically justified, but it is strategically essential. The work of implementing trauma-informed education is complex, long-term, and deeply relational. It cannot be solved with a single workshop or policy memo. Instead, it requires a cultural shift, one in which compassion is treated not as an individual trait but as an institutional competency.

This paper calls on institutions, particularly colleges of business and accounting, to lead in this transformation. These programs are training future professionals, managers, auditors, and policy-makers. If they cannot model trauma-informed principles in their own classrooms, how can they expect their graduates to lead with emotional intelligence, resilience, and ethical clarity in the field?

By fostering strategic leadership, engaging in collaborative policy design, and prioritizing continuous research, we can elevate trauma-informed pedagogy from the margins to a central role in academic excellence.

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