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Sasha Conley, Aaron Ferguson, Alana Kumbier

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# Supporting Students with Histories of Trauma in Libraries: A Collaboration of Accessibility and Library Services

SASHA CONLEY, AARON FERGUSON, AND ALANA KUMBIER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores methods for building relevant, accessible academic services in the context of a liberal arts college with a growing population of students with psychological disabilities. This work is situated in a learning commons, where academic-support programs, including accessibility services and library services, work collaboratively with a shared goal of getting students to access support earlier and more often in their college careers. The college is home to many students who identify as holding marginalized identities, including those who are LGBTQ+, disabled, students of color, and/or international students, and are thus particularly susceptible to discrimination (Roberts et al. 2010; Seng et al. 2012; Ellis, n.d.; Harrell 2017; Coulter and Rankin 2017; Polaris, n.d.; Proctor, Semega, and Kollar 2016). In consultations with staff, students often name past academic experience as an underlying cause for academic struggle. Exploring this connection, staff observed that histories of trauma and marginalization can make it difficult for students to trust staff and have positive academic experiences. Through action research, the authors developed methods to better support students, including those with histories of trauma. The authors share their methods and suggestions to support readers interested in bringing this work into their communities.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, the authors present a holistic, trauma-aware<sup>1</sup> approach to student academic support. This approach evolved during the development of the Knowledge Commons (KC), a centralized hub for academic

support in the Harold F. Johnson Library Center at Hampshire College. The authors focus on the collaboration between library staff and the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services (OARS) staff, and the coevolution of the KC and the Holistic Learning Program (HLP). OARS staff developed HLP as a partner program in the KC to normalize academic struggle and empower disabled and nondisabled students with tools and strategies for academic success. HLP staff work with students to help them understand their strengths and challenges to hone their learning process. An action-research approach serves as the framework for HLP's iterative development. The authors note problems prevalent in the community and remark on the goals and values they developed to address those concerns, as gleaned through HLP student consultations. The authors articulate their own process and discuss methods they employed to increase program sustainability. Finally, they outline a set of strategies that proved effective for supporting students with histories of trauma.

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT

### *The Knowledge Commons*

The Knowledge Commons is a centralized, vibrant center of academic-support services for students at Hampshire College. The KC is both a physical space in the library and a conceptual frame for the intentional collaboration between academic-support programs, previously spread across campus.<sup>2</sup> The mission of the KC is to cultivate a hub within the library to revitalize a campus center, centralize resources, and build community in order to support students in confidently navigating those resources at crucial points during their time at Hampshire. To this end, the KC brings ambassadors from several academic-support programs, which are called "partner programs," into the library in the form of alumni fellows and peer mentors. When students come to the KC, they can access help with research, academic strategies, executive function, writing, quantitative skills, public speaking, interpersonal communication, technology, media production, and gallery installation.

At the administrative level, an infrastructure team, comprised of library staff, oversees the development of administrative protocols and resources that keep the physical space running smoothly. "Functional managers" are staff who represent the academic partner programs in the KC by offering consultations and supervising and training fellows and mentors. Alumni fellows and undergraduate peer mentors provide much of the direct student support in the KC through one-on-one consultations and group programs. The KC model allows students the choice of working with experienced staff who are a degree removed from student life or with individuals close in age who have also experienced being a student at Hampshire.

Fellows and mentors are credible, trustworthy resources for students because they, themselves, have navigated Hampshire's curriculum. Students customize their course of study as they pursue an individualized, self-directed academic concentration. Fellows and mentors know what it's like to meet the demands of Hampshire pedagogy, which is project- and writing-intensive. They have shared the deeply complicated social and emotional challenges of Hampshire student life. That shared knowledge can be an invaluable support for students, encouraging them to recognize that those challenges can also be barriers to academic success.

Each alumni fellow trains for their position with the manager for their program. In this supervisory relationship, fellows learn how to provide consultations in their area of practice, deepen their subject knowledge, and develop resources to facilitate consultations with students. Managers offer instruction on protecting student privacy and help fellows navigate their new staff role. Fellows receive cross-training in making referrals between programs, working in the KC space, using library and campus IT systems, negotiating student-staff boundaries, and navigating workplace expectations and culture. They also participate in a College-wide employee orientation, where they learn about their responsibilities regarding FERPA and Title IX issues. After fellows experienced challenges maintaining boundaries with students in consultations, KC staff incorporated a workshop into fellows' training with the director of College Counseling Services on maintaining boundaries and crisis-referral practices.

Peer mentors train for their positions in program-specific ways. For example, mentors for the Transformative Speaking Program develop their praxis in a semester-long course dedicated to peer mentorship for oral communication.<sup>3</sup> Many fellows also shadow functional managers in consultation, with the permission of the student, to gain insight into what student support looks like from the perspective of professional student support staff. While fellows' own experiences give a solid context within which to begin their work, the challenges of the quick student to staff transition and intensity of the role requires a rapid pace of training and high level of support from their specific program and the entire KC team.

#### *Accessibility Services and the Library*

Before staff partnered to build the KC, students experienced academic-support services as discrete and disconnected, and staff had limited opportunities to collaborate. Library and OARS staff were eager to connect, however, and benefited from the institutional, structural, and financial support provided by the grant and the KC.

During the development of HLP, staff noted that collaboration between OARS and the library was becoming increasingly essential for staff and students, due to the fact that there are more self-identified students with disabilities in college, and as a result, in academic libraries, than there ever

have been (Goodman 2017; Horn, Berkthold and Bobbitt, 1999; NCES, n.d.). Partially explaining this trend is the fact that, unlike the generations before them, many disabled students in college today were able to thrive in their education environments and make it to college, with the help of accommodations provided to them under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (formerly the Education for All Handicapped Children Act from 1975).<sup>4</sup> As a result, all staff require additional resources and training to understand how to best support this population. Entering into a collaborative relationship through the KC afforded OARS staff a valuable opportunity to discuss accessibility issues across campus.

At Hampshire, the percentage of the student body who disclosed a disability to OARS in 2018 was 32 percent, 64 percent of whom had a psychological disability, many of whom also had other co-occurring diagnoses. The most recent national average of college students self-reporting disabilities available at the time of writing this paper was 11 percent in 2012 (Snyder and Dillow 2013). Prior to 2015, OARS, formerly known as Disabilities Services, was only staffed by a part-time coordinator, so there are no comparable 2012 Hampshire statistics. If there is a significantly larger population of self-reporting disabled students at Hampshire, OARS staff hypothesize that Hampshire's occurrence rate is also higher than the national average. Many students select Hampshire because it offers a sense of freedom with its self-designed curriculum and narrative assessment system, which is appealing to those who have felt constricted by mistreatment or trauma, especially in a traditional academic environment. Though Hampshire likely has a higher occurrence rate of psychological disabilities than some other institutions, the incidence of mental-health symptoms reported on college campuses is of increasing concern to educators across the country.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Marginalization and Trauma: Feeling Safe in the Library*

Psychological trauma is fairly common, affecting 70 percent of adults in the United States at some point in their lives (Sidran Institute, n.d.). *Trauma* refers to “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation,” experienced firsthand or by a loved one, witnessed, or being repeatedly exposed to the details of a trauma (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 271).

Trauma is particularly common for individuals with marginalized identities. A “marginalized identity” refers to an identity that garners discrimination: for example, people who are of color, indigenous, undocumented, refugees, low-income, disabled, LGBTQ+, women, and/or immigrants, es-

pecially those who are not fluent speakers of the predominant language(s) in their country of residence, or who speak with an accent. These populations are susceptible to a wide variety of injustices such as violence; homelessness; discrimination in housing, healthcare, and education; unemployment; poverty; wage gaps; sexual assault; human trafficking; and incarceration. Many of those negative experiences can and do result in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may or may not lead to clinically significant PTSD (Roberts et al. 2010; Seng et al. 2012; Ellis, n.d.; Harrell 2017; Coulter and Rankin, 2017; Polaris, n.d.; Proctor, Semega, and Kollar 2016).

An individual can be affected by historical trauma without having been present for particular events. One may feel stress around an issue described to them by their community, coming to hold embodied knowledge of the way their community has been historically persecuted, displaced, and attacked, such as with indigenous people or individuals whose ancestors experienced the Holocaust or slavery (Brave Heart et al. 2011).

As a result of the associated challenges, marginalized and traumatized individuals are in a position to significantly benefit from the free, abundant resources present in a library that they may not otherwise be able to afford or access. For individuals with a trauma history, social interaction can be filled with hesitancy, fear, or may just be avoided at all costs (National Center for PTSD 2018b). On top of the shame many disabled people feel, in many marginalized groups, especially in communities of color, there are high levels of stigma associated with asking for help or receiving services (Onken and Slaten 2000; NAMI, n.d.[a]; Poteat, German, and Kerrigan 2013). This is in part because people from marginalized groups have historically and often still experience discrimination and violence when they seek support (Chapman, Katz, and Carnes 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015). Therefore, there is a perception that reaching out for help will cause more harm than good and that it is emotionally and physically safer, as well as more financially feasible, to deal with things independently or exclusively with resources provided by individuals who share one's identity, like church counselors and local healers in Black/African American communities. This is perhaps an effective way to reduce the likelihood of enduring a potentially traumatic hardship. However, critically, this also deprives individuals of access to valuable resources outside their community (Eiser and Ellis 2007). As a result, there are movements working to educate healthcare providers to make medical spaces safer for marginalized individuals so they are able to take advantage of these resources without encountering harm and discrimination (Hook et al. 2018; Sekoni et al. 2017; Chapman, Katz, and Carnes 2013). The authors argue that it is critical to do this work within a library context also.

*The Neuropsychology of Trauma*

A stress response occurs when the brain perceives a sign of danger so urgent it must respond automatically, without taking time to stop and think. This helps the body react quickly, so it can perform survival tasks like swerving while driving to avoid obstacles. This is commonly called “fight-or-flight,” which refers to the two most common reactions the body has to imminent danger, preparing for combat or escape, though one may also freeze up, which is the body’s effort to play dead and become numb when neither fight nor flight appear possible (Harvard Medical School 2018).

When one experiences a trauma, a stress response often occurs. During the event, the parts of the brain that help sequence events and orient one in time may shut down. As a result, the traumatic memory is not integrated like a typical memory, firmly rooted in the past. This causes the brain to respond to moments in daily life as if the initial traumatic event was still happening. Behaviors that were once adaptive (e.g., jumping out of the way of a car) appear in response to non-life-threatening or even positive stimuli (e.g., startling when being tapped on the shoulder). These reactions occur in part because automatically responding to urgent danger is more efficient than pausing to determine if the perceived threat is life-threatening, so the automatic response is processed and carried out first. Therefore, the individual does not have the chance to rationally process what was, or is happening, and instead responds to benign stimuli in a similar way to how they responded to their traumatic experience (van der Kolk 2015). This is in part why a survivor of a trauma is often left confused and struggling to understand what occurred, why, and how that event is affecting their present life experiences.

Survivors of trauma may re-experience a trauma anywhere when triggered by a situation or sensation that is reminiscent of it. Survivors may endure re-experiencing while in libraries, especially if they hold trauma that occurred in an educational context or involved authority figures. Re-experiencing can present as flashbacks, becoming overwhelmed, remembering the trauma, or having nightmares. In trying to protect oneself, maladaptive, and at times automatic coping mechanisms such as dissociation (checking out), hypervigilance (always being on guard), and avoidance (neglecting what’s going on and focusing on something else) may be employed (Sidran Institute, n.d.; NIMH 2016; Jones and Cureton 2014). These symptoms can prove extremely challenging to manage in an academic context and may appear to peers and staff as typical behaviors: being distracted, defensive, procrastinating, and feeling uninspired or unengaged. Becoming familiar with the symptoms of trauma can help one understand the value of trauma-based interventions, help staff see where trauma is showing up in the library, and identify when it might be appropriate and beneficial to refer a patron to support.

In addition to flying under the radar, individuals exhibiting symptoms of trauma may run into altercations. Hypervigilance, for example, can cause everyone around an affected individual to appear untrustworthy, which may cause the individual to direct disproportionate levels of anger at others (National Center for PTSD 2018a). An acute example is the phenomenon of transference, in which a specific individual will remind the survivor of a traumatic person from their past, and they will respond accordingly.<sup>5</sup> Transference occurs at times in OARS, with some students fearing OARS staff will recreate traumatic experiences they had with parents, counselors, or teachers. Students may act combative, timid, burst into tears, or not show up for appointments at all. Recognizing transference is extremely beneficial for staff to identify when an individual may be reacting to events or people from their past. This can help staff step back from the present context and know that the response is not personal. Then, working to empower the individual, staff can draw attention to the choices available to the person and help them focus on the present moment.

#### *Why Library Access Matters*

It cannot be overstated that despite the authors' framing from a college perspective, academic libraries are far from the only libraries serving patrons carrying trauma histories. The free and open status of public libraries feels radical in a day and age where housing prices are rising with the population and with gentrification affecting many large cities across the country (Maciag 2015). Public libraries serve for many as a place with free toilets, warm places to sit, to charge electronics or use computers, access a variety of programming, and of course, interact with countless resources in physical and digital formats to acquire knowledge that would not otherwise be accessible (Ayers 2006; Leeder 2010; Giesler 2017; Bardoff 2015).

This radical access has become more crucial than ever now that higher education has become almost compulsory for employment and increasingly expensive (Ma and Baum 2016; Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013). Libraries are essentially the only free, public, wheelchair accessible space where one can create and learn. Libraries are vital resources, especially as more people take to nomadic living due to economic insecurity, with the rise of van life and tiny-house movements, as well as for individuals living on the streets out of severe circumstance. Though their presence is at times contested, homeless individuals have long used libraries as refuge and resource. These individuals are disproportionately folks with histories of trauma, many of whom are people of color, from low income families, and/or veterans (National Coalition for the Homeless 2012; National Coalition for the Homeless, n.d.; Hayes, Zonneville, and Bassuck 2010; Deck and Platt 2015).

With this knowledge that many library users are multiply marginalized, many holding histories of trauma and other psychological disabilities, staff



in the Holistic Learning Program wondered, “How can our library move towards becoming truly accessible and relevant to individuals affected by trauma and marginalization?” To even begin to answer that question, HLP staff had to determine how to work collaboratively in a group of over thirty stakeholders, divided into nine separate programs, to construct unified as well as programmatic goals, and to create and execute action plans with limited time and money.

## METHODS

### *Action Research*

Action research (AR) was the method used to iteratively develop the goals and interventions of HLP. The foundation of AR is a five-step cycle: diagnose, plan, act, evaluate, reflect (Susman and Evered 1978, 588). This cyclical process enables one to address practical issues by balancing observation and planning with action and reflection, linking theory with practice (Denscombe 2010, 127).

Over the course of a semester, staff utilize methods of collecting observations, ideas, and research for program and resource development using collaborative software tools like Trello, Pocket, and Zotero. They also use tools like Qualtrics to document session notes and collect student feedback on their experience in a confidential, online template, hosted on the institution’s servers, and Google Drive to record staff meeting minutes and develop resources. These systems allow staff to routinize information gathering during the semester for deeper consideration during winter and summer break. During this time, student demand for support is much lower, so staff can transition from a “performance zone” to a “learning zone,” as Eduardo Briceno described in his 2016 Ted Talk (Briceno 2016). In the learning zone, staff evaluate collected data, reflect on meetings independently and collaboratively, and create new plans for the upcoming semester. As staff enter a new semester, they enter the performance zone, using the predetermined plans for the present cycle as a guide, turning these plans into action while meeting with students. At the end of a semester, staff re-enter the learning zone, and the cycle continues. As a result of this method, support has become more adequate with the same staff and time available because when faced with problems, instead of just fixing singular circumstances, staff step away from performing to reflect, learn, and create plans that work toward more widespread, sustainable change.

Action research has been an instrumental part of HLP’s efficiency and efficacy. While the number of consultations over the course of a year dropped from 263 to 182 from the first academic year of the grant (2016–2017) to the second (2017–2018), the number of individual students reached through consultation rose from seventy to eighty-six, on-

line resources were accessed on over one thousand occasions, and those supported through programs and workshops rose from 186 to 263. “No-shows” for scheduled appointments also dropped from forty-six to four.

Action research has been criticized by some as lacking rigor, validity, and generalizability and has been accused of producing “research with little action or action with little research” (Dickens and Watkins 1999, 131). Staff remain mindful of this criticism through each AR cycle and have evolved the efficiencies mentioned above to ensure proper balance of action and research. They have applied their methods of AR to the development of three essential program elements: a guiding philosophy, a sustainable consultation model, and a system of resources.

#### *Program Philosophy and Foundational Theory*

In 2015, the college’s Office of Disabilities Services became the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services (OARS). Previously, students with disabilities who felt they would be stigmatized or who weren’t aware they were negotiating a disability did not have many opportunities to encounter support that resonated with their experience (Denhart 2008; Trammell 2009). Reframing the office to focus on accessibility, rather than disability, enabled students to imagine how the office could be useful to them without having to hold a disability identity. HLP takes that effort a step further by offering academic support based in the principles of Universal Design (Burgstahler 2012) and a social model of disability (Oliver 2013) to all students, whether they have a disability or not. In addition to supporting students directly, HLP staff work to empower others in the institution to utilize values, concepts, and resources from HLP in their own work and to infuse concepts of Universal Design across the institution.

In a consultation, staff start with a student’s history of success and encourage them to be the authority on what they want to focus on. Staff suggest new strategies and tools to address an issue at hand. If these resonate with a student, they are encouraged to experiment on their own, and return when they need help problem-solving. In this way, staff are curators of ideas and facilitators of strategy, but allow students to be the authority on their path. This perspective crucially empowers students’ autonomy, as many hold negative or traumatic memories of their self-knowledge being neglected or devalued. HLP works to inspire self-understanding so students can unlearn behaviors that veer toward assimilation and standardization, empowering students to develop in their own time, on their own terms. Through these efforts, despite difficult educational histories, students can become true life-long learners. To this end, HLP seeks to accomplish the following:

- Help students understand their learning profile, strengths and challenges.
- Encourage students to feel empowered to learn by exploring the

technical and adaptive skills they need to align their abilities and strategies for meeting goals.

- Support students to shift from avoidant behaviors to advancing behaviors by unlearning bad habits and negative self-concepts, and replacing them with empowered strategies and trust in their community.
- Foster a sense of self-advocacy in students and foster a community of learners who value different types of abilities and normalize the struggle we all experience.
- Embolden all Hampshire community members with the ability to navigate the world and all its communities with an ever-growing sense of self and intention. (Hampshire College, n.d.)

The HLP philosophy serves as a point against which to check all program activities—to ensure that consultations, workshops, and resources are in service of the goals HLP aims to accomplish. When resources do not resonate with students, it provides an opportunity to reflect on whether the HLP guiding philosophy needs to be adjusted or if that particular resource embodies the philosophy. If that is not the case, inadequate communication with the campus community or the platform of resource delivery may be to blame. In these ways, the program’s philosophy guides development of program staff, resources, and delivery methods, and vice versa.

#### *Consultation Development*

Knowledge Commons alumni fellows transitioned from former students into brand new positions that were defined as they were occupied. This both enabled innovation and created conflict. In consultations, fellows often found themselves treated like friends, rather than professionals, and as a result had more trouble setting boundaries than their managers, with whom students were less likely to share personal anecdotes and emotional challenges. The flexibility of their positions awarded alumni fellows the opportunity to advocate for the issues that were affecting the student body most severely, while building the KC and HLP from the ground up.

Eager to address the full scope of issues impacting students, beginning with those most pressing, KC staff worked to support students holistically, providing support with any problem brought into consultation. After a semester, staff realized that for most students, academic issues tended to be reflective of something deeper. In search of answers, HLP staff members independently reviewed their session notes over the past semester to identify key issues raised by each student and then ranked topics by prevalence. Both raters then met to converge their observations into one ranked list of topics to draw conclusions about issues most prevalent in HLP consultations.

Many topics aligned with HLP’s role in facilitating academic success: *academic tools and strategies*, or time management and study skills; *advising*, covering academic requirements and course-related strategy; *accommoda-*

*tion support*, for assistance implementing accommodations and self-advocacy with faculty; and *developmental skills*, or help with goal-setting, habits, and learning strengths. However, two sets of additional topics emerged that fell outside the initial concept of HLP's scope: *self and community concept* and *mental and physical health*.

*Self and community concept.* Issues pertaining to self and community concept were raised in 19 percent of consultations during the first semester of HLP. This refers to students' perception of themselves and the exhibition of negative self-talk and self confidence in regard to personal or academic life. These topics also refer to issues students experience with their community, such as difficulty feeling connected to peers and staff and having trouble trusting and feeling trusted by the community. These concepts are not typical to what one would think of as academic-success topics, but when approaching student success from a holistic perspective, it's clear these issues impact one's ability to focus and to feel confident reaching out for help, and affect one's ability to stay at school.

*Mental and physical health.* Issues of mental and physical health arose in 21 percent of coaching meetings during the first semester of HLP. These topics cover managing health issues and accessing care. Health affects a student's ability to thrive academically and thus surfaces in Knowledge Commons consultations. From a holistic perspective, these topics are not outside of the realm of academic success. However, some of these consultations involved crisis intervention, supporting students describing self-harm or severe depression in themselves or their peers. This put staff in a position of attempting to assist students in areas outside the bounds of their training, causing significant stress. It became clear that a line needed to exist between support offered in the KC and that which is best addressed through referral to a mental health or medical professional. It was in the context of trying to define that line, and how HLP staff could responsibly approach and integrate these topics into consultations, that the team became aware of the concepts of *trauma-informed practice* and *cultural humility*.

*Trauma-informed practice and cultural humility.* There is no program in the Knowledge Commons equipped to directly address issues of self and community concept, or of mental and physical health. As a result, all KC staff required a way to support students experiencing issues in these areas in ways appropriate for their positions.

Cultural humility builds upon earlier calls for "cultural competence," emphasizing that rather than striving for an achieved state of competence navigating cultural differences, one must work to continually practice humility. Providers are encouraged to consider the specific perspective and

needs of an individual or group in question and partner with them, redistributing power rather than assuming the provider has what the client needs (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998). A trauma-informed approach involves working to understand how trauma affects people and how they can recover, recognizing the signs that someone is suffering from trauma, integrating survivors' needs into policy and practices, and continually conducting oneself in such a way that does not retraumatize an individual (SAMHSA 2018).

Staff checked their own approaches and best practices against literature on these methodologies and consulted mental-health professionals within their community and social networks to learn more (SAMHSA 2018; Spinzola et al. 2017; Waters and Asbill 2013). HLP brought these concepts, their concerns about the student body, and their own program's sustainability issues to the rest of the KC staff. Together, the group discussed student needs, the boundaries of academic support, and the views of all constituents in the KC. Then, they determined what a team of individuals with mostly bachelor's degrees or master's in library science were capable of supporting. KC staff decided that while the emotional needs of patrons were significant, trying to provide that support themselves was not only inappropriate given their skill level but also distracted from the primary purpose of their roles, to nurture the development of academic skills.

Eager to be mindful of the deeper issues affecting students while also providing sustainable academic-support, HLP searched for ways to integrate elements of trauma-aware practice and cultural humility into their service. To strive for cultural humility, HLP connected with the leadership in the Lebrón-Wiggins-Pran Cultural Center (CC) to discuss the ways disability issues are perceived and treated differently in communities of color and internationally. HLP now annually attends new-student orientations at the CC and takes advantage of every opportunity to work with associated student groups. Furthermore, when there is a provider of color in counseling services particularly interested in connecting with students of color, HLP staff inform self-identified students of color who desire therapy of this option, so that students can choose to partner with a mental-health provider who might share an aspect of their lived experience. Staff continue to be mindful to practice cultural humility so that they can best support international students and students of color.

*Trauma-aware* was a term HLP created while becoming aware of the concepts behind trauma-informed practice but not yet understanding how the concept could be used by librarians and educators outside of clinical mental-health work. Also, because HLP staff work without any formal training on the methodologies and are not yet completely fulfilling the key objectives, they wanted language to reflect those facts. Staff often used this term to also refer to practices that would be considered a part of cultural humility, working from the perspective that culturally inappropriate care

is often traumatizing, so the two are very closely related. Worth noting is that not everyone on the KC team works toward a trauma-informed, culturally humble perspective, or uses those words. Different frameworks are employed by different constituents to work toward similar values in different ways.

*Informed referral.* HLP determined two key methods for increasing the sustainability of the program as well as outlining the boundaries of the academic service. The first was providing referrals intentionally and often. The alumni fellows, having experienced how disheartening it can be to be sent from office to office, expressed the distrust many students had of staff due to inconsistency of service. Over time, HLP met one-on-one with support staff across campus to get to know community leaders, discuss campus climate and pedagogy, and share what a student could expect from each program.

Presently, when a student describes confusion over sexuality, spirituality, or mental health, for example, staff respond with empathy and offer an informed referral. They suggest a service, note personal relationships they have with providers, detail the best way to connect, describe what could be expected after reaching out, and ask the student's opinion. In circumstances where students note conflicts pertaining to mental and physical health or self and community concept, staff lead into a referral by inquiring if students are in counseling, or if they have ever been to counseling and found it helpful. This structure provides students an opportunity to express concerns about the referral and have them resolved, making the students less likely to avoid the interaction due to uncertainty. Opening a dialogue about referral makes it more likely that a student will verbalize discomfort with a referral, and alternatives can be suggested.

*The HLP Toolbox.* The second key sustainability strategy staff employ is the HLP Toolbox. The HLP Toolbox curates a collection of created and found resources that speak to common issues students report. Topics brought up by many students are distilled into resources like LibGuides and handouts that explore a topic by providing facts and/or opportunities for personal reflection. This prevents staff from needing to reiterate the same concepts from scratch, allowing a resource to serve as a conversation guide in meetings. Not only does this eliminate the pressure to remember key points, but available Toolbox resources provide further support in boundary maintenance by communicating what topics are a part of HLP.

Toolbox resources are adaptable, as students can use them on their own, discuss them in HLP meetings, or take them to other providers. The Toolbox also includes resources for faculty and staff, encouraging engagement of all community members in holistic learning and further normalizing the need for help. This helps HLP staff address academic issues from

both sides by educating the student and the professor about best practices and one another's experiences.

All resources are online and accessible, able to be used with text-to-speech and screen-reading software. HLP resources are also multimodal, to allow for multiple means of receiving and processing ideas, including audio, visual, and text-based modalities. Resources offer varied degrees of depth. For example, some students may only be interested in a short article or video to introduce them to a concept. Once introduced, they may want to engage in reflection, listen to a podcast, or read a book about the subject.

The foundation of HLP resources is that they are modular. They do not need to be accessed in any particular order, thus allowing students to receive support on their current specific issues. The Toolbox also serves as a place from which HLP staff can access tools during consultations and programs. When designing a workshop, staff do not need to create a plan from scratch. Rather, they can pull from a set of resources designed for use in a variety of contexts and with a range of audiences without having to modify the resource to fit the context.

## SUGGESTIONS: SIX STRATEGIES TO BUILD TRAUMA-AWARE LIBRARIES

Knowledge Commons staff work toward trauma-informed service by building on the service model that has been employed by library staff in reference consultations, incorporating the practice of cultural humility, and attending to social-justice issues.

### *1. Awareness of Marginalized Identities*

The first key strategy KC staff employ is acting with the awareness that trauma and marginalization are part of many patrons' experience. Remembering this reminds staff how crucial it is to ensure each encounter is as consensual and culturally humble as possible. This attention is an important part of making libraries accessible to everyone.

Staff also work toward greater accessibility by reducing microaggressions and cultivating an inviting space for all. A *microaggression* is defined as "a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group."<sup>6</sup> Microaggressions serve as a reminder to marginalized individuals that they are considered an "other," which can make them feel as though they do not belong, and that they are not valued, welcome, or safe in the context in which the microaggression took place. Conversely, when staff work to avoid microaggressions, they create a space of possibility in which patrons may begin to feel belonging, interest, and excitement about the library.

To work toward this objective, HLP staff strive to begin consultations

without making any assumptions. This means that patrons are not put in the position of having to express certain needs up front. Staff work to not assume a patron's pronouns or gender, citizenship, dis/ability, race/ethnicity, or that they have access to technology, money, or resources of any kind.

This practice is evidenced by the following:

- Asking for gender pronouns if necessary to refer to someone in the third person
  - Note: This practice is part of a larger set of community norms at Hampshire and might require further discussion, or not be appropriate, for other institutional contexts. Also, this practice is contested, as some people prefer not to be asked this question out of comfort and/or safety. Sometimes, staff will ask patrons to share “any information that will help me address you in a way that feels best” to decenter the pronoun request.
- Not requiring government-issued identification where avoidable
- Offering to talk further in an area with seating if preferable, or adding seating in an area with none
- Not commenting about the patron's race or ethnicity, or assuming it based on appearance
- Offering the patron access to library technology and paper copies of material, not assuming they possess a computer or cell phone
- Suggesting free resources before, or alongside, costly options
- Scheduling events long enough before or after meal times so individuals have time to cook, or providing food

## *2. Negative Self-talk*

The second valuable strategy staff employ is disrupting negative self-talk. In consultation, many individuals with marginalized identities, particularly those with psychological and/or learning disabilities, exhibit low self-confidence in their academic ability. As they cram at the last minute, these individuals express that they should have done more and better work, sooner. In those moments, staff respond and don't let a negative comment a patron makes about themselves go unnoticed, which might allow the patron to mistake silence on the part of staff as agreement. By validating when something is challenging and encouraging patrons to try again, library staff have an opportunity to model the kindness many patrons have not learned to show themselves due to experiences in the education system or other contexts that have influenced their low self-confidence. This demonstrates that the patron can come to staff at any time, with any relevant question, not be judged, and receive support. This builds invaluable trust. Though not statistically measured, when patrons exhibit vulnerability with staff in times of stress and are met with support



and encouragement, many of these patrons return for additional consultations and begin to do so regularly.

### *3. Self-Service Resources*

The third intervention, self-service resources, like the HLP Toolbox, is likely to appeal to staff members, whether or not they are interested in incorporating social-justice work in their practice. By offering information in paper and digital formats that might usually only be acquired by speaking to a library staff member or attending programming, individuals who might avoid interaction with staff are still able to acquire valuable information.

While some staff may have concerns that this makes their role obsolete or encourages avoidance, with the large occurrence rates of psychiatric disabilities (NAMI, n.d.[b]), restricting access is not going to foster necessary trust, it is simply going to lower perceived usefulness of, and affinity for, the library (Sidran Institute, n.d.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2018).

Some patrons with PTSD, social anxiety, or autism, for example, may never get information if they have to talk to staff to receive it. A librarian's first priority is typically access to information, so creating tools these individuals can use on their own is a way to provide access while meeting patrons where they are. These resources should also include plenty of encouragement for patrons to reach out to staff for more information on that resource's topic, related topics, or to request a similar resource on another topic. This ensures that when individuals who lean toward avoidance are ready to talk, they know who they can go to, for what, and may already feel comfortable with whomever provided the initial information.

### *4. Identity Programming*

The fourth intervention is a strategy developed by alumni fellows Alexis Reed and Lauren Garretson in the first year of grant implementation. Reed and Garretson realized upon their hiring that they were the only self-identified Black/African American full-time staff in the library. Their experience is not uncommon, with the American Library Association reporting in 2010 that only 5 percent of credentialed librarians self-reported as black/African American, not including the less than 1 percent of librarians who identified as "two or more races" (ALA 2012). With experience as both alums and staff, Reed and Garretson reported that many students of color did not enter the library or use its services because they did not feel represented and, as a result, did not feel valued in that space or comfortable using it.

In response, the fellows conducted outreach to students of color by offering identity-specific programming. Garretson held a study group in the Cultural Center. The program, called "Cocoa in the Cultural Center," en-

abled students of color and international students to access her research expertise in a space where they felt comfortable, while enjoying hot chocolate. Reed, recognizing a similar problem with an absence of women and femmes in media and computing labs in the Library, offered “Femmes Do Photoshop,” a workshop led by women and femmes for women and femmes<sup>7</sup> (Cecelia 2016). Reed and Garretson set out to create events led by staff reflecting the diversity of the students, where students had a sense of belonging and could interact with resources that had been tailored to their needs and perspectives, a privilege their white and more masculine counterparts are more likely to feel wherever they go. Both programs were well attended, despite typically low turnouts at most Hampshire programming.

Programming like this could be executed for a variety of other identities. It is beneficial for these programs to be offered by staff holding those identities, though not always essential depending on the circumstances. Instead of assuming staff holding particular identities will run identity-specific programming, it is important to include this work in a position’s job description, or compensate staff additionally and enable them to run the programming at their discretion. Staff should be regularly granted funds to acquire training to appropriately perform this often emotionally draining work, or an organization may build relationships with outside contractors who can offer this programming.

While this kind of work may seem unfamiliar to many in library contexts, its benefits were clear in the Knowledge Commons’ first academic year (2016–2017). Many students and staff noted great excitement prior to events and deep satisfaction afterwards. Participants reported increased excitement about the library as a whole and greater hope for programming more relevant to their needs. When participants saw marginalized individuals in positions of influence, their future success was modeled for them, after perhaps never before seeing someone with their identity in that role. Participants saw some evidence that the institution made a commitment to acting in support of its diversity statement. Hiring, listening to, and supporting leadership in people with marginalized identities demonstrates that marginalized people are valuable to the institution and deserve support.

In the second year of KC grant implementation, fellows and staff shifted to hold KC and Library programming that was inclusive and open to all students. Though KC programming in the grant’s first year was successful, the team aligned with a campus-wide initiative to foster intergroup dialogue and community-building across difference. A successful program in this framework brought community members together for an event that provided context and history for incidents of anti-Semitic graffiti on campus.

With sustainability in mind, Library and KC staff have moved from a

focus on programming to a focus on relationship-building, with offices on campus that support underrepresented students, particularly students of color and international students. Library and KC staff are building on well-established collaborations to welcome students to the library during orientation for initial research-instruction workshops, and are developing strategies to support students across all four years of their education. In making this shift, staff are working to ensure that support will continue beyond the grant and can be carried on by staff whose tenure is longer than the fellows’.

#### *5. Striving for Diverse Hiring*

Knowledge Commons staff have taken care to recruit a diverse pool of applicants for fellow and mentor positions. Legally, one cannot hire a candidate just because their marginalized identity would be beneficial in balancing a racial disparity.<sup>8</sup> Staff members involved in hiring alumni fellows have proactively recruited a diverse pool of applicants and attended to areas where bias in either direction could emerge in hiring practices through antibias training and continued self-reflection and communication within hiring committees. Committees have asked explicitly about candidates’ experience working across difference, a requirement of the job as indicated in the description. In the first two years of the grant, committees also asked candidates about their experience working with underrepresented communities on campus, valuing strong responses to these questions.

#### *6. Referral*

Referral, described more in-depth above in the authors’ discussion of consultation development, functions as the cornerstone of the Knowledge Commons, but one does not need a Learning Commons to regularly utilize referral. Every community has a diverse array of resources that, when combined with intentional relationship-building, can offer holistic support using a team approach.

### CONCLUSION

The trauma-aware library-service model used in the Knowledge Commons continues to be utilized and developed through ongoing collaboration and action research. The key to the development of the KC has been a willingness to acknowledge community issues, to engage in open dialogue, and to experiment through collaboration. The Library and KC staff envision and continue to work toward a system that does not ignore trauma. It does not expect people to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, nor does it encourage avoidance of hard topics, as liberal arts institutions have been criticized for doing (Orem and Simpkins 2015). This service model advocates for the cultivation of an environment that allows people to feel

safe and confident when taking on academic and personal challenges. It imagines a library that educates its staff and patrons on the existence and signs of trauma, how to avoid perpetuating trauma, and how to center resources and services all community members can utilize to meet their individual and shared goals. The universally designed, trauma-informed library, which practices cultural humility, is proposed as an ideal toward which to work. The goal of this library is not necessarily to heal trauma, but for all patrons, including those impacted by trauma, to be able to access academic resources and achieve academic goals. Each institution and community embodies elements of institutionalized oppression and marginalization, so it is not a matter of whether this work is relevant to any given individual, program, department, or institution, but a matter of identifying the first steps to take.

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## NOTES

1. The authors intentionally use “trauma-aware” throughout the article, not as a synonym of “trauma-informed,” but to remain conscious that they have yet to achieve a truly trauma-informed approach in their own programs and across campus (SAMHSA 2018).
2. The project is funded by a \$1.2 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, awarded in December 2015, and has been led by Library and Knowledge Commons Director Jennifer Gunter King (King 2016).
3. As the KC grant concludes and the project moves from a fellow-based support model to a mentor-based support model, all mentors will be trained through a dedicated course, coupled with additional training to support specific KC partner programs.
4. Students of color continue to be underrepresented in higher education, which some criticize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as being partially responsible for. Providing accommodations to students with disabilities can have the tendency to isolate and racially segregate students, and it cultivates a form of policing where these students are supervised particularly closely, and as a result may be disciplined more often. These factors may contribute to the higher rate at which black/African American students with disabilities drop out of high school and do not attend college (Schmaling and Williams 2017).
5. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “transference,” accessed August 16, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transference>.
6. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “microaggression,” accessed August 16, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microaggression>. A common microaggression takes the form of the “where are you really from?” exchange. This refers to one person assuming another is from somewhere other than an in-country location, possibly based on skin color, attire, or accent. After asking where they are from and getting an in-country location, the questioner will attempt to learn the “truth” of the other’s origin, by pressing the matter and asking, “but where are you *really* from?” This implies a citizen of the nation could not look or sound like them.
7. “Femme” refers to individuals who are nonheterosexual and/or nonbinary or transgender who identify with femininity but may not consider themselves women.
8. Title VII of Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e; <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/titlevii.cfm>.

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Sasha Conley got her start in disability work as a one-on-one at age 13. While a student at Hampshire, she explored education through the lens of disabled students' experiences. She then brought her studies to the Netherlands and Morocco, where she focused on gender, sexuality, and disability justice on a more global scale. She's since facilitated disability workshops in Massachusetts, Vermont, and the Netherlands. Sasha is passionate about creating the infrastructure to make all spaces accessible to all people, whether she is working in the library or making physical changes using her carpentry skills. She holds a bachelor of arts from Hampshire College, where she returned to serve as the Holistic Learning Alumni Fellow in the Knowledge Commons, functioning as the ambassador for the Office of Accessibility Resources & Services (OARS) in Hampshire's Library.

Aaron Ferguson has been working to support student academic success since his undergraduate career at the University of Connecticut as a peer-facilitator for UConn Connects. Since then he has worked in advising, academic-support services, and accessibility services at the University of Vermont, Chapman University, North Shore Community College, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Springfield College, and now at Hampshire College. He holds a master's degree in higher education and student affairs from UVM and focuses mainly on campus and academic accessibility, promoting Universal Design principles, and building programs and communities of inclusion to support peer mentoring and normalization of struggle for college students.



Alana Kumbier is a research and instruction librarian for the humanities and the team lead for the Knowledge Commons, a centralized hub for academic-support services in the Library at Hampshire College. They have an academic background in disability studies, having completed related coursework for their PhD in comparative studies at Ohio State University, and hold an MLIS from Kent State University. Through workplace experience, research, a coauthored article (“Access is Not Problem Solving: Disability Justice and Libraries,” with Julia Starkey, *Library Trends* 64 [3]), and workshops, Alana has explored how disability informs library instruction and pedagogy, how disabled embodiment and access matter to library staff as well as patrons, and how disability-justice perspectives can inform our thinking about access and accessibilities in libraries.