

Emily Sallee PhD is an assistant professor in the Counseling Department at the University of Montana. Her experience with students spans more than a decade and includes work with elementary and college students. The following is in Emily's own words and reflects her passion for serving students and providers as they navigate the effects of trauma.

In this time of COVID 19 uncertainty, what is the best advice you can offer college access professionals about supporting students?

Any uncertainty and unpredictability can trigger typical trauma-responses of Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fright, Fawn. The COVID-19 pandemic complicates this conversation, because it's in and of itself a source of trauma for all of us right now, whether that looks like loss of work/financial security, missing friends/family, fear of the illness for ourselves or others, etc. There is a wide continuum of what this might look like for each of us, but for college access professionals trying to support students right now, this is three-fold. One, the college access professionals themselves are impacted by this trauma. Two, the students they are supporting are impacted by this trauma. And three, the way in which college access professionals support students could potentially be triggering and/or re-traumatizing.

The basis of being trauma-informed is putting the relationship first. This is the number one piece of advice I can offer college access professionals now more than ever. This is not a time to push on as originally planned, because nothing about the original plan is the same. Putting relationships first looks like checking in on those basic human needs of food, shelter, safety, etc. Let's take an example of a college-bound senior whose family has been impacted by the pandemic in a way where the primary provider has lost employment, resulting in lack of financial security, resulting in heightened stress for the family, all while the student is navigating how to finish their senior year through remote learning. Nothing is as it was. Instead of beginning the college conversation where it left off pre-COVID, college access professionals must re-establish the baseline of student and family needs. Part of this also looks like offering grace and allowance to make changes to the original plan. Perhaps instead of moving out-of-state in August to attend a four-year university, there are other options, such as attending a community college or online program to knock out some pre-recs next year, with or without holding down a job to help re-establish a sense of financial security for the family. At the same time, this grace and these allowances shouldn't be approached as "less than" or a "back-up plan," which can lead to feelings of insecurity and inferiority that again, could be triggering or re-traumatizing for the student and family.

In this time of COVID 19 uncertainty, what is the best advice you can offer college access professionals about self-care?

Oh goodness, that it's more important now than ever? My previous point about checking in with students and families on their basic human needs is applicable to college access professionals themselves too. This pandemic has affected us all in ways we might never have imagined, and part of self-care is recognizing the current state and identifying areas of unmet need. For many of us, the current state looks like working from home, isolated from friends and family, sometimes with partners or children who are also bringing their heightened regulation into the equation.

There are a lot of metaphors thrown around about self-care, and my go-to has always been “you can’t pour from an empty cup.” I discovered that years ago when my trauma-informed journey first began, and I hang on to it to this day. While we extend grace and allowance to our students, we need to extend that same grace and allowance to ourselves. It’s ok to lower expectations; it’s ok to do less; it’s ok to have different needs than you typically do. Part of this conversation is also that self-care looks like SO many different things. It can be physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, intellectual, etc. It can be saying “no”; it can be saying “yes.” It can be whatever you need right now to keep or return to a regulated state. And when we talk about working with kiddos, either in our own household or in our schools, the important thing to remember is that a dysregulated adult is not able to effectively work with a dysregulated kiddo (or person, for that matter). The value of self-care is to be a regulated adult that can effectively work with a dysregulated kiddo/person. So I’ll say it again – “You can’t pour from an empty cup.”

Is there anything else you would want our college access professionals to know?

Being trauma-informed isn’t a checkbox on a to-do list. It’s not a new curriculum or a new system or procedure that is likely transient. Rather it’s a commitment to changing professional practice for the long haul. It’s about understanding the WHY behind the HOW. It’s about getting passionate about this work and sharing it with others. It’s about creating systemic change in schools that results in a culture-shift where people feel valued and safe and included. Trauma-informed practices isn’t a “me” movement, it’s a “we” movement. All of us.

Please tell us about why the subject of trauma informed practices is one of your passions?

This feels like a long story, and I’ll try to keep it brief. In 2009, I began my professional work as a school counselor in an elementary school with a fairly SES-diverse student population. Down the block from the school were two large government subsidized housing neighborhoods, and I spent a lot of my time working with and supporting families and students from these neighborhoods. As the only school counselor at 0.6FTE for 550 students, I was doing a lot of crisis response and intervention. Luckily, I was part of a really strong specialist team, which eased the burden of working with high-risk kiddos impacted by a lot of trauma.

A few years into my professional work, my administrator and I attended an all-day training on ACES findings and trauma-informed care. The light bulbs were going OFF! My admin and I kept looking at each other, wide-eyed, with this feeling of “THIS IS WHAT WE’VE BEEN MISSING.” We took our findings back to school with plans for seeking further professional development and resources to start rolling this out with our staff and students.

What we came to find is that for sustainable trauma-informed practice to happen, a basic understanding of trauma must be achieved. The following years consisted of continued personal and professional development, which resulted in facilitating educator/staff professional development trainings first within the building, then at other elementary schools in the district, then district-wide. At the same time, I started presenting at conferences to share this information with other school professionals. It felt like the missing block in our precariously balanced and quickly crumbling tier-tower of support, and I wanted to share it with anyone that would listen!

At my school level, we started to see change happen in some of our very highest-risk kiddos. We saw relationships with families strengthen. We saw our school community grow. We saw teachers and paraprofessionals revived in their work. Our lens of education shifted, and that in turn impacted school-wide programming, individual interventions, positive behavior supports...literally everything.

My passion for this work has been reignited after moving from Portland, Oregon to the Missoula area last summer. The work here is only just beginning, and I'm so excited to be part of this process of change.