



## **Applying the Principles of Community Psychology in Institutions of Higher Education**

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Equity in higher education has been addressed in a variety of ways across the decades from educational access in the 70's and 80's (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003) to persistence and retention in the 2000's.

Today, "on average, White and Asian students earn a college-level credential at a rate about 20 percentage points higher than Hispanic and Black students" (Tate, 2017). These findings point to a clear need to address the success of minority students in higher education. This article seeks to add a deeper understanding of the context that many first-generation minority college students have endured prior to getting to higher education, specifically the disproportionately high number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their long-lasting impacts. We will examine how principles of community psychology, such as empowerment and respect for human diversity, can provide a buffer for these students against the impact of their ACEs. This will lead not only to their sense of belonging and academic success (persistence, retention, degree completion), but more importantly, to their thriving in the system of higher education.

First, we need to understand the person in context – minority students within higher education. We supplement this community psychology frame with NEAR science which includes Neurological, Epigenetic, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Resilience. Although our focus is primarily on ACEs and

Resilience, it is important to note the long lasting neurological effects of early trauma on a child's brain are increasingly well documented, including alterations in brain structure and function (Duncan, 2015). Childhood trauma is encoded in our brain. In fact, it appears that, without innovative treatment, these brain and hormone changes may be lifelong.

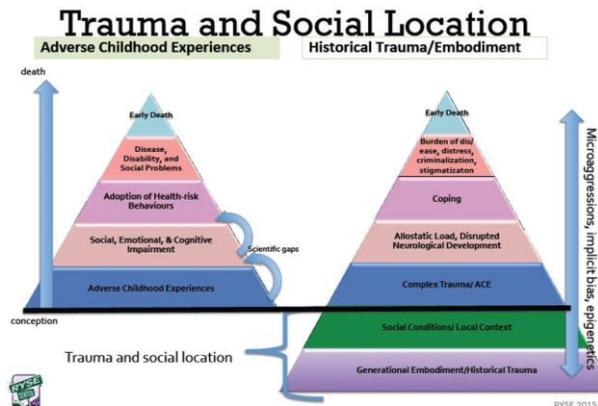
With the focus on ACEs and Resilience from the NEAR model, we argue the "treatment" lies in shifting the frame toward a community psychology perspective that focuses on the poor fit between the existing higher educational setting and most first-generation minority students' needs. First, it is important to understand the impact and scope of ACEs.

The study of ACEs began with Felitti et al.'s (1998) landmark study showing that ACEs (abuse, neglect, household dysfunction) lead to many health problems and, ultimately, early death. This work has been followed up with a myriad of studies. Felitti et al. developed an ACEs pyramid that provides a snap shot of the impacts of ACEs within the context of NEAR science. Figure 1 shows the ACEs pyramid that originated from Felitti's study alongside an updated proposed pyramid that is aligned with community psychology philosophy and includes historical trauma and implicit biases.

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Figure 1. *Adding Layers to the ACEs Pyramid* (Stevens, 2015)



Metzler (2016) sums up the current state of knowledge on ACEs related to our topic nicely, noting that there is a negative correlation between ACEs and adult education, employment, and income potential. Further, intergenerational poverty is a potential outcome of the impact of ACEs across the lifespan. We extend this argument to include addressing the ACEs of adults in higher education and contend that institutions of higher education have a responsibility to create a culturally-responsive environment that includes human diversity and empowerment designed for students not only to remain in school and earn their diplomas, but to thrive in the process and beyond.

Although limited research was found directly examining the impact of ACEs on minority students in higher education, we do know that Black and Hispanic children experience more ACEs throughout their childhood compared with White children; this is compounded by a lower SES status (Slopen, et al., 2016). Limited community psychology research was found on ACEs in higher education, however, Madigan, Wade, Plamondon, and Jenkins (2016) have published related research on the impact of childhood trauma on adults that applies to adult learners. In line with NEAR science, they

hypothesized that there may be increased tolerance for physical and emotional abuse among individuals with high levels of trauma as children, which can impact their interactions with others. Concerns about interaction, as well as finding appropriate coping skills, are further challenged when adult students are thrown into a context of which they are not familiar with the culture and see few professors who resemble them or understand their experience. In order for students impacted by ACEs to succeed and thrive, a better person-environment fit is needed. Specifically, the system needs to shift its focus from retention, persistence, and degree completion to respecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the non-traditional, minority student and, then, understanding the human experience of ACEs and maladaptive coping mechanisms that manifest in the educational setting. More importantly, it is the application of this knowledge that can produce an environment that empowers and allows students to thrive. This is a resilient setting aligned with the R in the NEAR model.

While research on ACEs in higher education is limited, strides made in elementary schools to work with students with ACEs and communities plagued by trauma arguably amount to a nationwide movement. For example, many schools have become designated as trauma informed. Some schools are positioned in trauma-informed communities, in which parents, community-based agencies, public health centers, law enforcement, and faith-based organizations are trained and collaborate to enhance the overall well-being of their communities by applying their knowledge of ACEs.

This approach to addressing young students and their context both within and beyond the school should be extended to higher education. A hidden truth is that most college and university faculty, outside of those in the education disciplines, receive little teacher

training at all, much less specific training on teaching non-traditional, minority students. Fewer still are those professors who are trauma informed. The institutions most likely to serve these students provide little to no administrative support for time and space to consider these issues. Further, there are typically fewer administrative supports and more demands to serve underprepared students in less time and with fewer resources.

Taking a holistic approach, we examine both the person and the context – minority students in higher education. Our goal, first, is to use our knowledge of ACEs and their impacts to help our students understand these experiences and their effects. Coping mechanisms and skill sets that have ensured survival in their communities are often maladaptive in the educational setting. With an understanding of their own ACEs, these students can develop improved 1) executive functioning and self-regulation, 2) focused attention, 3) self-monitoring, 4) delayed gratification, 5) teamwork, 6) problem solving and planning (Shonkoff, 2013), all of which have been associated negatively with ACEs.

Secondly, changes need to be made in the context. Higher education institutions need to accept their accountability to address ACEs. They then need to create trauma-informed settings that includes ACEs education for everyone who interacts with students. Unfolding research in Washington State indicates that having knowledge, an understanding of the impact of ACEs on students, needs to be coupled with insight, which might come from exposure to trauma stories, empathy and self-reflection (Longhi, 2017 personal communication). A trauma-informed culture within higher education that allows non-traditional, minority students to thrive will contribute to more resilient communities across generations, the embodiment of social justice.

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*Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at [underwoodtabitha@gmail.com](mailto:underwoodtabitha@gmail.com)*