

EXPLORATORY ESSAY

Using a Trauma-Informed Approach to Encourage Academic Help-Seeking Among Ethnically Diverse Students

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<https://doi.org/10.58997/5.2ee1>

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

The curvilinear relationship between academic help-seeking and the need for assistance is well-reported (Fong et al., 2021; Karabenick & Knapp, 1991). Within the help-seeking literature, the complexity of help-seeking for ethnically diverse students has been explained by a few studies that cite cultural differences

in self-regulation in general (Fong et al., 2017). However, using a trauma-informed lens to inform the field's understanding of how to encourage academic help-seeking among ethnically diverse students has been largely unexplored in higher education. By understanding the common factors that influence help-seeking and employing a trauma-informed approach to designing academic support services, institutions can be better positioned to encourage adaptive help-seeking behaviors that promote student success.

Unpacking help-seeking as a construct can shed further light on the mechanisms that impact help-seeking behavior. The literature suggests the help-seeking process is a social interactive self-regulatory strategy that can manifest in either maladaptive behaviors (i.e., help avoidance) or adaptive behaviors, such as instrumental help focused on asking for specific examples (Fong et al., 2021). There are generally three stages integral to any process of seeking help: (a) problem definition, (b) decision to seek help, and (c) actively seeking help (Featherstone & Broadhurst, 2003). These stages are influenced by individual and environmental factors. At the individual level, students with a mastery orientation and higher levels of self-efficacy seek support (Fong et al., 2018) because they likely define the problem of academic failure as one based on internal controllable factors, such as effort. However, a student's decision to seek support is also mediated by the educational environment. Students interact within academic microsystems (i.e., a variety of face-to-face meetings) and mesosystems (programs within the school) that influence their decision to access help (Sandars et al., 2014). In environments with a pedagogical focus on learning and improvement (Bardach et al., 2020), help-seeking is normalized and seen as a sign of personal development. As such, there are a range of complex and interconnected factors that impact whether a student will decide to seek academic support.

Among students who are ethnically diverse, the decision to seek academic help can also be explained by stereotype threat and behavioral economics. Stereotype threat is a social-psychological threat that emanates when someone is in a situation where a negative stereotype about their group applies (Steele & Aronson, 1995), such as an ethnically diverse female student taking a math exam. If ethnically diverse students perceive that academic support providers may hold negative stereotypes about their group, they are likely to avoid seeking help because they expect to be (or have been in the past) stigmatized (Winograd & Rust, 2014). These barriers can also be attributed to delay discounting in

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behavioral economics. If there is a choice between the immediate gain of temporarily alleviating the discomfort of academic failure by avoiding seeking support or the delayed gains of seeking help, those under greater stress are more prone to the latter (Malesza, 2019). Consistent with the minority stress framework (Meyer, 2003), the decision to avoid seeking help may also be related to an increase in stress and decreased sense of felt safety (Purvis et al., 2013). Students may have experienced macro and micro-aggressions that can trigger a trauma response and therefore use maladaptive mechanisms to moderate the psychological distress (Hill & Hoggard, 2018). Taken together, for ethnically diverse students, help-seeking comes with a higher cost—highlighting the importance of engaging with students in a manner that is sensitive to trauma and the impact it has on help-seeking behavior.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Given that the cornerstone of effective academic support programs is cultivating trust (McClellan, 2014) and that many students from ethnically diverse backgrounds have experienced systematic oppression, a trauma-informed approach can shed new light on ways to encourage help-seeking behaviors. The main pillars of trauma-informed program design are: (a) developing safety, (b) promoting healing relationships, and (c) supporting self-regulation skills (Bath, 2008; Purvis et al., 2013). To develop safety, academic support programs can meaningfully engage ethnically diverse students by building knowledge of common maladaptive help-seeking behaviors. The messaging can be situated with transparency and validation of the historical context and injustices students have experienced. For example, programs can acknowledge institutional marginalization, structures of power, and the need for vital engagement with students in program design.

Developing Safety and Healing Relationships

Academic support programs can also promote safety and healing relationships by ensuring that help providers develop a consciousness of how they impact the advising process. Academic program directors can conduct a mid-year and end-of-year evaluation that includes gathering qualitative and quantitative data from faculty members, academic advisors, and students on perceptions of felt safety (Purvis et al., 2013). Additionally, academic program directors can coach help providers in engaging in self-reflection to ensure they are creating safe spaces that enrich student learning. By exploring how their identities, biases, and values impact

the advice that is offered, academic help providers can discover new ways of thinking to deepen the quality of student interactions. Providing academic support requires a pedagogy of care that honors each student's humanity and the desire to see them thrive by listening to and understanding their worldview (Aguilar, 2013). As such, this perspective entails understanding and valuing the whole person and how different aspects of their lives inform their academic performance (Aguilar, 2013). These mental models that emphasize holding unconditional positive regard for the learner can carve a path for belonging, which has been shown to be a strong predictor of academic success (Curtin et al., 2013).

Supporting Self-Regulation Skills

When there is a sense of felt safety and empathy, stress is lowered (Ciaramicoli, 2016), affording academic support providers the opportunity to empower students with strategies to improve self-regulation. Academic support providers can partner with students to create a schedule that includes rituals for effective self-regulated learning principles (i.e., 5 min of goal setting, 25 min of work, and 5 min of break time) and allot for engaging in activities that build academic capital or creating valuable relationships in an educational environment (Trammell, 2019). Additionally, to close the metacognitive equity gap or the lack of exposure to strategies in self-questioning (McGuire, 2021) that is common among ethnically diverse students, advisors can model how to use shorter break times to engage in metacognitive pauses that ensure optimal learning. A few key questions learners can ask are: What is happening? Is this

what I want to happen now? If not, how can I change what I am doing to achieve the results I want? (Schön, 1983). By engaging in self-regulation skills, students engage in deeper thinking processes that can elicit behavior changes to improve their academic performance.

In brief, help-seeking behavior is impacted by a range of complex and interconnected factors (Fong et al., 2021), which are compounded for learners who are ethnically diverse. Using a trauma-informed approach that is grounded in promoting healing relationships and creating validation-rich environments (Rendón, 2021) can encourage help-seeking among ethnically diverse students. Academic support programs can research the impact of this approach on their services and create cross-movement solidarity that transforms students' lives. Such an approach can easily fit seamlessly with traditional tools in academic support.

To develop safety, academic support programs can meaningfully engage ethnically diverse students by building knowledge of common maladaptive help-seeking behaviors.

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