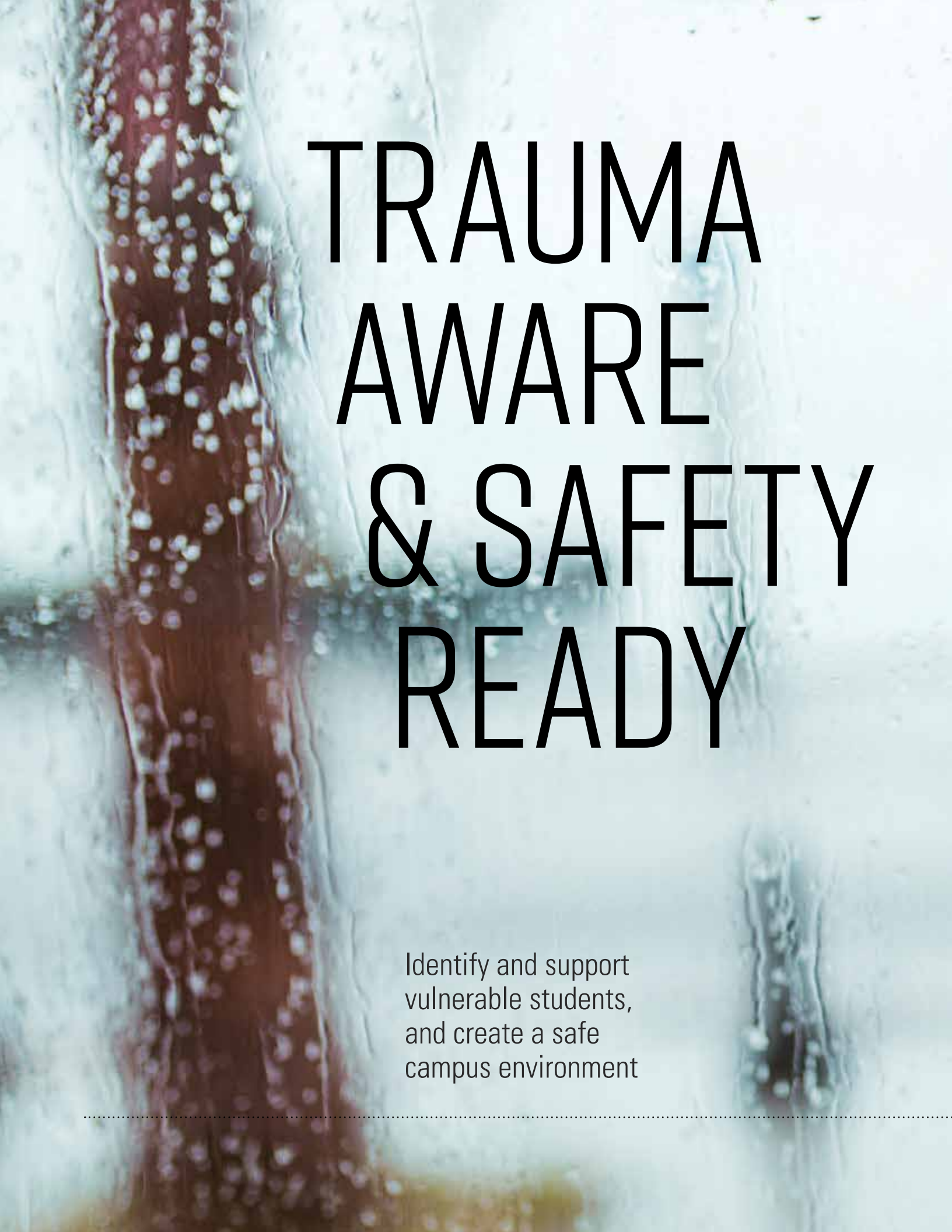

TRAUMA AWARE & SAFETY READY

Identify and support vulnerable students, and create a safe campus environment

By Jim Paterson

The interwoven issues of trauma and safety have swept through college campuses over the last decade, and they've arrived at doors of admission offices, encouraging officials to think more carefully about those concerns and take a closer look at how they handle them.

Horribly violent and personally tragic incidents, the political climate, media coverage, societal pressure, and just age-old parental concerns about kids leaving home for the first time—they all have pressed these issues to the forefront, with demands that schools more closely screen their students on one hand, and protect a young person's privacy and right to an education on the other.

Experts recommend in this atmosphere that admission offices discuss these topics openly, educate and train themselves, and have clear policies that guide their handling of students who might be suffering from trauma or might be unsafe—and handling the worry associated with them.

"I think most incoming students and parents want to know what the school is doing to identify risks and protect their students from what they see on the news," said Brian Van Brunt, a campus security consultant in Berwyn, Pennsylvania. "Ten years ago, it was fine when a school told them sexual assault never happens on campus. Today, I think most incoming students and parents would see a school having zero data very differently."

LOOKING AT TRAUMA FIRST

As a first step, experts say, schools should become "trauma-informed," including admission offices, the filter for new students of all stripes coming to a campus, and high school counseling offices, where issues can be spotted.

Research shows that most undergraduate students have suffered some sort of trauma, according to a University of Minnesota study. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) reports about 25 percent of teens have suffered trauma severe enough to affect their school performance or behavior—due to events ranging from bullying and extreme stress to abuse or living through a disaster.

NCTSN notes that being trauma-informed doesn't mean someone can diagnose or deal with the effects of trauma—but that they are aware of the signs, understand the vulnerabilities and risks, and know how a student can get help.

"Trauma has a short and long-term effect on an individuals' overall health and well-being. The impact is broad and life-altering and it really can affect a young person's overall potential," said Mary Wyandt-Heibert, a professor at the University of Arkansas who has studied and reported about the issue as it relates to college campuses.

She and her colleagues say it can cripple a student's learning, social skills, and ability to thrive in school—and affect others around them.

"High schools, colleges, and universities are systems," she said. "Everyone is interconnected and interdependent and what happened to—or what happens to—a student can affect everyone."

She said admission offices specifically can play a role because they are the first to meet students and often they gather extensive personal information through conversations or student essays.

"They have the potential through these conversations to recognize cues of trauma and share resources that could be helpful, or they might identify students with great potential who could otherwise go unnoticed or be erroneously and negatively categorized."

SPOTTING TRAUMA

Trauma-informed organizations, where people are aware that trauma is a concern, can often potentially identify it, and can help students find support.

Here are some indications a student is suffering from trauma, or has in the past, according to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

- Physical symptoms like headaches and stomach aches without an evident cause
- Poor control of emotions and mood swings
- Inconsistent academic performance with significant swings in their record
- Unpredictable or impulsive behavior
- Over or under-reacting to bells, doors slamming, sirens, lighting, sudden movements, or even physical contact
- Thinking others are violating their personal space. "What are you looking at?"
- Blowing up when being corrected or told what to do by an authority figure
- Fighting when criticized or teased by others
- Resisting transition or change.

An even more detailed list can be found on the Recognize Trauma website: *www.recognizetrauma.org/links.php*.

Beyond that, admission office awareness about trauma or related difficulties experienced by a prospective student can be very important for the safety of a college campus, though their role in spotting it is complex.

TALKING ABOUT SAFETY

A Princeton Review survey of parents last year showed that 70 percent felt campus safety was a critical issue in choosing a school and half were "very concerned" about sexual assault. Popular media and resources advising parents about college choice often raise the issue of campus safety and some call for public ranking of schools with the information.

"Covering safety is not new, but we have expanded the level of information as the services have expanded and there's been more interest," said Kelley Maloney, director of marketing and communication for enrollment at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. "Safety questions tend to come more from parents than prospective students."

Urban schools such as Duquesne and Tulane University (LA) make a discussion about safety part of every admission counselors' presentation, officials say, but even at rural schools it's increasingly discussed.

"We know parents and students want to hear about it, and safety information is included in any discussions about the university," said Bud Grimes, a spokesperson at the University of Tennessee, located in the quiet, hilly western part of the state where a student body of 6,700 is about one-third of the surrounding town. "We also include safety information in university publications, and it's readily available online through our department of public safety."

Other schools such as Michigan State or Binghamton University in New York have a spot for safety information on their admission office home

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page, and all schools are required by the Clery Act to present certain safety information and records to prospective students.

Admission counselor Van Brunt said, we should let students know about things like "blue light" phones or escorts, emergency procedures, and other resources that are available, even if the information is going to be repeated after enrollment.

Wyandt-Heibert notes admission offices can also help make certain that vulnerable students know about support services that may be available. The Association of American Universities study showed, for instance, that while a quarter of college women reported being assaulted, less than half knew where to get help, and other studies have shown students are not well-informed about campus security operations or what to do in the event of an emergency.

Dealing with threats is more complex.

Kevin McCarthy, associate dean of students at North Central College and chairman of the school's behavior intervention team, has been researching and writing about the admission office's role in security for the National Behavior Intervention Team Association (NABITA), a group in which he and other campus officials concerned about safety are active.

He said every school has a different approach, but that many believe admission offices should be involved in the process of identifying students who may be dangerous or need support.

"They have a plethora of knowledge. They are sitting down and meeting with students who are sharing a lot of information about themselves, so they can play a key role. They should build relationships so that information is responsibly available."

McCarthy added that admission officials might let officials know about a student who has an attention issue or an eating disorder, or a prospect who might be at risk of harming themselves or others. Some concerns might

WHERE TO LOOK

Here are some resources about trauma and safety:

TRAUMA

- The US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration on trauma and violence
- National Center for PTSD
- Fostering Resilience
- National Institute of Mental Health: Coping with Traumatic Events
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Facts for Families
- Recovering Emotionally (Red Cross)
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
- National Library of Medicine: Coping with Disasters, Violence and Traumatic Events
- The American College Health Association on mental health and on college violence and trauma.

CAMPUS SAFETY

- The Association of American Universities Campus Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct
- Clery Center for Security on Campus
- Campus Safety and Security Data Analysis Cutting Tool
- *NotAlone.gov*
- US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights
- National Behavioral Intervention Team Association
- US Education Department on Campus Safety
- *Campus Safety* magazine.

prompt an informal chat, while more serious issues at his school are handled through an "early alert" system that allows any student or staff member to report a safety concern.

McCarthy continued, "Our team would then never weigh-in on or make a recommendation regarding any information referred to the Behavior Intervention Team (BIT). Instead, the BIT would simply gather this information in order to resource student in the most appropriate way."

He said his team would either store the information for use if there are future concerns, offer a "soft referral" for available resources, or "offer a more formalized referral."

"We all have the same goal. We just want our students to safely and successfully graduate," said McCarthy.

Van Brunt, who is also active in NABITA, says admission offices should see teams like McCarthy's as a resource.

"I can't stress enough the importance of the behavior intervention team not being in a decision-making capacity around admitting a student. This isn't why we are encouraging admission and other departments to share information with us," he said, noting that those teams can also help train admission officials or share information with them too.

This issue of admission offices gathering background information about a student and reporting on safety concerns is complex, however, and it has played out in recent public debates, specifically about schools collecting disciplinary and criminal histories.

Last year, the Obama administration asked colleges to review the use of application questions gathering information about those records.

"An estimated three out of four colleges and universities collect high school disciplinary information, and 89 percent of those institutions use the information to make admissions decisions," the Department of Education noted in its *Beyond the Box* report that argues for more care with application questions that ask students to disclose such information. Other organizations advocated for such a review, some with NACAC input.

One study found about half of high schools disclose disciplinary information about their students to colleges, and at about 40 percent of those that do, guidance counselors make that call in isolation. About two-thirds don't have a formal, written policy regarding disclosure of student disciplinary records.

WHAT THE ED SUGGESTS

The US Department of Education developed recommendations in May 2016 about the use of criminal history information in college applications. Here are its suggestions for colleges, which have been adopted to varying degrees by some campuses.

- Delay the request for—or consideration of—criminal justice involvement until after an admission decision has been made to avoid a chilling effect on potential applicants whose backgrounds may ultimately be deemed irrelevant by the institution.
- Create transparency and clearly inform potential students as early as possible in the application process on how to respond to the inquiry about criminal pasts.
- Ensure that the questions are narrowly focused, avoiding overly broad requests about criminal history.
- Give all prospective students the opportunity to explain criminal justice involvement and preparedness for postsecondary study.
- Provide admission personnel and counselors training on the effective use of criminal history data.

ONE APPROACH

At Colorado Mesa University, school officials look at the issue of safety differently. They believe some thinking about it is just backward.

John Marshall, vice president for student services, explained, rather than be concerned about revealing safety information to prospective students, the school is happy to talk about it, though he admits that it isn't much of an issue on the campus, located in Grand Junction in the scrappy mountainous region in western Colorado, surrounded by high desert, open space, and national park land.

But perhaps more importantly, as the debate has raged about whether gathering and acting on information concerning past student criminal and disciplinary records, school officials stuck with a different path.

Marshall said the school, which offers degrees ranging from technical certificates to doctoral degrees for students who mostly come from the vast region's small towns and blue collar families, uses that information to give more students a chance to complete it with the appropriate resources rather than limit the opportunity by *only* allowing students to check the box on the application.

"We need to know if they check that box. Campus safety and common sense demand it. But we really look for every opportunity to say "yes" more often—an *informed* yes to giving a student who's had a serious problem a second chance. We really felt that if they can't find a second chance here, they won't find it. So we take our charge very seriously."

Marshall explained that once they've gained sufficient information on the most serious cases, the school conducts in-person interviews, "to get to know them as people, beyond what's simply on paper." In rare cases the university will determine that a student simply shouldn't be on campus, but generally through a structured review process the school finds a path for a student to attend, sometimes through deferred admission while they stabilize their life circumstances or sometimes using counseling or mentors or other academic supports on campus combined with careful monitoring.

"We offer a lot of support and a require a lot of accountability," he said. "Over the years, we've enrolled hundreds of students with criminal backgrounds who've gone on to be very successful, and we're proud as they become a valuable part of our student body. It isn't always easy, but it's the right thing to do."

The Education Department also asked that "colleges and universities help remove barriers that can prevent the estimated 70 million citizens with criminal records from pursuing higher education, including considering the chilling effect of inquiring early in the application process whether prospective students have ever been arrested."

In response, some schools stopped gathering or examining this data. The Common Application after a review last year announced that it has changed its policy about the two questions, but is keeping them.

"Working to meet the diverse needs of 700 members while also being responsive to the concerns of counselors and their students, the 2017–2018 Common App will provide more context about the criminal history and school discipline questions, such as the ability of colleges to suppress answers to those questions" the organization announced. It also provides students more information about how their answers will be used, and individual school policy toward the questions.

In May 2015 when one report on the issue came up, Todd Rinehart, associate vice chancellor for enrollment & director of admission at the University of Denver, then chair of the NACAC Admission Practices Committee, told *Education Week* colleges could responsibly use the material.

"When we conduct a holistic review of each student, we're shaping a community. We should have every bit of information that's possible," Rinehart said. "If the student has done something severe or has a history of poor behavior, the college or university has the right to know that and make an admission decision that is best for their institution."

He added, "admission committees do a good job of considering discipline issues within proper context, and many students are still offered admission."

Most importantly, Kenneth Anselment, dean of admissions at Lawrence University of Appleton, Wisconsin, said admission offices should be well informed and have a clear policy.

"We cannot control for everything that a student might do once they enter our community, but on the front end we in admission need to ensure that we have done everything we can to provide a safe environment for all students."

He notes that his school gathers information about disciplinary or criminal issues, and concerns are directed to him for a decision, perhaps in consultation with other administrators.

Anselment said the process is not intended to be used as "a blunt instrument." It's a "more precise, personal, and particular follow up is necessary to reach a decision that fits the individual student," he said. "When a student presents information on the application about disciplinary or criminal issues, we need to ensure that we are doing our due diligence in the admission office in considering whether to invite that student to join our community."

Jim Paterson is a writer and former school counselor living in Lewes, Delaware.