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## Trauma-Informed Practice in Ontario University Writing Centres

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## **Trauma-Informed Practice in Ontario University Writing Centres**

Given the ubiquity of trauma in post-secondary students, it is imperative to consider trauma-informed (TI) practices in every classroom or service setting in higher education. While some work has been done to understand responsible engagement with trauma in classroom settings, including composition pedagogy studies, and research has begun to address emotion and affect in the post-secondary writing centre (WC), the ways in which WC staff perceive their experiences with student trauma and TI practices is under-researched.

Due to the lack of research in this area, this exploratory qualitative study sought to gain insight into the perceptions of WC staff on their engagement with student trauma and emotionally challenging sessions, to understand strategies they may employ in relation to these sessions and interactions, and to explore how these strategies and experiences may relate to TI practices and pedagogies. As a narrative inquiry, the study also prioritized an analysis of *how* the participants chose to narrate their experiences, especially given their day-to-day work with writing and narrative.

Eight participants were interviewed for this study through semi-structured interviews. These participants were recruited via an invitation sent to all Ontario university WCs and then through snowball sampling with a focus on recruiting participants who may be underrepresented in the WC literature, including racialized, queer, and disabled participants. Participants were employed at six different institutions' WCs across Ontario, as well as one former WC employee who no longer works in the field, and represented a variety of staff roles, including student staff, part-time and full-time staff, and contract staff. Each interview, lasting approximately one hour, was conducted via Microsoft Teams.

A reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews broke down into the following themes: general WC work, including staffing, structure, space, training, working conditions, and other stressors; types of trauma-related and emotionally challenging sessions, including students with academic anxiety, trauma disclosures unrelated to assignments, disclosures in assignments, and trauma and marginalized populations; tutors experience of emotionally challenging sessions and trauma, including emotional distress, difficulties with boundaries and role strain, guilt, and personal triggers; and strategies tutors use to engage with student trauma and emotion, including referrals and collaborations, active and empathetic listening, tutoring strategies, compartmentalization, movement and distraction, setting personal boundaries, therapy and counselling, and community and personal support systems. Participants were also asked for their suggestions on ways that WCs could provide more TI service in support of student and staff well-being, of which suggestions including increasing flexibility, community and collaboration, improved access to mental health services, flexibility around space, training and policies specific to TI practice, improved staffing and labour conditions, and structural change in the operations of WCs within universities.

These themes align substantially with the literature on WC work, situating this labour as a helping profession vulnerable to emotional labour, burnout, and secondary trauma. While an exploratory study, this research suggests possible avenues and recommendations to build TI practices into Ontario university WCs, including recognizing and elevating marginalized voices within WCs, providing ongoing and meaningful training, welcoming vulnerability,

improving labour practices, flexibility, and resourcing, engaging in community models of care and collaboration, and advocating for systemic changes toward TI praxis across institutions. This research highlights the marginalization of WCs within institutions and the impact of this status on staff's well-being and their ability to provide TI service to students; it also illuminates the possibility for systemic change throughout institutions to centre collaborative efforts toward TI practices and pedagogies from student services to assessment and curricular design at the departmental and course level.