Agenda Item No: 14.2

UNIVERSITY COUNCIL
TLARC
REPORT FOR INFORMATION

Presented by: Vince Bruni-Bossio; Chair, Teaching, Learning, and Academic Resources Committee of Council (TLARC)

Date of Meeting: November 21, 2019

Subject: Strategies for Approaching Trauma-Related Student Responses to Course Materials

Council Action: For Information Only

Summary:

This strategies document is a faculty-led initiative. Its aim is to provide approaches and resources for educators and for units, and thus to support students who are or anticipate experiencing trauma-related responses to course materials in order to enable them to meet learning objectives. Given the diversity of the teaching and learning situations that take place at the University of Saskatchewan, the strategies document is divided into four sections including: (1) principles, (2) AES syllabus statement, (3) strategies, and (4) resources. The materials attached include a description of the how the strategies document was developed and the consultations that led up to the finalized version that is now before Council as an information item.

Attachments: Strategies Document (Guidelines)
Strategies for Approaching Trauma-Related Student Responses to Course Materials

CONTEXTUALIZING REPORT

Introduction
This strategies document is a faculty-led initiative. Its aim is to provide approaches and resources for educators and for units, and thus to support students who are or anticipate experiencing trauma-related responses to course materials in order to enable them to meet learning objectives. The resources are provided in the form of best practices: they do not pertain to academic decisions regarding course content, learning outcomes, or discipline-specific requirements. Instead, this document provides possible methods of course delivery that may be of use to an educator in response to documented, demonstrated student needs.

The strategies are predicated on three main tenets: i) that people will respond differently to trauma and that responses are not always possible to anticipate, whether those responses be to course material or course discussions and comments made by other students; ii) that there is a clear and necessary distinction between trauma and discomfort, and that potentially sensitive topics and materials will be discussed at the university in accordance with academic freedom; and iii) that student, educator, and staff wellness is central to the functioning and mission of the university. As stated in the Wellness Strategy, an institutional goal is and must be “To create an environment that promotes and supports the health and well-being of all who study and work at our campuses.” The guidelines are informed by three main documents: the USFA Collective Agreement (2014-17), including section 6.1: Academic Freedom; the University of Saskatchewan Guidelines for Academic Conduct (June 1999), including Principle III: Respect for the Dignity of Others, Dealing with Sensitive Topics; and the Canadian Association of University Teachers Policy Statement on Trigger Warnings (May 2015).

Given the diversity of the teaching and learning situations that take place at the University of Saskatchewan, the strategies document is divided into four sections:

1. Principles:
   A more conceptual statement of the bases and underlying objectives of the guidelines. These general principles may inform a college’s or a unit’s local approach to situations that are not necessarily addressed in the document.

2. AES Syllabus Statement:
   A specific option for students with existing diagnoses, which entails student registration with AES on the basis of medical documentation. Registration is an act of self-advocacy, as is the student’s role in the AES Accommodation Committee consultation process, which involves the student and the educator in establishing specific accommodations.

3. Strategies:
   Organizational and classroom strategies offered as options for educators and units in managing responses to potentially traumatic as well as to uncomfortable course materials. Techniques for possible accommodation that would be established locally (i.e. by the student and educator in likely consultation with department / unit head or program chair) and sources for more information are also provided.

4. Resources:
   A list of on-campus resources for educators to recommend to students and to use themselves.
PROCESS OF GUIDELINES DEVELOPMENT

The Strategies initiative arose in the Department of English in response to course-related situations concerning student well-being. Initial consultations included discussions with representatives of CAUT and the USFA; with the Associate Dean, Student Affairs and the Vice-Dean, Academic of the College of Arts and Science; with the Manager of AES and the Director, Student Affairs and Services; with the University’s Legal Counsel; and with the Vice-Provost, Teaching, Learning, and Student Experience.

Following these consultations, a Working Group was formed by the Vice-Provost, TLSE. After small-group consultation, the group as a whole met in April 2017 and in October 2017, and included the following members (listed in terms of their positions at the time):

- Kristina Bidwell, Associate Dean, Indigenous Affairs, College of A&S
- Yelena Bird, School of Public Health
- Patience Elabor-Idemudia, Sociology, College of A&S
- Lorin Elias, Associate Dean, Student Affairs, College of A&S
- Joel Fonstad, Learning Centre, University Library
- John Hansen, Sociology, College of A&S
- Peter Hedley, Director of Student Affairs and Services, TLSE
- Maxine Kinakin, Manager, Access & Equity Services, TLSE
- Maggie Kovach, College of Education
- Ann Martin, English, College of A&S (Chair)
- Patti McDougall, Psychology, Vice-Provost, Teaching, Learning, and Student Experience
- Lucinda Vandervort, College of Law

A draft of the Trauma Guidelines was established and subsequently circulated among the Working Group for further revision in Winter 2017. A consultation process was also established. Accordingly, the Chair of the Working Group and the Vice-Provost, TLSE met with the USSU Academic Affairs Committee and with the Executive of the Graduate Student Association, and circulated the document to the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning for feedback in Summer 2018. A revised draft was circulated among the Working Group for final approval in February 2019 and forwarded to TLARC for preliminary discussion at the meeting of 16 April 2019. The current version of the strategies document integrates feedback provided by TLARC and from Peter Hedley (Student Affairs and Services) and Maxine Kinakin (Access and Equity), thus marking the document’s intended role as a responsive, evolving set of best practices.
Introduction
This strategies document is intended to provide resources for educators and units at the University of Saskatchewan regarding trauma-related student responses to course materials and classroom discussions. It is a support for educators and thus for students who identify that they are having or anticipate having trauma-related responses to certain course materials. The strategies do not pertain to academic decisions regarding course content, learning outcomes, or discipline-specific requirements and practices, nor are they intended to inhibit in any way the educator’s exercise of academic freedom. Rather, they represent possible approaches and methods for the delivery of course content that an educator may choose and use in response to documented, demonstrated student needs. By exploring alternative approaches to the delivery of course content and materials, educators are enabled to reduce the likelihood of harm while maintaining the integrity of course outcomes.

The resources are presented in four sections:

1. Principles: a conceptual statement of the bases and underlying objectives of the document. These general principles may inform a college’s or a unit’s local approach to situations that are not necessarily addressed in the document.
2. AES Syllabus Statement: a statement supporting registration with Access and Equity Services for students with existing medical diagnoses. Student registration is an act of self-advocacy and involves a targeted, managed approach towards accommodation through the AES Accommodation Committee consultation process, which involves the student and the educator in a facilitated dialogue.
3. Strategies: a set of optional organizational and classroom techniques that may be of use for educators and units in managing student responses to potentially traumatic course materials. Such techniques are intended as best practices in the possible accommodation of students (i.e. on an informal basis by the educator in likely consultation with a department / unit head or program chair) as well as techniques for guiding productive discussions of what may be perceived as uncomfortable material.
4. Resources: a list of on-campus resources for educators to recommend to students and to use themselves.

The strategies and resources provided may have greater applicability to some units than to others. They may serve to raise awareness of the range of student responses that can arise in relation to some course content or classroom discussions. The strategies and resources may be consulted by individual instructors or may become part of a unit’s discussion of teaching and learning objectives, and / or managing student and educator wellness. That discussion may involve administrators alongside full-time and adjunct faculty, limited-term faculty, sessional instructors, and graduate student and undergraduate teaching assistants or seminar leaders. Such discussions, as well as the teaching practices of individual educators, may also benefit from talks, workshops, and presentations offered through the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning and through Student Affairs and Outreach.

Principles
There are a range of possible trauma-related responses that students may have to course materials
and class discussions. Some may arise from diagnosed conditions, such as PTSD, anxiety disorders, clinical depression, etc., that pertain to a specific experience and result in recognized physiological or psychological responses. Familial and/or communal histories can also inform a response. Everyone responds differently to trauma, and it may not be possible for the student or the educator to identify all potentially traumatic materials presented and engaged with through course readings, assignments, and class discussions.

Accommodations will not be made for students who are simply uncomfortable with subject matter. Critical inquiry is central to the university’s mission, and academic freedom is predicated upon an educator’s ability to choose and use teaching techniques and course materials, and to engage in the critical discussion of potentially sensitive topics. The university is an academic environment in which difficult and potentially disturbing content is to be better understood through the development and practice of scholarly methods of inquiry. Such inquiry can be enriched by students who engage with the process through a range of histories and experiences, and with respect for each other and for the larger academic enterprise.

Any approach should thus acknowledge the difference between the psychological or traumatic, which may require accommodation, and the ideological, in which a level of discomfort can be recognized as part of the learning process. In either case, the aim is to identify empowering and supportive strategies for all parties; to acknowledge the centrality of our shared well-being to teaching and learning; and to assist in the development of knowledge, skills, and resilience in managing difficult topics and issues within and beyond an academic environment. Respectful teaching and learning practices, as well as the identification of support services and other resources for students, faculty, and staff alike are crucial elements of this aim.

Any student accommodation(s) involved in this process would pertain to methods, approaches, and/or procedures supporting students to achieve course outcomes. Accommodation(s) would not pertain to academic decisions regarding content or curricula.

**Access and Equity Services (AES) Syllabus Statement**

Students who have disabilities (learning, medical, physical, or mental health) are strongly encouraged to register with Access and Equity Services (AES) if they have not already done so. Students who suspect they may have disabilities should contact AES for advice and referrals at any time. Those students who are registered with AES with mental health disabilities and who anticipate that they may have responses to certain course materials or topics, should discuss course content with their instructors prior to course add/drop dates. In order to access AES programs and supports, students must follow AES policy and procedures. For more information or advice, visit [https://students.usask.ca/health/centres/access-equity-services.php](https://students.usask.ca/health/centres/access-equity-services.php), or contact AES at 306-966-7273 or aes@usask.ca.

Students registered with AES may request alternative arrangements for mid-term and final examinations. Students must arrange such accommodations through AES by the stated deadlines. Instructors shall provide the examinations for students who are being accommodated by the deadlines established by AES.
Strategies

• Educators will ensure the confidentiality of students who anticipate or who self-identify as experiencing a trauma-related response to course materials, and will provide the student with information about the University of Saskatchewan Student Wellness Centre and Access and Equity Services, as per the AES syllabus statement. AES registration may result in the arrangement of accommodations not included in the list of suggestions provided below.

• Students can benefit from educators using the following wording on their course outlines in conjunction with the AES syllabus statement, should it seem appropriate:

The discussion and analysis of challenging subject matter is an integral part of the academic environment and of the learning process. Students should self-identify before the class add / drop date to Access and Equity Services, and to the instructor if desired, if they have diagnosed responses related to traumatic situations that may be covered in course materials and if they would like to discuss content warnings or other accommodations.

• Students can benefit when educators provide notifications, including through e-mail or Blackboard, of course materials that could be regarded as emotionally difficult before study of those materials begins, with wording such as the following:

So that you can prepare for the study of Eden Robinson’s short story “Queen of the North,” you should be aware that it deals with familial sexual abuse related to Residential School experiences, including specific subjects such as sexual assault and abortion.

• Students can benefit when educators use teaching strategies geared towards facilitating productive discussions of material and topics that may be viewed as uncomfortable. These might include:
  o prefacing such discussions by acknowledging the potentially emotional dimension of the material and providing information on support services, such as those offered through the Student Wellness Centre;
  o inviting a guest lecturer to address issues specific to a given group or experience;
  o considering the integration of specific teaching strategies (see the Gwenna Moss Centre for workshops and sessions) that can assist in guiding students through material that may evoke discomfort or strong emotion;
  o encouraging students to draw upon their own knowledge to enrich the larger learning experience, thus examining situational experiences through the analysis of systemic or structural issues;
  o enunciating the student’s responsibilities to the larger class in relation to mutually respectful dialogue; and / or
  o moving a conversation that is tending towards personal opinion back to a focused engagement with the material, literature, and / or research itself, thereby grounding discussions in evidence-based modes of scholarly inquiry and analysis.

• Accommodations arranged for students who self-identify will vary depending upon circumstances, but could include one or more of the following, which are ordered to suggest a progression of options:
working with the student, if the student so desires, through the USSU Academic Advocacy Office or the GSA Vice-President Academics and Student Affairs, to establish needs;
working with the department / unit head or undergraduate chair to find the student an alternate class (at the beginning of term);
noting particular content in advance so that the student can best prepare for effective discussion of the material (see sample wording, above);
if there is a participation grade, allowing students to miss without penalty one or two classes in which the problematic material will be discussed;
at the discretion of the educator, allowing for the substitution of a limited amount of course material that fulfills the same learning objectives in terms of topic, theme, form, methods etc., but that does not contain the traumatic subject matter; and
if necessary and depending upon the structure of the midterm and / or final exams, adding one or two questions about the substitute material / text to the exam(s) administered to that particular student.

Educators, including sessional instructors and graduate students working in an instructional capacity, can benefit from accessing the following on-campus resources (see "Resources" below for contact information):

- Student Affairs and Outreach for consultation, advice, and strategies regarding specific student or classroom situations;
- Student Affairs and Outreach for presentations aimed at issues and strategies relevant to specific colleges, departments, programs, and units;
- the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning, which offers workshops, sessions, and talks regarding teaching and learning strategies;
- Mental Health First Aid courses offered through the Office of the Vice-Provost, Teaching, Learning, and Student Experience; and
- the Employee and Family Assistance Program.
Resources
Access and Equity Services: E1 Administration Building
AES is guided by Saskatchewan’s Human Rights legislation and the duty to accommodate individuals requiring accommodations based on disability, religion, family status, and gender identity.
https://students.usask.ca/health/centres/access-equity-services.php
306.966.7273; aes@usask.ca

University of Saskatchewan Students’ Union Academic Advocacy Office: Room 110, Place Riel
The USSU’s Academic Advocacy Office serves as a general information source for students regarding their rights and responsibilities.
https://ussu.ca/main-page/services/academic-advocacy/
306.966.6968; vpacademic@ussu.ca

Graduate Students’ Association
The not-for-profit organization that represents over 4000 graduate students at the University of Saskatchewan, and that provides professional, academic, and social activities and services.
https://gsa.usask.ca/
Vice-President Academics and Student Affairs (gsa.sa@usask.ca)
President (gsa.pres@usask.ca)

Student Wellness Centre: 3rd (Rm. 310) and 4th floors, Place Riel Student Centre
The Student Wellness Centre offers urgent and non-urgent physical and mental health care to U of S students and their spouses and children.
https://students.usask.ca/health/centres/wellness-centre.php
306.966.5768; student.wellness@usask.ca

Student Affairs and Outreach: 3rd floor, Place Riel Student Centre
A team of Social Workers responsible for mental health intake, early alerts, student outreach, crisis response, psycho-educational groups, and consultation to faculty, staff, and students who are concerned about a student.
306.966.5757

Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning: Room 50, Murray Building
The Gwenna Moss Centre is committed to supporting and improving teaching and learning, and provides a variety of programming and resources to help faculty, instructors, and grad students.
https://teaching.usask.ca/about/units/gwenna-moss-centre-for-teaching-and-learning.php
306.966.2231; gmctl@usask.ca

Employee and Family Assistance Program
The University of Saskatchewan provides EFAP as a resource to help employees and their family members deal with personal and work-life concerns.
306.966.4300 / 1.844.448.7275

Office of the Vice-Provost, Teaching, Learning, and Student Experience
https://teaching.usask.ca/about/people/vice-provost-teaching-learning-and-student-experience.php