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The Cost Of Professional Helping In Higher Education

By: **R. Jason Lynch**

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Lynch RJ. The cost of professional helping in higher education. *New directions for student services*. 2022;2022(177):69-80. Publisher version of record available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ss.20416>

The cost of professional helping in higher education

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Abstract

It is estimated that over half of college student affairs practitioners support students through traumatic life events on at least a monthly basis. This level of trauma exposure leaves professionals at risk of experiencing secondary traumatic stress (STS), or the distress that results from helping, or wanting to help, a person experiencing trauma. Unfortunately, little is known about the impact of this phenomenon within the context of student affairs work. This article seeks to shed light on the nature and impact of STS within the context of college student affairs work, as well as explore ways to identify and address the negative impacts of professional helping. The article ends with practical recommendations for individual practitioners, supervisors, organizational leaders, and the profession at-large.

INTRODUCTION

“...the other thing about this whole secondary trauma thing is that you don’t talk about it.”

~Krista (Lynch, 2017)

One night as a full-time resident director (RD), I was serving on-call duty, similar to many residential life professionals across the country. Late in the evening, I received a phone call from a resident assistant (RA) informing me that a resident had attempted suicide. The resident in question had specifically tried to do this through cutting. The scene I witnessed was graphic and chaotic; but, fortunately, EMS arrived in time, and the resident received

the services and support they needed to recover. I vividly remember the student's slack face, the blood, the RA's mixture of shock and worry, and the confusion of other students as they witnessed their community member being wheeled out of the hall on a gurney. Following the incident, I engaged in follow-up meetings with others in my department that (rightfully) centered the student and debriefed the logistics of the incident. However, little to no consideration was given by leadership to how managing the crisis impacted me as an early career professional. Unfortunately, my socialization in the profession led me to believe that this was normal and that I should keep my troubles to myself and re-focus my energies on the next student who needed my help. It was not until I began visiting a counselor that I realized that incidents like this, in addition to the almost constant exposure to first and second-hand stories of student traumas (e.g., sexual violence, mental health issues, poverty, abuse, and discrimination), were taking a very real and severe toll on both my physical and mental health.

While my story represents only one perspective, my research on the topic has revealed that my experience is not uncommon. The above quote from Krista, a student affairs professional and participant in my previous research, is an example of this shared experience of not talking about our exposure to student trauma. In a profession that promotes mantras such as "students first" or "students as customers," some professionals often feel they cannot have open and authentic conversations about how they have been impacted by their roles as professional helpers (Lynch, 2017).

In this article, I seek to break this taboo by discussing how engaging in professional helping can be detrimental to the health and well-being of student affairs professionals (SAPs) as well as how campus work environments and professional cultures lead to experiences of secondary traumatic stress (STS). I draw on my own research and professional experiences, as well as the larger literature from higher education and other helping professions to unpack the nature of STS, center the experiences of other professionals, and explore how work environments and cultures pose inherent risks for experiencing STS. I end the article with recommendations for practitioners, supervisors, departmental leadership, and the greater profession that may help student affairs divisions fulfill their organizational missions to support students without perpetuating a system of burnout and secondary trauma for their staff. As you engage with this article, I ask that you actively reflect on your own experiences and reactions to the content presented here. Pause and check in with yourself: What emotions are you feeling? How do you see the themes in this article playing out in your own contexts?

WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS?

Although there are many perspectives on the nature and definition of *trauma*, I operate from the point of view that trauma is the natural reaction to any event or circumstance that overwhelms a person's capacity to psychologically cope (Barbash, 2017). The experience of trauma is highly individualized, meaning that one person's trauma or reaction to trauma may look very different than that of another person (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014): Anyone can experience trauma, but the experience may not be so severe that it meets criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Often the nature of traumatic stress and support is considered through the lens of the trauma survivor with less focus given to the impact of trauma beyond that of the survivor. In reality, trauma has a ripple effect that extends well beyond those experiencing the initial event, much like a stone thrown into a pond (van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009). Figure 1 illustrates this metaphor with the center circle representing the traumatic event, the second

FIGURE 1 Illustration of van Dernoort Lipsky (2009) metaphor regarding the impact of trauma

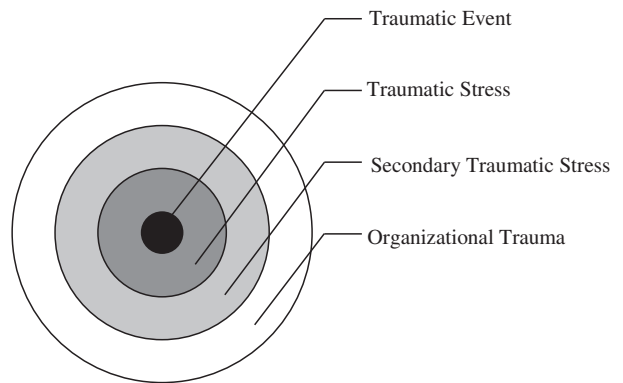


TABLE 1 Trauma exposure response behaviors (van Dernoort Lipsky, 2009)

Feeling hopeless/helpless	Dissociative moments
A sense that one can never do enough	Sense of persecution
Hypervigilance	Guilt
Diminished creativity	Fear
Inability to embrace complexity	Anger and cynicism
Minimizing	Inability to empathize/numbing
Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments	Addictions
Deliberate avoidance	Grandiosity or inflated sense of importance

circle representing the person primarily exposed to the traumatic event, and subsequent ripples representing those providing care and support. For the purposes of this discussion, I explore the third circle, *secondary traumatic stress*, also known as secondary trauma or vicarious traumatization.

The phenomenon of secondary trauma can be thought of as the distress that results from helping, or wanting to help, a person experiencing trauma (Figley, 1999), but this definition provides little direction in identifying when someone may be experiencing secondary trauma. van Dernoort Lipsky (2009) offers a useful framework of behaviors and emotions that may indicate a trauma exposure response, defined as “the transformation that takes place within us as a result of exposure to the suffering of other living beings or the planet” (p. 41). In adopting such a framework, student affairs practitioners may use a common language to identify and articulate their experiences, creating opportunities for self-reflection and self-advocacy. The framework is also valuable for supervisors and department leaders to reframe staff behaviors that could otherwise be interpreted as unprofessional or problematic.

Table 1 provides a list of 16 common responses found in individuals who have been exposed to a traumatic event or have worked with individuals experiencing trauma (van Dernoort Lipsky, 2009). I encourage you to pause for a moment and consider if you have observed any of these signs in yourself or your colleagues, after having supported students in crisis. How did these signs manifest in the individual or yourself? What impacts did they have on their, or your, wellbeing or ability to engage in work responsibilities?

While some of these signs (van Dernoort Lipsky, 2009) can be more readily recognized (such as feelings of fear, hopelessness, or anger), others may be harder to conceptualize (such as grandiosity or hypervigilance). Drawing on my year-long phenomenological study of 30 SAPs who described themselves as having experienced secondary trauma (Lynch,

2017; Lynch & Glass, 2020), I attempt to offer practical examples of a few trauma exposure responses that may be more obscure (grandiosity, avoidance, and hypervigilance) in what follows:

Grandiosity

In experiencing a trauma exposure response, SAPs may often feel a sense of personal responsibility for students experiencing trauma, leading these professionals to believe they must be involved in every step of the response or constantly be “on.” Leslie, a senior-student affairs officer explored this notion as she worked with younger professionals during a major crisis:

[Younger professionals] also tend to—you know, this is a profession where [professionals] tend to wear themselves out and be martyrs. So, it’s just saying it’s okay if there aren’t six of you in the support center today since we have two students here. You could take time away.

While the underlying motivation of the individuals Leslie referred to cannot be known, I have sometimes found that professionals supporting students take on a mindset that they must be involved in all aspects of a student’s support plan or fear that, if they are not there to provide support, no one else will. This may stem from an unacknowledged need for control or closure regarding their role in the student’s experience and can lead to poor boundary setting and exhaustion. This belief may also stem from broken trust in institutional support systems. Matt, a senior level leadership programs professional encapsulated this notion as he reflected on his experiences supporting students through a number of hardships:

students [are getting] ground up by the system, the system we believe in . . . and I would say the system doesn’t appropriately value the emotional, mental, physical academic strains that financial stresses place on a student, so that’s contaminating everything.

Within many of the interviews I have conducted, this sentiment of mistrust in university systems and leadership has remained consistent. As student affairs practitioners are called upon to support students, this mistrust can lead practitioners to work overtime to make up for these systemic issues in higher education.

Avoidance

Avoidance may take many forms after exposure to traumatic incidents. It may show up as the staff member who has excessive absences or actively avoids certain parts of campus or avoids particular students. The primary motivation for those engaging in avoidance is to evade people, places, or objects that bring up memories of the trauma exposure. Angie, a service-learning professional, reflected on how participating in her interview with me required her to confront memories and emotions she otherwise would have avoided:

I don’t take a lot of time to stop and reflect. . . . I personally don’t see it as beneficial. Often I think that when you stop to reflect and you spend so much

time [reflecting], [it] can lead you back to feeling like that and not being able to function really well in your life, so I don't take time often to sit back and reflect. I think it was very interesting to do that because that's just not characteristically my personality . . .

Within higher education, it is easy to avoid uncomfortable feelings and memories related to student support because there are always more students in need of help. Additionally, organizational cultures may contribute to avoidant behaviors by not providing intentional, meaningful, and ongoing opportunities to process these emotions.

Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance may be thought of as a consistent nagging feeling that “the other shoe is going to drop.” Essentially, the brain is attempting to protect the individual by constantly being on guard for threats. Bernadette exemplified this in her discussion of working in the area of gender and sexuality services:

It sometimes scares me because . . . sexual assault is normal to me . . . I assume anyone could sexually assault someone. It's an assumption that in this world, I think to a certain extent, anyone could be a [perpetrator]. And I think that's really something I learned in student affairs, and . . . it just shatters your worldview a little bit. But I think it's easier when you think anyone could be than if you think no one could be. I don't know.

Although for Bernadette hypervigilance presented as a persistent belief that anyone could be a perpetrator of sexual violence, it may show up in diverse ways depending on the individual. For professionals who have worked with students experiencing suicidality, they may see signs of suicidal ideation everywhere, but for others, as in my own experience, hypervigilance can merely show up as a persistent fear that something bad is about to happen.

THE PARADOX OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Almost a century after the penning of the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1937), the primary purpose of the student affairs profession remains to provide transitional, developmental, and emotional support to students as they navigate college (Burke et al., 2016; Schuh et al., 2016). However, the context both within and outside of the American college campus has drastically changed since the early 20th century. The diversification of the student body (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2019), emergence of neoliberal logics (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017), technological innovations (Kentor, 2015), and the onset of the college student mental health crisis (Kadison, 2005) have forced the profession to evolve to address the challenges of 21st century higher education. Although many of these changes have been positive (including greater focus on issues of access, equity, inclusion, student wellness, and social mobility), SAPs continue to be asked to give more of themselves to their work despite poor wages (Marshall et al., 2016), fewer resources (Mitchell et al., 2017), and pressure to increase services due to rising competition via student choice (Hurwitz & Kumar, 2015). These changes, combined with overt and covert messaging perpetuating maladaptive views of

student support, have created work environments primed to perpetuate secondary trauma and burnout.

One consistent theme in my research has been the persistent and widespread nature of student trauma within higher education (Lynch, 2017). Traumatic experiences including food and/or home insecurity, sexual violence, mental health disorders, and discrimination are only the tip of what students may experience while in college (Lynch & Glass, 2020; Silverman & Glick, 2010); yet, due to the transient nature of higher education, student affairs practitioners are presented with a new batch of students to support through these crises year after year. Krista, a former residential life professional turned career counselor recalled one particularly tough year for her:

One of the years that I was [a resident director], in the course of a month, there were two suicide completions and another three hospitalizations for attempts when I was on call. It was insane. . . . What are the staff supposed to do when they're coming just one after the other after the other after the other?

Indeed, *what are staff supposed to do?* Remembering the experience I shared at the beginning of this article of my own on-call duty encounter of student trauma, that was not my first exposure to student suicidality that year, nor was it the first crisis of the year. Yet, I had no time to process this event before I had to assist in another roommate conflict, manage another hall program, attend another department meeting, and facilitate another conduct hearing. Needless to say, the amount of emotional labor needed to effectively complete these other tasks while experiencing exhaustion, sadness, and anxiety, was significant and perpetuated my experience of trauma and secondary trauma as I felt forced to bottle up my emotions to uphold the standards of professionalism required at the institution (Lynch & Klima, 2020). While it may be easy to scapegoat my supervisors for not checking in on me or departmental leadership for passively perpetuating such a work culture, they had also been socialized within the same professional norms of the institution and caught within the larger system that led to this circumstance. Unfortunately, this cycle is set up to continue until both staff and leadership are prepared to speak up and demand change.

As student affairs practitioners seek to employ trauma-informed approaches in their practice, they must not forget that true trauma-informed environments also include acknowledgement and support for those engaging in professional helping (SAMHSA, 2014). While some may view time focusing on the well-being of student affairs practitioners as better served engaging in student support, this notion is misguided and harmful for both practitioners and students. But how do we break out of this paradox of student support? In the next section, I explore several ways in which various stakeholders can maintain the effectiveness of student support units without harming the staff called to provide such support.

REDUCING THE COST OF PROFESSIONAL HELPING IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

While much of this article has provided an overview of the phenomenon of STA within the context of the college student affairs profession, it is also important to consider the ways in which we can reimagine our profession as one that understands the interconnectedness between healthy professional helpers and student success. Below, I have provided specific recommendations for how student affairs practitioners, supervisors,

organizational leaders, and institutions of professional socialization can begin to consider how to include SAPs within their considerations of trauma-informed campuses.

Practitioners

As the old adage goes, “you can’t fix a problem you don’t recognize.” One of the first steps individual practitioners can take to understand the impact that trauma-support work has had on them is to engage in consistent self-reflection. Many tools are available, including the *Secondary Trauma in Student Affairs Professionals Scale* (STSAP), developed specifically to assess secondary trauma in SAPs (Lynch & Glass, 2018). Another evidence-based mechanism for self-reflection that has been found to reduce the impact of traumatic stress is to intentionally set aside 15–30 min in the morning or evening to journal regularly (Desmond, 2019; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). As one begins to see patterns in their thoughts, behaviors, and triggers, they are better equipped to articulate their needs and boundaries. In one study, Ullrich and Lutgendorf (2002) found that journaling about both the emotional and cognitive, or meaning making, elements of traumatic or stressful events had the greatest positive impact in participants compared to those only journaling about their emotional reactions.

Self-reflection alone, however, is not a complete panacea for the negative impacts of trauma exposure. Being in community with others, particularly others who may have similar backgrounds or lived experiences, is also necessary to healing (Badenoch, 2017). Consistent across a number of studies (Crumpei & Dafinoiu, 2012; Lynch & Glass, 2020), one byproduct of experiencing trauma is a sense of isolation. Margaret, a new professional, recalled sharing her participation in my research with her peers and the feedback she received:

I feel like whenever I brought up [this topic] to [co-workers], people were really receptive because this is their experience too. I feel like it’s this thing that people don’t talk about in the field. They don’t talk about what it feels like . . . It’s kind of just like this unspoken thing that you’re supposed to just do your job and do it well every day and there is no room for feeling any kind of feelings whether it’s frustration or anger. There is no actual time to take care of yourself or spaces really for processing. So, it was good to be able to talk to other folks about it, especially folks that “get it” because it’s not an uncommon feeling.

As such, one of the best ways to combat secondary trauma is to talk about it (Lieberman et al., 2007). Practitioners are encouraged to investigate university-sponsored avenues for mental health support or review mental health coverage within their insurance plans. However, I recognize this is not always feasible or affordable. Instead, practitioners may seek trusted colleagues, within or outside of their institutions, that they can regularly debrief with after providing support to students experiencing traumatic stress, with the aim of articulating specific thoughts and emotions brought up by the experiences and mechanisms to release them.

Supervisors

Supervision in student affairs has often been a point of critique in creating sustainable work environments in the field (Mullen et al., 2018; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003; Tull, 2006).

Cited as a common theme contributing to the attrition of SAPs from the field (Marshall et al., 2016), poor supervision has been linked to low job satisfaction (Tull, 2006) and exacerbation of secondary trauma of professionals (Lynch 2017; Lynch & Glass, 2020). After engaging in extended support of students who experienced sexual violence, Scarlett, a mid-level campus activity professional, reflected on the following during her interview:

I think a lot of [secondary trauma] comes from supervision. . . . Why are there so many bad supervisors in higher ed? I do not understand. Everyone I talk to hates their supervisor or has had a terrible supervisor. But, we are supposed to be preparing people [to be professional helpers]? I don't get it. So, I think that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in our field about supervision because it makes or breaks our experiences. I think it is why we have so much attrition in the field.

One of the primary ways in which supervision can be engaged to reduce secondary trauma is for supervisors to undergo training for trauma-informed supervision (TIS). A number of reputable national organizations offer tools for TIS including the *Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape* (Stiles et al., 2020), which provides an outline for creating secondary trauma prevention plans. Through appropriate training, supervisors may be better equipped to recognize the signs of a trauma response and feel better equipped to support supervisees in navigating these difficult situations through established trauma-informed practices (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Supervisors in student affairs divisions may also consider how they approach their day-to-day work and how this may impact their capacities to support their staff through experiences of secondary trauma. For example, some supervisors may adopt a hands-off approach to staff wellbeing. Instead, supervisors should seek to partner with their staff in order to accomplish departmental goals while simultaneously building the capacity for resilience in their staff. This may include regular (annually, semesterly, or quarterly) check-in's where supervisors intentionally ask about staff experiences with students in crisis and engage in discussions around boundaries and wellness needs. It is also important for supervisors to differentiate these check-in's based on the needs of individual supervisees. For instance, a conversation with a new professional may center on strategies for establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries, whereas conversations with seasoned professionals may center on meaning making of past experiences. Finally, supervisors are encouraged to maximize choice and flexibility in their staff's schedules. Student affairs work is notoriously unpredictable when it comes to work hours, so expecting a staff member to immediately bounce back from a difficult student conversation in order to be prepared for another meeting is unreasonable and harmful.

Organizational leadership

Given the potential of negative impacts from professional helping, it is of little wonder that the student affairs field experiences high rates of attrition, particularly for early career professionals (Razek et al., 2016). Organizational leaders may have the most significant role in creating more sustainable work environments, as they have the power to set a vision that incorporates staff wellness as a priority within departmental policies and cultures. While staff members and supervisors can certainly do their part to mitigate the impact of traumatic stress within the organization, systemic change requires buy-in and intentional action from senior leaders.

One way in which organizations may increase support of front-line professionals is appropriate and ongoing training. Reilley illustrated a common critique among participants in my study, expressing dissatisfaction with the training and development provided by their departments:

I don't think there was a lot of robust professional development that would actually help me be a supporter to someone else. Getting six hours of "Here's how to have hard conversations with people in a time of need" is not a training program for support.

For functional areas where supporting students through traumatic incidents is common, training should be consistently developed keeping three concepts in mind. First, training should focus on building the capacity of a professional's use of trauma-informed practices (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), including the tenets of psychological safety; choice and voice; collaboration; transparency and trustworthiness; empowerment; and sociocultural considerations. Second, training should include shadowing between new professionals and senior professionals. Much like nursing, counseling, and teaching, individuals in other helping professions are rarely thrown into their jobs without first experiencing the job alongside a more seasoned professional. Within student affairs work, this may look different depending on the functional area, but may include having first-year resident directors shadow a seasoned peer serving on-call before serving in this capacity on their own. From the perspective of student conduct, new staff may shadow a few conduct hearings before conducting one themselves. Finally, trauma-informed trainings should be an on-going process targeted towards the level of experience in the job. For instance, while new professional training may introduce the idea of trauma-informed practice, training for seasoned professionals may include TIS skills, consistent debriefing about their experiences supporting students, or ways to support new professionals being socialized into their roles.

Additionally, organizational leaders should leverage data and assessment in tracking the impact of professional helping within their divisions or departments, specifically within areas that potentially engage in a disproportionate level of emotional or crisis support (i.e., residence life, student conduct, Title IX, academic advising, and identity-based services). This could take the form of periodic anonymous surveys to understand wellness trends of their staff or tracking incidents of student crisis support. The survey may ask participants to answer scaled questions such as: *Over the past academic year, through what types of crises have you provided support to students?* and *On average this past academic year, how often have you provided crisis support for students?* By taking a proactive and data-driven approach to building trauma-informed work environments, departmental or divisional leaders may be better equipped to redevelop protocols and policies geared toward work hours flexibility and specific training, while also advocating for mental health resources and other means for building trauma resiliency.

Professional preparation and socialization

Year after year college SAPs calls for change in working conditions on their campuses and the maladaptive views of student support in which they are socialized (Anderson, 2020; Kinser, 1993; Marshall et al., 2016; Schneck, 2014); yet, change comes slowly, if at all. For a true culture shift within our profession, national leaders, organizations, and professional preparation programs need to acknowledge and *actively* advocate for resources and

training to equip SAPs with the skills, resources, and support to meet the needs of students without sacrificing themselves. One area of the profession that can make an impact is higher education and student affairs preparation programs. Luke, a new campus-activities professional, said it well:

I don't feel that the student affairs master's program fully prepares you. . . . There has to be something where the student affairs field at large needs to recognize that it's not enough just to throw fresh grads into those types of positions. There needs to be either something more formal or it needs to be clearly stated that the master's degree is purely for the theoretical [aspects of the job] . . . you don't get taught how to respond to emergencies in your master's program, yet 90 % of entry-level jobs [require this skill] . . .

While many higher education preparation programs offer helping skills courses that are grounded in counseling practice, they do not frequently address how to build personal resilience as a professional helper. This is a missed opportunity for preparation programs to equip emerging professionals with the tools and resources to combat secondary trauma before it becomes an issue. Incorporating topics on secondary trauma, boundary setting, meaning making, and professional wellness could easily be incorporated into courses such as Introduction to Student Affairs, Helping Skills, or Current Issues. Programs requiring internships or assistantships with reflective components may also incorporate these topics within course discussions or other activities. Texts such as this *New Directions for Student Services* issue, as well as *Overcoming Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Schools* (Dubois & Mistretta, 2019), and *Reducing Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Burnout: A Trauma-Sensitive Workbook* (Steele, 2019) would offer great introductory discussions for such courses.

In addition to professional preparation programs, student affairs national organizations such as NASPA, ACPA, and NASAP must take a more proactive approach to leading conversations, funding opportunities, and professional development events that center issues of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary trauma in student affairs. This may take the form of grant funding opportunities, special issues in professional publications, or joint advocacy initiatives to affect change on the state and federal policy level.

Although some campus leaders may frame staff wellness as something admirable, but non-essential, we must re-frame those attitudes to underscore the often-overlooked ethics of staff well-being and student support. After all, professionals who are unwell have less capacity for the creativity, empathy, and ability to make difficult decisions needed to effectively support students. In order for SAPs to best serve their students, they must be operating from a place of support and healing. Until we begin to seriously view wellness as an ethical underpinning for socialization in the field, many of the recommendations I discuss may be difficult to sustain.

THE PATH FORWARD

Reflecting on my own experiences as a student affairs practitioner, my memories are bittersweet. Providing support and assistance for numerous students brought a great sense of joy and fulfillment, but I cannot help also remembering the ways the profession and my institutions often made me feel like I was not giving enough of myself to this work. As campus administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff consider implementing trauma-informed approaches within their campus communities, they must also consider

the impact of trauma on those charged with supporting students. By overlooking this aspect of trauma-informed care, professional helpers in higher education will continue to experience secondary trauma and burnout, reducing their capacity to fully provide students the support they may need. Everyone has a role to play in creating a trauma-informed community, but the most significant change needs to come at the level of professional culture, socialization, and senior leadership in order to create trauma-informed campuses for all stakeholders. Instead of turning away or pretending this is not an issue, we must face this issue head-on so that professional wellbeing is seen as a cornerstone of providing sustainable student support.

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How to cite this article: Lynch, R. J. (2022). The cost of professional helping in higher education. In T. R. Shalka & W. K. Okello (Eds.), *Trauma-informed practice in student affairs: Multidimensional considerations for care, healing, and wellbeing* (New Directions for Student Services, 177, 69–80). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20416>