

Trauma-Informed Advocacy for Clinical Law Students



A Training Framework

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Preamble

Clinical legal education places students at the intersection of rigorous academic training and emotionally demanding client work.

This sample framework outlines a trauma-informed training program designed for clinical law students working with vulnerable populations, including immigration, criminal defense, family law, and child advocacy clinics.

The program integrates trauma science, ethical advocacy, and resilience practices to help students engage clients effectively while sustaining their own professional well-being.

I. Introduction

The legal profession is a high-stakes field where practitioners encounter significant stressors, often amplified by the trauma their clients endure.

For clinical law students, these challenges are particularly acute as they balance, for the first time, the demands of rigorous academic work with the emotionally charged realities of client advocacy. This dual burden requires students not only to develop their legal skills but also to navigate the emotional and psychological complexities inherent in this work.

These challenges are further intensified in the current social climate. As a new presidential administration prepares to disrupt established legal norms—particularly in immigration and criminal justice—clinical law students face heightened uncertainty and volatility in the legal landscape.

These shifts compound the stress for both students and the clients they serve, many of whom are grappling with the real and immediate effects of policy changes on their lives. In such moments, possessing the skills to understand and address trauma becomes an essential component of effective and ethical advocacy.

Trauma affects how clients interact with the legal system and how advocates navigate the complexities of their work. Without the tools to recognize and mitigate these impacts, law students risk burnout, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and moral injury—factors that contribute to the legal profession's well-documented struggles with mental health.

This proposal introduces the *Trauma-Informed Advocacy Training Program*, a comprehensive initiative designed to address the unique challenges faced by clinical law students. By providing training in the neuropsychobiology of trauma, strategies for working within its constraints, and essential skills such as resilience and ethical advocacy, the program equips students to navigate the complexities of legal practice and excel in an increasingly demanding profession.

The training is led by Marjorie Florestal, founder of Blackbird Trauma Training Co., a former tenured law professor with 30 years of experience in legal practice and pedagogy. Marjorie holds a Master's degree in Jungian Psychology, and another in Human Development. She is currently completing a PhD in Human Development with a concentration in transformative coaching.



Trauma-Informed Advocacy Training

II. The Foundational Program At-A-Glance

Target Audience	Program Objectives	Program Structure
<p>This program is designed for clinical law students, particularly those working with vulnerable populations, such as clients in family law, immigration law, criminal defense, or child advocacy clinics.</p>	<p>By the end of the training, students will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain trauma and its psychological, emotional, and behavioral impacts. 2. Identify and assess signs of trauma in both clients and themselves. 3. Employ trauma-informed communication and advocacy techniques in client interactions and case strategy development. 4. Integrate ethical considerations into trauma-informed legal practice. 5. Demonstrate the use of evidence-based techniques, such as mindfulness or self-regulation strategies, to manage secondary trauma through role-play or self-assessment exercises. 6. Develop a resilience plan that includes at least three actionable strategies for managing stress in high-pressure advocacy environments. 	<p>The program is delivered in a hybrid format, combining synchronous online workshops with asynchronous materials accessible on Zoom and Canvas. This structure ensures flexibility while maintaining engagement and practical learning opportunities.</p> <p><u>Synchronous Delivery:</u> Interactive, expert-led online workshops designed to engage participants in real-time learning and discussion.</p> <p><u>Experiential Learning:</u> Participants practice trauma-informed interviewing and counseling techniques through real-world scenarios, role-plays, and guided exercises.</p> <p><u>Asynchronous Resources:</u> Supplemental materials, including readings, videos, and digital toolkits, allow participants to deepen their understanding at their own pace.</p>

III. Program Rationale and Objectives

Program Rationale

The need for trauma-informed approaches in legal education has never been more critical. Law students experience some of the highest rates of anxiety, depression, and emotional stress among professional students, which are only exacerbated by the psychological demands of working with clients. Legal professionals, particularly those in clinical settings, often engage with individuals who have endured significant trauma, such as survivors of domestic violence, asylum seekers, or those impacted by systemic injustices. The current political and social climate—marked by rapid policy changes and heightened polarization—further amplifies these challenges, placing additional stress on students and their clients.

Without proper training in trauma-informed practices, law students may unintentionally retraumatize clients or struggle to manage the emotional toll of their work. This program equips students with the knowledge and strategies needed to navigate these challenges with confidence and resilience. By learning to effectively support traumatized clients while safeguarding their own well-being, students will be prepared to engage with clients and the legal system in a sustainable and impactful way.

Program Objectives

The *Trauma-Informed Advocacy Training Program* is designed to achieve the following:

1. Build Foundational Knowledge in Trauma-Informed Practices

Clinical law students will gain a comprehensive understanding of trauma, its psychological and emotional impacts, and how it manifests in legal settings. This foundational knowledge will prepare them to recognize and address trauma in their clients and themselves effectively.

2. Develop Practical Skills

Clinical law students will learn trauma-informed communication techniques, client interaction strategies, and methods for managing emotionally charged situations. These skills will enable students to practice advocacy with greater empathy, professionalism, and effectiveness.

3. Promote Ethical Advocacy

Clinical law students will be trained to uphold the highest standards of ethical and trauma-informed practice. By integrating these principles, they will be better equipped to navigate the complex dynamics of representing vulnerable or traumatized clients.

4. Foster Resilience and Well-Being

Clinical law students will gain the skills and tools to build emotional resilience, manage secondary trauma, and reduce the risk of burnout. These strategies will ensure that students succeed academically while also preparing them for sustainable careers in the legal profession.

IV. Program Implementation Options

The *Trauma-Informed Advocacy Training Program* aligns with legal academia's mission to prepare resilient, ethical, and socially responsible lawyers. It can be tailored to fit students' diverse schedules and learning preferences.

A. Program Delivery Options

Option 1: Intensive One-Credit Course

Format: 2-day weekend intensive

Classroom Time: 6.25 hours per day, totaling 12.5 hours of instruction

Delivery: Online synchronous sessions supplemented with additional asynchronous resources and materials

Benefits:

- Provides a comprehensive training experience in a condensed timeframe.
- Ideal for students with limited availability during the semester.
- Encourages focused, immersive learning.

Option 2: Mini-Series (Condensed One-Credit Course)

Format: 6 weekly 2-hour sessions

Classroom Time: 12 hours total

Delivery: Online synchronous sessions supplemented with additional asynchronous resources and materials

Benefits:

- Spreads learning over multiple sessions, allowing time for reflection and application.
- Fosters ongoing engagement and skill-building through interactive weekly sessions.
- Ideal for students who prefer a steady, paced approach to mastering trauma-informed practices.

B. Sample Program Outline

1. Introduction to Trauma-Informed Advocacy

Content:

- What is trauma? Definitions and types (e.g., acute, chronic, systemic).
- The impact of trauma on clients and advocates.
- Key principles of trauma-informed advocacy.

Objectives:

- Build foundational knowledge on key principles of trauma-informed advocacy and set the stage for the rest of the program.

Duration: 2 hours

2. Recognizing Trauma in Legal Practice

Content:

- Signs and symptoms of trauma in clients.

- How trauma manifests in legal interactions (e.g., difficulty providing coherent testimony).
- Ethical considerations when identifying trauma.

Objectives:

- Train students to identify trauma in clients in order to minimize inflicting more harm.

Duration: 2 hours

3. Trauma-Informed Communication Techniques

Content:

- Creating a safe space for clients to share their stories.
- Active listening and non-verbal communication techniques.
- De-escalating emotionally charged situations.
- Conducting a trauma-informed client interview.
- Challenges in maintaining boundaries.
- Do's and Don'ts in trauma-informed client interactions.

Objectives:

- Develop skills for effective and compassionate client interactions.

Duration: 2 hours

4. Managing Secondary Trauma and Emotional Stress

Content:

- Recognizing secondary trauma and its impact on advocates.
- Strategies for maintaining emotional well-being.
- Building resilience through mindfulness and self-care routines.
- Creating boundaries to maintain well-being.

Objectives:

- Learning to build resilience and manage the emotional toll of client-centered work.

Duration: 2 hours

5. Applying Trauma-Informed Advocacy to Casework

Content:

- Strategies for trauma-informed client interviewing.
- Building a trauma-sensitive case strategy.
- Role-play scenarios to practice techniques.

Objectives:

- Provide hands-on application of learned concepts.

Duration: 2 hours

6. Ethics and Emotional Intelligence in Trauma-Informed Practice

Content:

- Balancing client needs with professional responsibilities.
- Addressing moral injury and ethical dilemmas.
- Ensuring culturally sensitive and inclusive practices.

Objectives:

- Strengthen students' ability to uphold ethical standards

Duration: 1.5 hours

7. Integration and Capstone Project

Content:

- Reflecting on learning outcomes.
- Participants develop and present a trauma-informed strategy for a mock case.

Objectives:

- Synthesize program content and demonstrate mastery.

Duration: 1.5 hours

C. Program Features and Benefits

The *Trauma-Informed Advocacy Training Program* is carefully designed to equip clinical law students with the tools and resources they need to practice effective, ethical, and sustainable legal advocacy. The program focuses on building trauma-informed skills while also addressing the emotional and psychological challenges inherent in legal practice.

Key Program Features

1. **Hybrid Learning Format**

- *Synchronous Workshops*: Live, interactive sessions foster real-time engagement and allow participants to learn directly from expert facilitators.
- *Asynchronous Materials*: Supplemental resources, including recorded lectures, reading materials, and digital toolkits, allow for flexible, self-paced learning.
- *Platform Integration*: Materials and sessions are seamlessly hosted on Zoom and Canvas to ensure accessibility and ease of use.

2. **Experiential Learning Opportunities**

- *Role-Plays and Scenarios*: Students actively practice trauma-informed client interviews and case strategies in guided exercises.
- *Real-World Applications*: Exercises based on available case studies ensure students can apply concepts in practical settings.
- *Capstone Project*: A culminating activity challenges participants to synthesize what they've learned by developing and presenting a trauma-informed legal strategy.

3. **Digital Toolkit**

Participants receive a robust collection of resources to support their trauma-informed practice, including:

- *Trauma Screening Templates*: Structured tools to identify trauma-related issues in clients ethically and systematically.

- *Customized Client Intake Forms*: Designed to minimize retraumatization and gather essential information in a trauma-sensitive manner.
- *Self-Care Guides*: Practical strategies to help legal professionals manage secondary trauma and foster resilience.

4. **Optional Add-Ons**

- *Follow-Up Webinar*: An optional 90-minute session offered 4–6 weeks after the program to reinforce learning, address real-world challenges, and provide additional tools and resources based on participant feedback.
- *Coaching and Mentorship*: Personalized guidance through small group coaching sessions or one-on-one mentorship to tackle specific cases or challenges.

Program Benefits

1. *Skills Development*:

- Students gain a deep understanding of trauma and its psychological, emotional, and behavioral impacts on clients and on themselves.
- Students master evidence-based trauma-informed communication techniques, client interaction strategies, and ethical advocacy principles.

2. *Improved Client Outcomes*:

- Students learn to reduce retraumatization risks and build trust with clients through trauma-sensitive practices.
- Trauma-informed approaches enable more accurate and comprehensive case preparation, potentially leading to improved advocacy outcomes.

3. *Personal Resilience*:

- The program prioritizes self-care, offering tools to help students manage burnout, prevent secondary trauma, and maintain emotional well-being.

- Resilience-building strategies ensure students are equipped for sustainable legal careers.

4. *Institutional Impact:*

- This training enhances the clinical program's overall effectiveness by preparing students who are not only academically proficient but also psychologically equipped to excel in high-stress advocacy work.
- Graduates help establish a trauma-informed legal culture that benefits clients, organizations, and the broader legal system.

V. Advanced Training and Certification Options

Building on the foundational principles introduced in the *Trauma-Informed Advocacy Training Program*, these advanced options provide immersive, hands-on learning experiences designed to deepen participants' expertise. Through specialized modules and interactive learning techniques, participants strengthen their skills and apply trauma-informed practices in complex legal scenarios. These programs are tailored to equip students with advanced knowledge, practical tools, and professional certifications that enhance their career readiness.

Benefits of Advanced Training and Certification:

- Tackle real-world challenges through focused, specialized modules and experiential learning.
- Access ongoing resources, mentorship, and peer support to sustain resilience and growth.
- Earn a recognized certification that enhances professional credibility and opens doors to leadership opportunities.

A. Specialized Modules for Specific Practice Areas

(1-unit / 12.5 hour Program)

These specialized modules offer targeted, practical training for advocates working in challenging legal contexts, ensuring they are better prepared to meet the needs of their clients while applying the principles of trauma-informed practice.

Immigration Law: Strategies for Working with Clients Who Have Experienced Persecution or Violence

This module addresses the specific challenges of working with individuals who have endured trauma due to forced displacement, violence, or systemic persecution. Immigration advocates often work with clients whose complex emotional and psychological needs may hinder their ability to provide coherent testimony or fully engage in legal proceedings.

Key Topics:

- Identifying trauma in asylum seekers and other immigration clients.
- Understanding cultural and linguistic barriers in trauma disclosure.
- Trauma-informed interviewing techniques for building trust and eliciting detailed, accurate information.
- Strategies for preparing clients for emotionally challenging legal proceedings, such as asylum hearings or deportation defenses.
- Ethical considerations in advocating for vulnerable populations while managing the emotional toll on the advocate.

Learning Outcomes:

- Build rapport with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Craft legal arguments that account for trauma's impact on memory and behavior.
- Advocate effectively in high-stakes immigration cases while minimizing retraumatization.

Criminal Defense: Addressing the Trauma of Incarceration and Its Systemic Impacts

The criminal justice system disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, often perpetuating cycles of trauma. This module focuses on the dual role of advocates: addressing the immediate needs of clients who have experienced incarceration and challenging systemic injustices that exacerbate trauma.

Key Topics:

- Understanding the psychological impact of incarceration on clients.
- Trauma-informed approaches to client interviews and case preparation.

- Exploring the intersection of systemic racism, poverty, and trauma in the criminal justice system.
- Navigating ethical dilemmas when representing clients with histories of victimization and perpetration.
- Self-care strategies for managing secondary trauma and moral injury in criminal defense work.

Learning Outcomes:

- Recognize and address the unique challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals.
- Develop trauma-informed strategies to strengthen client trust and participation.
- Advocate for systemic changes while maintaining resilience in emotionally demanding cases.

About the Author

Marjorie Florestal, JD, MA, PhD(c), is the CEO and principal consultant of Blackbird Trauma Training Company. She brings a unique interdisciplinary perspective to her work, combining over 25 years of experience in legal education and practice with advanced degrees in psychology and human development, as well as specialized training in several trauma healing modalities.

Marjorie earned a JD from New York University School of Law, where she was a Root-Tilden-Snow Scholar, an International Law Fellow, and a staff editor for the *Journal of International Law and Politics*. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to France, where she studied comparative immigration law and policy.

Marjorie also holds an MA in Jungian Psychology from Sonoma State University, an MA in Human Development from Fielding Graduate University, and is completing a PhD in Human Development with a concentration in coaching at Fielding.

She is trained in several trauma-healing modalities, including: NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM), a somatic-based approach to addressing developmental trauma; Healing the Wounds of History, a drama therapy process that catalyzes collective healing; and Pure Belonging, a somatic process aimed at restoring nervous system capacity.

A former tenured professor at the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, and a lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, and UC Davis, Marjorie has taught courses in the fields of international trade and commercial law, as well as the first year contracts offering. She developed and taught the first course on trauma-informed lawyering at UC Davis Law School.

An award-winning writer, Marjorie is co-author of *The Trauma-Informed Lawyer* (ABA, 2023) and has published on cross-cultural pedagogy, race, and the transformative power of narrative, as well as on issues of international trade law.



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