

Trauma-Informed Leadership:



Course Proposal

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A Note on This Proposal

This course proposal was originally developed for an international university whose students navigate extraordinary trauma on their way to obtaining a college degree, including fleeing conflict zones, and experiencing displacement, gender-based violence, and systemic oppression. This context shaped the course's design.

But in preparing this proposal, what became clear is that the framework is not context-specific. Trauma is not a condition limited to students from crisis regions. It is a feature of the world this next generation of students will lead.

This proposal is offered as a template for institutions ready to take that reality seriously.

I. Introduction

We live in a world where trauma is ubiquitous, and we can no longer treat it as a one-time disruption to the status quo. Rather, it must be recognized as an ongoing force that shapes bodies, communities, and even nations. Institutions of higher education must therefore prepare the next generation of leaders to transform trauma into resilience and ethical leadership.

Today's students are coming of age in a world marked by intersecting crises — from climate change and political instability to gendered violence and widening income inequality. Many arrive on campus having already navigated conditions of conflict, displacement, or systemic oppression. These experiences can uniquely position them to lead in a world shaped by instability and crisis. But leadership requires more than survival strategies. Without intentional training, these strategies can harden into vigilance, rigidity, or exhaustion — patterns that limit rather than expand leadership capacity.

Navigating such complexity requires capacities that go beyond traditional leadership training, which typically prepares students to analyze problems, manage resources, and execute strategy. The next generation of leaders must learn to lead in the face of trauma. What might that look like? It requires an ability to stay present to suffering — both personal and collective — without becoming overwhelmed. They must develop the ability to construct meaning from experience. Meaning-making does not erase pain, but it can transform suffering into wisdom and ethical action. And finally, they must be able to act from an integrated sense of self rather than from the fragmentation that comes from unhealed wounding.

The Trauma-Informed Leadership course addresses these needs by creating an intellectually rigorous framework for understanding leadership. It approaches the field not as a set of techniques to master but as a way of being in the world. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in trauma and resilience studies, narrative identity theory, developmental and Jungian psychology, neuroscience, and organizational leadership, the course will teach students how to work safely with traumatic material, construct meaning from difficulty, and lead from a position of self-authorship rather than survival.

The course adopts a trauma-informed pedagogy that takes seriously what educator and neuroscientist Mays Imad describes as the central ethical question of teaching: How do we honor the humanity of those we teach? Through structured dialogue, engagement with myth and archetypes, and somatic practices that support nervous system regulation, the course creates an environment that is “safe enough” for learning. By engaging with symbolic language, the course enables students to approach difficult material “through a glass darkly.” Myth, symbol, and archetype provide a psychological buffer, allowing one to explore personal experience without requiring self-disclosure or risking retraumatization.

Such an approach positions education itself as a reparative developmental experience — one that completes the cycle that trauma interrupted and teaches students to lead with the full range of capacities that ethical leadership requires.

II. Purpose of the Course

Higher education's mission is to prepare the next generation of leaders to contribute to a more just and peaceful world. Yet many students arrive on campus from communities where these attributes remain aspirational. Their lived experience bears witness to conflict, displacement, poverty, political instability, and gender oppression, among other forms of trauma. These experiences, when handled with care, are not deficits — nor do they preclude students from fulfilling that mission. But trauma shapes how people lead.

What is trauma? Definitions of the term vary widely, but two are particularly relevant for our purposes. Psychotherapist Linda Thai, whose work is informed by her heritage as a Vietnamese refugee, offers a practical framing: Trauma is the things that happened to us that should not have happened, and the things that did not happen but should have. Thai focuses on experiences that exceed our nervous system's capacity to process safely, leading to feelings of overwhelm and dysregulation.

Psychotherapist Larry Heller broadens this understanding by framing trauma as the absence of adequate support at critical moments in the developmental cycle. Heller defines developmental trauma as a disruption to the formation of core capacities such as agency, trust, self-regulation, and connection. From this perspective, trauma is not only what overwhelms the nervous system but also what interrupts the healthy development of the self.

Without romanticizing adversity, it is clear that trauma can also catalyze resilience. It sharpens a survivor's ability to persevere in the face of difficulty, to shoulder significant responsibilities, and to function under conditions that would overwhelm others. This reflects a human tendency to adapt to challenging circumstances and even transcend significant constraint or privation. These capacities, however laudable, remain incomplete.

Trauma often accelerates some forms of development while interrupting others. In particular, it impacts the development of self-regulation, reflective meaning-making, and the ability to act from an internally authored sense of self. Trauma teaches us how to endure, but it rarely allows sufficient space to integrate experience, sit with complexity, and exercise what Professor Ebony Thomas describes as “the dark fantastic” — the imaginative capacity to envision for oneself a world beyond the constraints of survival.

From a leadership perspective, the question is not whether trauma produces strength, but how that strength is shaped, directed, and expanded. In the absence of intentional, developmentally appropriate support, these same capacities can constrain leadership over time. The ability to persevere can become an inability to recognize when conditions call for a change in the status quo. The capacity to shoulder responsibility can become a lack of trust in collaborators and an unwillingness to delegate effectively. And the competence to function under crisis can make stability feel threatening because chaos is more familiar than peace.

Trauma-Informed Leadership responds directly to these developmental gaps. It offers an intellectually rigorous framework for understanding how trauma shapes individuals, communities, and institutions — and how leadership can be consciously cultivated in its presence. The course views leadership not as a set of techniques to master, but as a capacity that can be developed and strengthened over time. It further grounds the practice in a moral framework that Professor Derrick Bell describes as “ethical ambition” — the commitment to act with integrity and purpose even in the absence of guaranteed success.

Trauma-Informed Leadership extends traditional leadership preparation by focusing on the capacity to transform personal adversity into a source of strength and ethical leadership. It equips students with tools to develop self-regulation, meaning-making, and what developmental psychologists call “self-authorship” — the ability to generate one’s own values and direction in life rather than having them be determined by external demands or internal wounds.

This course is not therapy, nor does it “heal trauma” in a therapeutic sense. It is about cultivating the ability to lead. It honors students’ lived experience while addressing developmental gaps and expanding their capacity — preparing leaders who will not merely survive their existing conditions, but will contribute to the building of a more just world.

III. Pedagogical Approach

The COVID-19 crisis made visible what had been only a background assumption in most higher education classrooms: students do not arrive as a *tabula rasa*, untouched by the conditions of their lives. Trauma-informed pedagogy takes this reality to heart. Before designing curricula or creating assessments, it begins with a fundamental question: How do we create an environment where students can engage rigorously with difficult material without being retraumatized by the learning process itself? The answer lies in creating a container that makes it “safe enough” to learn.

A “safe enough” classroom creates the conditions for presence, curiosity, and intellectual risk-taking. It provides sufficient psychological distance from personal trauma—and enough structure and containment—to support engagement with difficult material. Students can hold complexity, sit with ambiguity, and integrate new frameworks without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down. This state of receptive engagement is what neuroscientists call the “window of tolerance” — a neurobiological condition in which students can remain present, generative, and intellectually open rather than reactive or defended.

Trauma-Informed Leadership adopts a pedagogical approach that recognizes the impact of trauma on learning. This approach treats learning as a developmental process that engages the whole person—encompassing cognition, emotion, and embodied experience. Drawing on

neuroscientist and educator Mays Imad's work on trauma-informed higher education, the course is structured around nine core tenets:

1. **Safety is a prerequisite for learning**
Learning cannot occur when students' nervous systems are in survival mode. Safety is not comfort or avoidance; it is enough predictability, structure, and relational trust for the brain to engage in higher-order thinking.
2. **Belonging is biological**
A sense of belonging regulates stress physiology. When students feel seen, valued, and included, the brain shifts out of a threat response, which facilitates learning.
3. **Trauma impacts cognition not intelligence**
Trauma affects attention, memory, executive functioning, and cognitive flexibility. When traumatized students experience academic struggles, it is often misread as a lack of motivation or ability. These struggles are actually stress-driven neurological responses.
4. **Structure creates freedom**
Clear expectations, transparent grading, predictable routines, and explicit communication reduce cognitive load and anxiety, freeing students to engage more deeply and creatively with the material.
5. **Choice and agency restore capacity**
Trauma diminishes agency. Trauma-informed pedagogy intentionally builds in choice regarding how to participate in classroom discussions, how to demonstrate learning, and how to engage with challenging material while maintaining rigorous standards.
6. **Meaning-making is central to healing and learning**
Students recover cognitive and emotional capacity when they can make meaning from experience. The learning environment should support reflection and integration, rather than forcing students to suppress or compartmentalize parts of their lives.
7. **Hope is a neuroprotective factor**
Hope is not merely optimism or positivity. It is a felt sense that one can orient toward the future with purpose rather than bracing against threat. Hope supports learning by restoring agency, widening cognitive flexibility, and facilitating sustained engagement with challenging material.
8. **Education is a relational and ethical act**
Teaching is not value-neutral. Faculty inevitably shape students' sense of worth, agency, and possibility. Trauma-informed teaching necessitates an awareness of how power, authority, and pedagogy impact vulnerable learners.

9. **Education should not reproduce harm**

Public shaming, excessive competition, ambiguity, and rigid policies can retraumatize students. Trauma-informed pedagogy asks educators to consider which norms hinder learning and which promote growth.

In this container, students are invited to work with experience symbolically rather than autobiographically, reducing the risk of retraumatization while preserving depth and rigor. They can explore patterns of wounding, resilience, and transformation without self-disclosure or direct confrontation with personal trauma. The course also incorporates somatic practices, including grounding techniques, that support nervous system regulation and increase reflective capacity.

These methods, paired with rigorous intellectual inquiry, enable students to move beyond survival-based patterns toward ethical leadership.

IV. **Course Objectives**

Trauma-Informed Leadership teaches students the theory and practice of leadership in a time of crisis and instability. It builds on adaptive strengths students already possess while cultivating leadership capacities that trauma often interrupts. The course empowers students to transform survival-based strategies into conscious leadership practices grounded in self-regulation, meaning-making, and ethical discernment.

Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in developmental and Jungian psychology, narrative identity theory, neuroscience, organizational leadership, and trauma studies, the course adopts four core objectives:

1. **Develop students' capacity to recognize how trauma shapes leadership patterns**—both adaptive strengths and developmental constraints—in themselves and their communities.
2. **Build integrated leadership capacities**, including self-regulation, reflective meaning-making, self-authorship, and the ability to remain present with complexity and suffering without becoming overwhelmed.
3. **Strengthen students' capacity to differentiate past threat from present conditions** and to envision futures beyond survival scripts, enabling leadership rooted in imagination, possibility, and strategic risk-taking rather than hypervigilance or constraint.
4. **Cultivate “ethical ambition,”** which is the capacity to act with integrity, responsibility, and moral clarity even when success is not guaranteed.

These objectives are achieved through the development of seven interconnected leadership capacities:

1. **Self-authorship and narrative identity.** Students develop the capacity to author their lives rather than act primarily in response to external demands. Using self-authorship and narrative identity frameworks, they learn to articulate values, commitments, and purpose, and to integrate past experience into a coherent sense of who they are and who they are becoming.
2. **Meaning-making.** Students learn to transform experience into meaning rather than allowing adversity to define them.
3. **Regulated agency.** Students develop a sense of agency that is stable, grounded, and rooted in their own values and choices. They learn to orient toward possibility instead of defaulting to threat-based or survival-driven responses.
4. **Presence with complexity and suffering.** Students develop the ability to remain present with uncertainty, grief, anger, and moral tension without becoming overwhelmed, allowing them to engage complexity without collapsing into avoidance or premature certainty.
5. **Differentiation between past threats and present conditions.** Students strengthen their ability to distinguish historical danger from present conditions, allowing them to engage new situations with openness rather than responding from overprotection, vigilance, or withdrawal.
6. **Integrated authority.** Students develop the capacity to integrate conflicting aspects of the self rather than organizing around a single role or identity.
7. **Imaginative capacity.** Students strengthen their capacity to imagine futures that are not constrained by survival scripts or inherited limitations, developing the ability to envision possibilities that exceed existing conditions rather than merely adapting to them.

V. Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Analyze how individual, collective, and systemic trauma shapes leadership patterns, identifying both adaptive strengths and developmental constraints in leaders, organizations, and social systems.

2. Apply narrative identity and self-authorship frameworks to case studies and symbolic texts (including myth and story) to examine how experiences of adversity can be interpreted, reworked, and transformed rather than treated as fixed identities.
3. Demonstrate the use of nervous-system regulation strategies to maintain presence, discernment, and reflective capacity when engaging with emotionally charged material.
4. Evaluate leadership dilemmas by integrating trauma-informed awareness with ethical reasoning.
5. Create leadership scenarios that demonstrate imaginative capacity to envision futures beyond survival-based patterns and constraints.

VI. Assessment Methods

Trauma-Informed Leadership employs a combination of formative and summative assessments to engage students in theoretical concepts, help them connect theory to practice, and foster self-awareness. Students will participate in classroom discussions and complete short reflection papers to articulate emerging insights.

The course culminates in a capstone project integrating trauma-informed analysis, ethical reasoning, and imaginative thinking.

VII. Course Description

This course examines leadership in the face of instability and social disruption. Students explore how individual, collective, and systemic trauma shape leadership capacity, ethical judgment, and decision-making.

Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in psychology, narrative identity, neuroscience, trauma, and leadership studies, the course invites students to examine how adversity can inform—rather than determine—who they become as leaders.

Through engagement with case studies, myth, and other materials, students develop the capacity to lead with integrity and vision in a challenging world.

VIII. Required Resources

The course will use materials compiled by the professor.

Conclusion

The next generation of leaders will inherit a world shaped by crisis and trauma. In order to meet that world with integrity, they must develop trauma-informed leadership capacities, including: the ability to hold complexity and suffering without becoming overwhelmed, generate meaning from difficulty, and act with integrity even when success cannot be assured.

Trauma-Informed Leadership prepares students for this work. The course builds on the adaptive strengths students already possess while cultivating capacities that trauma often interrupts. Most importantly, it enables students to expand their imagination into the realm of the “dark fantastic,” a space of radical possibility where new futures can be envisioned and claimed—despite the presence of trauma.

Lucille Clifton captures this radical vision—and the essence of trauma-informed leadership—in a poem that honors the lives of those who had to make a way where there was no way. It describes a life shaped by adversity but authored from within, and oriented toward joy, possibility and renewal no matter the circumstances:

Won't you celebrate with me
what I have shaped into
a kind of life?

I had no models
Born in Babylon
both non-white
and woman
what did I see
to be
except myself?

I made it up
here on this bridge
between starlight and clay
my one hand holding tight to
my other hand.

Come, celebrate with me
that every day
something
has tried to kill me
and has failed.

About Professor Marjorie Florestal

Marjorie Florestal is an educator whose work sits at the intersection of human development, trauma-informed leadership, and ethics. For more than two decades, she has taught in higher education, cultivating an environment that honors lived experience, cultural difference, and the human capacity for growth after adversity.

A former tenured professor at the University of the Pacific, Professor Florestal has also taught at UC Berkeley and UC Davis, where she worked extensively with international and cross-cultural student populations, including students from the China University of Political Science and Law and international graduate students.

Professor Florestal is co-author of *The Trauma-Informed Lawyer* (American Bar Association, 2023) and has published and spoken widely on trauma, narrative identity, race, and storytelling. She holds a JD from New York University, an MA in Jungian Psychology from Sonoma State University, and an MA in Human Development from Fielding Graduate University, where she is completing her PhD. Her doctoral research focuses on self-authorship and narrative identity formation in women.

Born in Haiti and raised in the United States, Professor Florestal has lived, worked, and traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America.

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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