The Compassion Dividend: Trauma-Informed Excellence in Higher Education

Hind Lebdaoui

Introduction

Safety (Creating Safe, Supportive, and Flexible Environments) is my selected TIE principl. This trauma-informed principle emphasizes building classrooms and campuses where students feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically secure, shifting from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?" Its importance lies in recognizing how trauma(from pandemics, family crises, or financial pressures) affects concentration, attendance, and trust, enabling all students, especially those facing adversity, to learn and thrive without lowering academic standards.

Selection Rationale

As an associate professor of finance and holistic adviser at Al Akhawayn University (AUI), I connect deeply to this principle through my shift from "tough" grading to empathetic support, like personalized feedback that makes students feel "seen." In our high-pressure university setting, where mental health challenges are rising amid economic uncertainty, implementing safety addresses retention gaps: our pilot holistic advising showed improved well-being, grades, and engagement, proving compassion yields measurable ROI over costly recruitment.

Application Strategy

Context: Undergraduate business and finance programs at a Moroccan liberal arts university like AUI, blending rigorous academics with diverse student traumas.

Actionable Steps:

1. Launch holistic advising with weekly check-ins on well-being, referrals to on-campus counseling with walk-in hours, and follow-ups for at-risk students (e.g., convincing a withdrawing student to stay via open dialogue).

2. Train faculty via Center for Teaching and Learning workshops on trauma-informed pedagogy, inclusive feedback, and syllabus flexibility (e.g., elective choices for empowerment).

3. Embed structure with empathy: Offer makeup opportunities, varied assessments, and Well-being Week events to normalize mental health talks.

Expected Outcomes: Higher retention, stronger motivation, fewer conflicts, and graduates with resilience and civic responsibility—mirroring our pilot's gains in performance and belonging.

Evaluation and Adaptation

Monitor via pre/post surveys on student safety perceptions, retention rates, and grade improvements; track advising session feedback and counseling referrals quarterly. Gather input through anonymous student-faculty forums and Well-being Week debriefs for refinement (e.g., expanding workshops based on uptake). Ensure sustainability by integrating into faculty evaluations, budgeting for ongoing training, and scaling via liberal arts flexibility: my certificate pursuit models lifelong adaptation.

Conclusion

Tailored safety principles like this transform universities into resilient ecosystems, boosting academic success and human connection. By investing in empathy alongside rigor, we equip future leaders to heal, adapt, and thrive.