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Navigating the Intersection: Imposter Phenomenon and Trauma Among Women Staff in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between imposter phenomenon and workplace trauma among women-identified, non-instructional staff in higher education. While imposter phenomenon has traditionally been framed as an internal struggle among high-achieving women, this research repositions it within the broader context of institutional structures and trauma. Using a cross-sectional survey of 276 respondents, the study revealed that over 63% of respondents reported experiencing workplace or secondary trauma. These experiences included crisis response, bullying, microaggressions, and direct violence. Analysis using a chi-square and independent samples t-test demonstrates a significant relationship between trauma and imposter feelings. Women who experienced trauma reported significantly higher imposter phenomenon scores. The results suggest that imposter phenomenon is not merely a psychological issue but is influenced by organizational culture and systemic inequities. This research contributes to the limited literature on trauma among non-instructional higher education staff, and calls for institutional reforms to create safer, more inclusive environments.

Keywords: Imposter Phenomenon, Workplace Trauma, Women in Higher Education, Non-Instructional Staff

Understandings of imposter phenomenon have failed to grow from founding scholars' (Clance & Imes, 1978) conception of the phenomenon as an experience shared among high-achieving women. Rather than viewing imposter phenomenon solely as a byproduct of gender and success, it is essential to recognize the significant role of the organization of the workplace in exacerbating these experiences. This study investigated the role of the institution of higher education in women non-instructional

staff's experiences of imposter phenomenon by considering their relationship with trauma and the higher education workplace (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). To better understand women's staff experiences in the higher education workplace with trauma, we employed a cross-sectional, nonexperimental mixed-method survey. Specifically, the results shared within this article are guided by the research question: What is the relationship between women's staff experiences of imposter phenomenon and experiences of workplace trauma?

Non-instructional staff are commonly defined as workers in higher education who do not teach as a part of their role and frequently are also referred to as professional support staff (Gander et al., 2019; Jo, 2008; Veles et al., 2023). Non-instructional staff commonly work in one of following administrative areas,

- Student services (i.e., admissions, registration, financial aid, counseling, and other aspects of student life);
- academic support (i.e., media, library, and learning skills-center services as well as cooperative education);
- business and administrative services (i.e., fiscal management, accounting and human resources, operations and maintenance, information technology, and planning and budgeting); and
- external affairs (i.e., public relations, alumni affairs, communication, and fundraising) (Jo, 2008, p. 566).

Within this article, we will use staff to describe non-instructional as the population of workers in higher education that do not teach as a part of their role and are not a faculty member on a full-time administrative non-teaching assignment.
Trauma among higher education staff is an under-examined, yet significant issue, given the various stressors they encounter within institutional environments. This gap in the literature is even more pronounced, considering there are 1,146,377 women-aligned staff members across U.S. higher education institutions, as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS, 2023). While faculty and student trauma have been extensively researched, staff—including administrative personnel, student affairs professionals, custodial workers, and campus security—are given little attention in the literature despite experiencing their own unique forms of trauma in the workplace. The prevalence of trauma in this staff group is difficult to quantify due to underreporting and a lack of targeted studies, but existing literature suggests that these employees are frequently exposed to workplace stressors that can lead to both acute and chronic trauma (Cho & Brassfield, 2022; Hartwig et al., 2020; Parkman, 2016; Shalka, 2024). This article seeks to grow the literature on trauma, imposter phenomenon, and staff by addressing trauma at the institutional level and provide recommendations for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that better supports women staff in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we review scholarship related to imposter phenomenon and trauma describing how these bodies of work intersect, illuminating the significance of this study. As preface to this review of literature, we delineate two guiding definitions. As set forth by Clance and Imes (1978), *imposter phenomenon* –also known as imposter syndrome— is characterized by persistent self-doubt, a fear of being exposed as a fraud, and an inability to internalize success, despite objective evidence of competence. *Trauma*, as proposed by Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995), is defined as an emotional response to an event or series of events that is perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, marked by feelings of helplessness, fear, and vulnerability, often with long-lasting psychological, emotional, and physiological impacts.

Imposter Phenomenon and Higher Education

The imposter phenomenon is particularly prevalent in academic and professional settings, where high expectations and institutional hierarchies contribute to feelings of inadequacy (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). While some scholars have shown that women and men experience imposter phenomenon (Badawy et al., 2018; Bernard et al., 2002), the larger body of scholarship attests to this experience of being an imposter as being more prevalent among women (Kumar et al., 2006; Sanford et al., 2015). Women who report experiencing imposter phenomenon describe negative psychological issues and career outcomes (Holt et al., 2023; Muradoglu et al., 2022). Women with persistent imposter feelings also report higher levels of workplace anxiety, perfectionism, and emotional exhaustion, increasing their risk of burnout (Matthews et al., 2021). This combination of imposter feelings and workplace stress can lead to disengagement, absenteeism, and even departure from higher education careers altogether (Parkman, 2016).

Although imposter phenomenon affects individuals across diverse backgrounds, research consistently indicates that it disproportionately impacts women, individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds, and those in environments with systemic biases (Hutchins, 2015). Institutions of higher education, which often have rigid power structures and implicit hierarchies, create conditions where imposter feelings are exacerbated, particularly among women in staff roles (Parkman, 2016). Women in these positions frequently encounter gendered workplace expectations that reinforce self-doubt and hesitancy in seeking leadership roles (Sanford, et al., 2015). The prevalence of imposter phenomenon among women in higher education staff roles is closely linked to gendered workplace dynamics and the undervaluation of administrative and student affairs work (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Studies indicate that women in these roles experience higher levels of self-doubt compared to their male counterparts, often due to systemic barriers, lack of representation in leadership, and implicit biases that question their authority and competence (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Peteet et al., 2015). Within higher education institutions, women in student support and administrative roles often encounter intense emotional labor, which contributes to imposter feelings. They are expected to act as mediators,

caregivers, and problem-solvers for students and faculty; yet, their contributions are frequently dismissed as secondary to academic work (Cho & Brassfield, 2022; Hutchins, 2015). This devaluation of their expertise and institutional role fosters chronic feelings of inadequacy and invisibility, reinforcing the imposter phenomenon (Parkman, 2016).

Women of color working in staff roles within higher education experience additional layers of "impostorism," as they must navigate both gender and racial biases within predominantly white institutions (Williams et al., 2021). Microaggressions, exclusion from decision-making processes, and the pressure to overperform to counteract negative stereotypes create a heightened sense of professional insecurity and self-doubt, suggesting the imposter experience is not simply an internal struggle but a product of external workplace conditions that continuously reinforce feelings of being an outsider in institutional spaces (Peteet et al., 2015). The impact of imposter phenomenon on women in higher education staff roles extends beyond the individual's self-esteem and influences career trajectories, leadership aspirations, and workplace engagement (Hutchins, 2015; Sanford et al., 2015). Women experiencing imposter phenomenon often engage in self-silencing behaviors, avoiding professional development opportunities, hesitating to apply for leadership positions, and minimizing their accomplishments to avoid scrutiny (Hutchins, 2015). This self-limiting behavior contributes to the underrepresentation of women in senior administrative roles, reinforcing the gendered power imbalances within higher education institutions (Jo, 2008; Tickamyer & Bokemeier, 1984).

Organizationally, imposter phenomenon among women staff in higher education negatively impacts institutional climate and professional development pipelines. When large segments of staff experience chronic self-doubt and hesitation to pursue advancement opportunities, institutions lose valuable leadership potential and struggle with retention challenges (Williams et al., 2021). This is particularly concerning in staff roles where experienced professionals play an essential role in student retention, campus diversity initiatives, and institutional operations (Gander et al., 2019; Mayhew et al., 2006).

Trauma and Higher Education

The impact of trauma on an individual's life and health can be profound, affecting psychological, emotional, and physical well-being, which can disrupt daily functioning, relationships, and work performance (Wu et al., 2021). Emotional impacts, such as feelings of guilt, shame, or worthlessness, often accompany these psychological symptoms, making it challenging for individuals to navigate personal and professional interactions (Deady et al., 2024). Furthermore, trauma also produces physiological responses in individuals, including heightened stress reactions, fatigue, sleep disturbances, and a weakened immune system, all of which negatively affect overall health (Lynch, 2023). In a workplace setting, the effects of trauma manifest through increased absenteeism, reduced productivity, and higher rates of burnout, especially when individuals are repeatedly exposed to trauma without adequate support (Lan et al., 2019; Perez & Bettencourt, 2024).

Higher education staff work in high-stress environments shaped by hierarchical structures, systemic inequities, and a lack of sufficient resources and support (Cho & Brassfield, 2022; Deady et al., 2024). These working conditions can perpetuate trauma, which is categorized into two main types: Type I Trauma, which involves sudden and acute events and Type II Trauma, which encompasses repeated exposure to stressors, often leading to more complex psychological and physical consequences (Hartwig et al., 2020). McCann and Pearlman (1990) define Type I trauma as an event that "(a) is sudden, unexpected, or non-normative; (b) exceeds the individual's perceived ability to meet its demands; and (c) disrupts the individual's frame of reference and other central psychological needs and related schemes" (p. 10).

Type II trauma, also sometimes referred to as vicarious trauma (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995) or secondary trauma (Figley, 1999) has its roots in psychology and social work (Ellis & Knight, 2021).Vicarious trauma was explored within the psychological sciences beginning with Freud's investigation of counter-transference amongst therapists, laying the foundational understanding of how professionals can absorb the emotional burdens of those they serve (Ellis & Knight, 2021). Pearlman and Mac Ian (1995) define vicarious trauma as a result of emphatic engagement of workers with the traumatic experiences of the individuals they serve. Type II trauma is common among workers in helping professions and intersects within the field of social work. Within the field of social work, Type II trauma is more commonly characterized as secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 1999) and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002); the physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized individuals and communities over a long period. Finally, one addition intersecting concept, developed by scholars in the field of nursing preparation programs in academia, note the psychological and emotional distress, known as moral distress, that occurs when an individual knows the right action to take but is unable to act on it due to institution constraints (Ganske, 2010). The concept of moral distress is an important connection point between trauma individuals experience and institutional responsibility to students and employees wellbeing.

How institutions respond to trauma within the population they serve and their employees is a key to understanding how trauma operates in the workplace. Hormann and Vivian (2005) asserted that at the institutional level organizations, like individuals, can become traumatized noting, "often trauma is indirect, the result of an organizations continual exposure to trauma to the very nature of its work" (p. 2). Traumatized organizations develop when, the quality of work environment is poor, there are frequent and sudden policy changes, there is financial uncertainty, and the trauma history of employees and supervisors within the organization go unaddressed (Bloom & Farragher, 2013). When an organization operates in a traumatized way the organizations develop a lack of historical institutional knowledge and staff will begin to feel a lack of basic safety. In addition, amongst staff and leaders there is frequent miscommunication, increased authoritarianism, silencing of dissent and a lack shared decision-making that leads to staff disempowerment or learned helplessness (Bloom, 2011). Finally, individual employees and whole organizations can experience grief of not being able to live up to the institution's ideals.

Within higher education environments, staff who engage deeply with their students may find themselves grappling with vicarious or secondary trauma, prompting (a) feelings of hopelessness, disconnection, fear, guilt, and anger, (b) physical ailments (e.g., chronic exhaustion, addictions, apathy), and even cynicism regarding the efficacy of their work and the systemic structures in which they operate (Burke & Van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009; Shalka, 2024; Stamm, 2009). This type of trauma is common among staff who engage with students' traumatic stories, often resulting in cognitive shifts that affect their personal beliefs, perceptions of safety, and overall well-being (Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Wu et al., 2021). In addition, Type II trauma may arise from persistent stressors in higher education such as systemic discrimination, bullying, and chronic workplace harassment (Shalka, 2024). Women, particularly those in marginalized groups, may endure protracted exposure to trauma, which often leads to debilitating physical and mental conditions such as anxiety, depression, and burnout, impairing both personal well-being and professional efficacy (McMahon & Seabrook, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2022). Moreover, these persistent traumatic conditions in the workplace can lead to chronic psychological and emotional impacts, including compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and re-traumatization (Figley & Ludick, 2017; Perez & Bettencourt, 2024).

High emotional labor, exposure to crisis situations, and systemic workplace challenges can lead to psychological distress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Marshall et al., 2016). Staff are often frontline responders to crises, including mental health emergencies, incidents of violence, and institutional upheavals such as layoffs or budget cuts (Branch & Murray, 2015; Figley & Ludick, 2017; Mitchener et al., 2021), and regularly engage with students facing homelessness, food insecurity, and psychological distress, leading to secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Burke & Van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009). In a broader societal context, trauma experiences of staff reflect systemic issues within higher education, such as job precarity, economic instability, and lack of institutional support (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) – all further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic as personnel were often required to manage logistical crises, enforce new policies, and support students and faculty while navigating their own health risks and job uncertainties (Cho & Brassfield, 2022).

Women staff, particularly women of color, frequently experience microaggressions, unequal opportunities for advancement, and workplace harassment in academic settings (Cho & Brassfield, 2022; Patton & Catching, 2009). Studies show that women, non-binary, and transgender staff members are disproportionately affected by workplace trauma, often due to gendered expectations, discrimination, and the emotional labor burden placed upon them (Ahmed, 2012; Bauer et al., 2021). Gender and job precarity further exacerbate trauma, as many female and gender-diverse staff members are employed in temporary or low-wage positions with little job security and provide emotional support (or what is termed invisible labor) without formal recognition or additional compensation contributing to increased emotional exhaustion and vulnerability to secondary trauma (Hochschild, 1983; Marshall et al., 2016; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Intersections of Imposter Phenomenon and Trauma in the Workplace

Research on imposter phenomenon and workplace trauma in higher education has primarily focused on faculty and students, leaving a gap in understanding the experiences of staff. While Bravata et al. (2020) provided a comprehensive review of imposter phenomenon's prevalence and psychological impact, their study does not specifically address its relationship to workplace trauma. Lynch (2023) and Perez and Bettencourt (2024) examined secondary traumatic stress in student affairs professionals, highlighting the emotional toll of working with distressed students but without explicitly linking it to imposter feelings. However, higher education staff, beyond just student affairs staff, are missing from the literature.

Muradoglu et al. (2022) emphasized the gendered and racialized dimensions of imposter phenomenon, demonstrating that underrepresented groups experience heightened self-doubt due to institutional biases. However, this research did not explore the role of workplace trauma in reinforcing these imposter feelings. Similarly, Anderson (2024) and Garvey and Huynh (2024) discussed institutional instability, layoffs, and financial precarity in higher education; yet, they do not address how these systemic issues intersect with professional self-doubt. Scholarship on organizational trauma (Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Hormann & Vivian, 2005) revealed how trauma can affect workers across an organization. Over time, staff experiencing trauma in the workplace begin to feel silenced and disempowerment. Emerging scholarship on staff and workplace well-being (Cho & Brassfield, 2022; McClure, 2025) provided a place to enter the conversation on the connection between employee, well-being, and organizational culture. This article, in particular, addresses the role of workplace trauma within higher education and trauma's relationship with employee's overall workplace experience and identity by focusing on the relationship between trauma and imposter phenomenon.

Summary and Significance

Within existing research, imposter phenomenon and workplace trauma share common behavioral patterns but differ in their origins and long-term consequences. Imposter phenomenon is primarily considered an internally driven experience, shaped by cognitive distortions, social conditioning, and professional expectations (Bravata et al., 2020). In contrast, workplace trauma is externally induced, resulting from exposure to systemic stressors such as financial precarity, toxic workplace cultures, and secondary trauma from student interactions (Cho & Brassfield, 2022; Lynch, 2023; Shalka, 2024). Thereby individuals experiencing imposter phenomenon often believe their struggles are personal failings rather than systemic issues, leading to self-blame and self-silencing behaviors (Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Holt et al., 2023). Those facing workplace trauma, however, are more likely to recognize the external nature of their distress, identifying institutional shortcomings as contributing factors to their emotional exhaustion (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024). Consequently, coping mechanisms diverge; imposter feelings frequently result in excessive self-monitoring and avoidance of professional advancement, while workplace trauma may lead to

emotional detachment, physical exhaustion, and eventual job turnover (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). The physiological manifestations of trauma also differ. Imposter phenomenon primarily presents as workplace anxiety, perfectionism, and self-doubt, while trauma responses often include hypervigilance, insomnia, and stress-related health issues (Figley & Ludick, 2017; Levine, 2020). These diverse manifestations of trauma that overlap with imposter phenomenon highlight the need for further investigation and tailored interventions to support women in the workplace.

While imposter phenomenon has been widely studied among faculty and students in higher education, its impact on staff remains an under examined yet critical issue, particularly as these professionals navigate complex institutional structures and emotional labor demands (Matthews et al., 2021). Unlike faculty members who have institutionalized research roles or students who are recognized as the primary beneficiaries of educational institutions, women in administrative, student affairs, custodial, and support staff positions navigate an environment where their professional contributions are often overlooked, yet their emotional labor is in high demand (Hochschild, 1983). These factors contribute to distinct patterns in how trauma manifests, influencing their psychological well-being, career progression, and workplace engagement. As a result, trauma in women working in higher education is not only a personal and psychological issue but also an organizational and systemic problem that requires a structural shift toward trauma-informed, gender-equitable workplace policies (Bauer et al., 2021; Campaign for Trauma Informed Policy and Practice, 2025). The purpose of this study is to investigate staff women's experiences of the imposter phenomenon by considering their relationship with trauma and the higher education workplace.

METHODS

Traditional quantitative research is often rooted in assumptions of neutrality, objectivity, and the pursuit of universal truths, while qualitative research is typically associated with critical perspectives. This battle between which method – quantitative versus qualitative – is "better" is problematic and misleading, as it suggests a lack of rigor in either approach (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). However, rigor and validity exist within both paradigms, with each approach contextualizing these measures according to our epistemological beliefs regarding knowledge creation.

The authors of this study seek to confront societal injustices, and all research is inherently value-laden with constructed realities. We, as critical scholars, therefore methodologically seek to challenge structures, illuminate conflicts, and advance theory, knowledge, and policy (Stage, 2007). The critical approach we use seeks to examine power dynamics and identity within the higher education workplace. To disrupt conventional survey design, which often relies on federally mandated identity categories and validation methods shaped by white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy (Garvey & Huynh, 2024), this study used a more inclusive survey tool. We employed open-ended questions regarding identity and experiences, drawing on diverse tools specifically developed to capture the lived experiences of marginalized identities.

Researchers' Positionalities

In alignment with our critical approach, we affirm that research is not value-neutral and that scholars bring both intention and perspectives to their work. We are driven by a commitment to higher education for the public good and that that public good mission applies to experiences and inherent value of all work and workers in higher education. By focusing on how intersecting social identities control educational and professional opportunities, our scholarship seeks to understand how the structure of higher education can limit or advance equity and inclusion.

Angela comes to this work as a white queer ciswoman, a parent, and a PELL grant-funded college student. She grew up in an extended-family household with her Mom, grandparents, and Uncle. She graduated high school the same year her Mom graduated college after many years of part-time study. She began her career in higher education as a department secretary and ended her most recent staff role as an executive director of a gender equity center. Angela, currently serves as an Associate Professor. She was hired into all her scholar and practitioner roles for her professional and academic knowledge; highlighting how the expert model applies to staff as well as faculty in the academy. A significant portion of Angela's professional experience has been providing professional development and coaching as well as victim's advocacy for students, staff, and faculty. This study is shaped in part by her personal lived experiences with workplace violence and her experiences delivering professional development, coaching, and advocacy to staff, faculty, and students in higher education.

Emily's professional background contributed to her passion for elevating women staff in higher education's voices. Emily is approaching 20 years of professional experience in higher education, the majority of those years as a staff member in academic advising, college counseling, and enrollment. Her current staff role as research director at an R1 institution, where she manages various grant-funded research projects and teaching graduate classes as a term lecturer, but she is moving into a tenure-track faculty position in the next academic. Emily believes her upbringing shapes who she is as a professional and scholar. Raised in a working-class family in a partially rural community, she was a first-generation college student, a Pell Grant recipient, and worked part-time to full-time throughout the completion of her four degrees. Identifying as a white bi/pansexual ciswoman, Emily has experienced both personal and workplace trauma, including incidents of sexual harassment, bullying, and physical threats, which help to her empathize and advocate for women staff in higher education.

Susan, who self-identifies as a white woman, has worked for 35 years in higher education, as a former student affairs administrator turned faculty. However, even with earning a doctoral degree and status as a tenured full professor, her working class roots define her psychologically as a laborer. Growing up on a dairy farm, she was socialized to the gendered realities of organizations and 'put in her place' by men who struggled to recognize her competence and capabilities (even as she supervised them). These early experiences with sexism seeded her identity as an activist-practitioner and later fueled her scholarship on women in higher education, with particular attention to violence against women, academic mothers, contingent women

faculty, and the "sticky floors" and "glass ceilings" that constrain women's advancement.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger exploratory, cross-sectional, non-experimental mixed-methods survey aimed at understanding the experiences of women-identified, staff employed in higher education in the United States. Creamer (2018) noted within a mixed methods research approach a researcher collects and analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data within a single study, integrating the results from each data type to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. We analyzed our data on a construct-by-construct basis by linking related quantitative scales and qualitative themes (Fetters et al., 2013). Specifically, the results shared within this article are guided by the following research question: What is the relationship between women's staff imposter syndrome and experiences of workplace trauma?

Survey Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a structured survey consisting of 124 questions. The survey had items that were developed by the researchers on demographic information and career history and also standardized instruments that measured professional development (Griffin et al., 2018), personal and workplace trauma (Lynch & Glass, 2019), and mentors, sponsors, networks, and role models (Griffin et al., 2018). The questions included were primary multiple-choice questions with three short-answer questions. Respondents were invited to elaborate on the following responses, allowing them to provide richer details about their experiences (Hurtado, 2022). These optional open-ended questions included the use of employee assistance programs or mental health services due to a work-related issue, trauma or an event that affected their professional performance at work, and elaboration if they ever seriously considered leaving higher education. Validated scales work-life balance attitudes (Johnsrud, 2002), campus climate (Mayhew et al., 2006), career satisfaction (August & Waltman, 2004), imposter syndrome (Muradoglu et al, 2022), career decision-making (Tickamyer & Bokemeier, 1984). To increase content validity, a group screened the questions and provided feedback, leading to changes in the final survey instrument on face validity to clarify researcher-created survey questions and update language related to identity and diversity in the campus climate survey.

Survey Reliability and Validity

For this article, the research question was answered by using the imposter syndrome scale (Muradoglu et al., 2021), which contains 20 statements, using a four-point Likert scale, coded as 1 = strongly disagree and 4 as strongly agree. We conducted Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.928) (Field, 2018). Statements from the scale included:

- I can give the impression that I am more competent than I really am.
- I avoid evaluations if possible and dread others evaluating me.
- When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I am afraid I will not be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.
- I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.
- I am afraid people important to me may find out that I am not as capable as they think I am.
- I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

To measure personal and workplace trauma, we relied on a yes or no variable reporting trauma and open-ended questions to allow our participants to define and reflect on their trauma. This way of collecting data allowed for the participants to construct meaning from their own experiences, providing them with power to identify trauma and traumatic experiences from their own viewpoint (Lynch & Glass, 2019).

Population and Sampling

Respondents included those identifying with woman-identified gender identities, including cisgender women, transgender women, and those who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or agender but aligned with a feminine identity. To provide a holistic understanding, the study included women from all functional areas within higher education institutions, not limiting the sample to commonly studied roles like student affairs or student services.

Sampling Strategy

A combination of purposeful and snowball sampling was used to recruit respondents. Recruitment efforts included targeted outreach through professional organizations such as HIGHER, which supports women in higher education across all functional areas. Recruitment also extended to social media groups dedicated to supporting professional women in higher education, to increase accessibility and diversity. Respondents were encouraged to share the survey with their colleagues, expanding the participant base through their personal and professional networks.

Sample

A total of 276 participants successfully completed the survey, providing detailed information on their professional and educational backgrounds, demographic profiles, institutional attributes, feelings of imposter syndrome, and experiences of personal and workplace trauma. The characteristics of this sample are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	N	%		N	%
Race/Ethnicity			*Institution type*		
Native American	5	1.8	Community College	17	6.2
Hispanic	9	3.3	Liberal Arts	50	18.1
Asian American	11	4.0	Comprehensive	90	32.6
Black/African American	29	10.5	Research Universities	111	40.3
Multiracial	4	1.4	HBCU	4	1.4
White	218	79.0	Women's Colleges	4	1.4
Gender Identity			*Staff role*		
Cis-gender woman	270	97.8	Support	46	16.7
Trans woman/Non-Binary	6	2.2	Professional	139	50.4
			Supervisory	91	33.0
Sexuality			*Current Division*		
Heterosexual	213	77.7	Academic Affairs	72	26.1
Lesbian/Gay	7	2.6	Student Affairs	93	33.7
Bi/Pan Sexual	26	9.5	Enrollment	19	6.9
Queer	12	4.4	Advising	38	13.8
Questioning	7	2.5	Career Services	11	4.0
Asexual	9	3.3	Advancement	21	7.6
			Operations	22	7.9
Income					
$0-48,000	56	20.3			
$48,001-60,000	87	31.5			
$60,001-80,000	68	24.6			
$80,001-100,000	35	12.7			
More than $100,000	30	10.9			

Note. N = 276. Respondents were on average 39 years old ranging from 22-66 (*SD* = 9.546). Respondents had on average of 12.23 years' experience in higher education ranging from 5 months to 45 year (*SD* = 7.806).

Data Collection Procedures

The survey was administered through an online platform, Qualtrics, which allowed for widespread participation across the U.S. To reach respondents, invitations were distributed via email through relevant professional organizations, social media platforms, and direct contacts as well as encouraging respondents to share the study with their professional circle. Detailed information about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and participant rights was provided. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents before they began the survey. Measures

were taken to ensure the confidentiality of all respondents, and the survey responses were anonymized.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected from the survey were analyzed using SPSS version 29. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used, including *t*-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA), to explore differences in feelings of imposter syndrome and personal and workplace trauma across different demographic groups and across various roles within higher education. Significance levels for these tests were set at the $p < 0.05$ level (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). We used content analysis to assess the open-ended survey responses (Krippendorff, 2004).

RESULTS

The results of this study illuminated women staff's experiences with trauma and the imposter phenomenon in higher education. Almost all 276 respondents in this survey scored at moderate or higher experiences of imposter phenomenon: 4% reported few imposter feelings, 35% reported moderate imposter feelings, 51% reported frequent imposter feelings, and 10% reported intense imposter feelings. Regarding trauma, 175 women staff participants reported that they experienced a form of workplace trauma and/or secondary trauma, whereas 101 women reported no trauma, meaning that over 63% of participants are going to work with some type of trauma.

Respondents described individual experiences of trauma in the workplace such as: secondary trauma experienced by providing crisis care to students; and workplace bullying including freezing out and sabotage by other women colleagues. Some respondents described experiences of direct violence towards staff, such as physical and sexual assault by students, threats of harm to the campus, and experiences like Marie, an office manager who was cornered in a closed, dark closet to be screamed at by her supervisor. Other staff reported experiences with racism and genderism intersections across these examples, including the experience of Shelia, a Black woman in student affairs, who was subject to daily microaggressions from her supervisor while waiting on a promotion. When Shelia expressed that she would no longer tolerate her supervisor's comments, her promotion was indefinitely postponed. Using an independent samples *t*-test, we found significant group differences between women who experience workplace trauma and those who do not in regard to self-reported feelings of imposter syndrome. Women who reported experiencing workplace trauma ($M = 53.74$, $SD = 10.91$) demonstrated significantly higher imposter syndrome scores than those who did not report trauma ($M = 49.03$, $SD = 11.03$), $t(274) = -3.44$, $p < .001$. This result indicates that women who experience workplace trauma tend to report heightened feelings of imposter syndrome, suggesting a positive association between the two variables.

We then scored the imposter phenomena scale as designed, creating a categorical variable with four levels for imposter phenomena (few, moderate, frequent, and intense). The imposter phenomenon scale was then analyzed via a chi-square test for independence. The proportion of women staff who reported frequent feelings of

imposter phenomenon was not independent from experiences of trauma. The test results, $\chi 2$ (3) = 8.65, p = .034, indicated a significant relationship. Expected counts of frequent and intense feelings of imposter phenomenon increased with exposure to trauma in the workplace (see Table 2). Women who reported trauma were significantly more likely to exhibit moderate, frequent, and imposter phenomena scores compared to those women who reported few feelings of imposter phenomena.

Table 2: Trauma Experience and Imposter Syndrome

	Imposter Syndrome			
Group	Few	Moderate	Frequent	Intense
Trauma	5	52	92	26
No Trauma	7	42	44	8

χ^2 (3) = 8.65, p = .034

DISCUSSION

The results from the study provide compelling insights into the intersection of trauma and the imposter phenomenon among women staff in higher education, which may share interconnected psychological responses rather than separate experiences. Furthermore, the results of this study expand on the existing literature that commonly associates imposter phenomenon with high achieving women to instead see trauma and imposter syndrome not as two distinct phenomena, but alternatively opens up a discussion about whether trauma may be an underexplored antecedent to imposter phenomenon. Specifically, this intersection of trauma and frequent feelings of being an imposter may be driven by higher education's institutional culture. As previously stated, Hormann and Vivian (2005) asserted that at the institutional level organizations, like individuals, can become traumatized overtime creating a negative work climate for employees. When an organization operates in a traumatized way, staff will begin to feel a lack of basic safety, experience frequent miscommunication, increase authoritarianism from institutional leaders, silencing of dissent, and a lack shared decision-making making (Bloom, 2011). These experience lead to staff disempowerment, self-blaming, and doubt commonly associated with imposter phenomenon.

The prevalence and magnitude of women staff reporting experiences of imposter feelings and workplace trauma suggest a crisis-level problem in higher education workplaces. With 96% of respondents reporting moderate to intense imposter feelings and 63% experiencing workplace trauma, this prevalence far exceeds what might be considered "normal" workplace stress and warrants urgent institutional attention. The literature on trauma highlights its profound impact on psychological, emotional, and physiological well-being, which aligns with the study's results showing that a significant portion of women staff experience workplace trauma (Lynch & Glass, 2019; Shalka, 2024). This trauma, whether direct or secondary, can lead to heightened stress reactions, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges (Lynch, 2023). This prevalence of imposter feelings and trauma among staff is concerning,

given the well-documented effects of trauma on overall health and workplace productivity, including increased absenteeism and burnout (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024).

Moreover, the study's exploration of the imposter phenomenon among women staff provides valuable insights into how trauma exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The significant differences in imposter syndrome scores, between those who experienced workplace trauma and those who did not, suggest a strong association between trauma and imposter feelings. Women who reported trauma had higher imposter syndrome scores, indicating that trauma may amplify feelings of not belonging or being unworthy of their positions. The chi-square test further supports this, showing that women with trauma were more likely to report moderate to intense imposter feelings. These findings highlight the need for trauma-informed frameworks in higher education to support staff well-being and address the psychological impacts of trauma, ultimately fostering a healthier and more supportive work environment (Campaign for Trauma Informed Policy and Practice, 2025; Deady et al., 2024; Hartwig et al., 2020).

Our results validated secondary trauma's core tenets regarding the occupational hazards faced by helping professionals in educational settings and expand the scope of who secondary trauma affects, beyond faculty, students, and student affairs staff, to include the broader label of staff (Gander et al.,2019; Jo, 2008; Veles et al., 2023). The documented experiences of staff who reported secondary trauma experienced by providing crisis care to students offer concrete evidence supporting theoretical assertions that helping professionals absorb trauma from those they serve, leading to measurable psychological impacts (Figley & Ludick, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2022; Stamm, 2009). Moreover, the significant association between trauma exposure and imposter phenomenon extends secondary trauma theory beyond its traditional focus on PTSD symptomatology to include disruption of professional identity (Bloom, 2011) and competence beliefs—a theoretical expansion supported by the present data showing how vicarious trauma exposure undermines staff members' confidence in their professional capabilities (Perez & Bettencourt, 2024). The result that secondary trauma compounds with direct workplace trauma experiences noted by Bloom (2011) are that there is a "interactive relationships between individual identity and organizational identity" that affects workers who have experienced trauma in the workplace or are working in a traumatized organization. In higher education, staff face cumulative trauma exposure that creates multiplicative rather than additive effects, supporting theoretical models that predict enhanced vulnerability in helping professions where both direct and vicarious trauma sources are present (Figley & Ludick, 2017; Lynch, 2023). Higher education is also facing many of the same institutional level issues that Bloom and Farragher (2013) associated with traumatize organization, such as frequent and sudden policy changes, financial uncertainty, and the trauma history of employees and supervisors within the organization that go unaddressed.

Our results also support and contribute to the foundations of the trauma-informed care framework, providing robust empirical evidence for implementing trauma-informed care frameworks within higher education institutions. With 63% of women staff reporting experiences of workplace trauma, our results validate the framework's

foundational principle that trauma exposure is widespread and requires systematic organizational responses rather than individual interventions (Bloom 2011; Hormann & Vivian, 2005). The significant relationship between trauma exposure and elevated imposter phenomenon scores demonstrates how trauma can disrupt normal cognitive and emotional functioning, particularly affecting professional self-assessment and confidence, core psychological processes that trauma-informed theory predicts would be compromised. Furthermore, the diverse manifestations of trauma documented in our study, including supervisor abuse, colleague sabotage, student violence, and secondary trauma from crisis care, align with trauma-informed care principles that recognize trauma's multiple forms and intersectional nature within organizational contexts. These results suggest that higher education institutions must adopt comprehensive, trauma-informed policies that address both direct and vicarious trauma exposure while accounting for the compounding effects of intersecting identities and systemic oppression.

Implications for Practice

The results from the study suggest we must stop centering high-achieving women workers as a group that simply have imposter experiences as a result of their gender and success but instead as a systemic issue at the institutional level which necessitate leaders to address the structure and climate to better support women employees. This shift in perspective is crucial for developing effective interventions that address the root causes of imposter feelings among women staff. The result that 63% of women staff experience workplace trauma necessitates comprehensive institutional policy reforms that address both prevention and response mechanisms. Institutions must implement mandatory trauma-informed care training for all supervisors and administrators, focusing specifically on recognizing trauma responses, avoiding re-traumatization practices, and creating psychologically safe work environments that support staff well-being and foster resilience (Hartwig et al., 2020). Workplaces that adopt trauma-informed policies—such as offering mental health resources, peer support programs, and workload accommodations—have been shown to improve employee well-being and reduce turnover rates (Lerman et al., 2023). Additionally, the documentation of supervisor abuse cases, such as sexual assault and Marie's experience of being cornered and screamed at in a closed space, demonstrates that current violence, harassment, and anti-bullying policies are insufficient and require robust enforcement mechanisms with clear reporting pathways, independent investigation processes, and meaningful consequences for perpetrators.

Furthermore, addressing the structural and cultural factors that contribute to workplace trauma and imposter syndrome can lead to more sustainable changes. The compounded experiences of staff like Shelia, who faced both racial microaggressions and career retaliation, underscore the need for intersectional approaches to trauma prevention and response in higher education workplaces. Policies must explicitly acknowledge how marginalized staff face multiplicative trauma effects and provide enhanced protections, support systems, and advancement opportunities for staff with multiple marginalized identities. Institutions should evaluate their policies and practices to identify areas that may inadvertently perpetuate stress and trauma, such

as unrealistic performance expectations, lack of support for work-life balance, and insufficient recognition of achievements. By making these systemic changes, higher education can better support the well-being and professional growth of women staff, ultimately leading to a more resilient and productive workforce. This approach not only benefits individual employees but also enhances the overall health and effectiveness of the institution.

The prevalence rates described in our study establish the need for ongoing institutional assessment and evidence-based policy refinement to address workplace trauma and its psychological consequences. Institutions should conduct regular assessments of workplace trauma and imposter phenomenon to monitor intervention effectiveness, identify emerging issues, and track long-term impacts on staff retention and career progression. These assessment efforts should be supported by dedicated funding streams for trauma-informed initiatives and specialized staff positions, such as trauma-informed care coordinators, to ensure sustainable implementation rather than sporadic or grant-dependent programming that fails to address the systemic nature of workplace trauma in higher education.

Limitations and Future Research

Though our sample was diverse, it was not representative of the true population diversity of women-identified staff in higher education. In addition, our survey lacked details on dis/ability and therefore was unable to consider any connection of imposter phenomenon to that identity space. Finally, as previously mentioned, the sample size allowed for adequate statistical power to detect meaningful differences across trauma experiences of staff, but not within social identities, divisional area, or institutional type. Future research could be strengthened by having a larger representative sample of staff across abilities and women of color. As noted in the introduction, 1,146,377 women-aligned staff members are working in U.S. higher education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS, 2023). Of these women staff, 40.76% identify as Women of Color, predominantly Black and Hispanic/Latinx women. Drawing upon such a representative data set, and gathering additional qualitative responses on respondents' trauma experiences, would make meaningful contributions to this under-studied population.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study's results underscored the critical need to reframe our understanding of imposter phenomenon among staff women in higher education. Rather than viewing it solely as a byproduct of gender and success, it is essential to recognize the significant role of workplace trauma in exacerbating these feelings. By addressing trauma at an institutional level and fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, we can better support women employees. Implementing trauma-informed practices and making systemic changes to reduce stress and trauma will not only enhance individual well-being but also contribute to a more resilient and effective workforce. This holistic approach is vital for creating a healthier and more productive academic community.

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