

# I&I ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATIONS

# LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR INCLUSIVE WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS IN MOBILE, ALABAMA

By the Urban Manufacturing Alliance and The Century Foundation

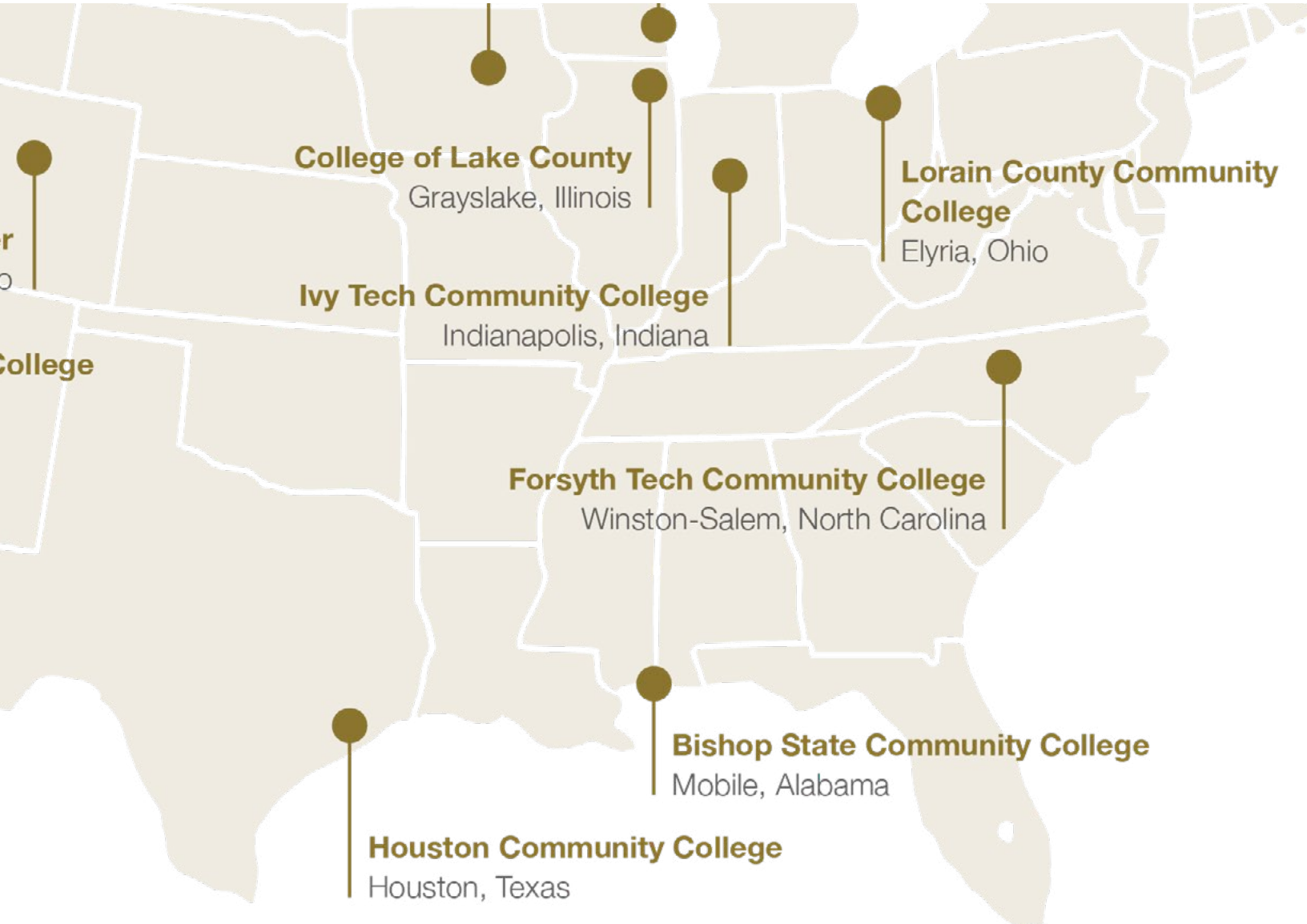
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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Photography by Bishop State Community College.



# INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court of the United States released its decision on *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, which has barred the use of race-based affirmative action in college admissions programs.

This devastating blow to racial justice is sure to have wide reaching ramifications beyond our understanding. For now, we know that the evidence shows a likely decline in Black enrollment at elite universities, with many high performing students enrolling at Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs) instead.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, these exceptional institutions aren't promised an increase of funding with this coming influx of students, and many of them are already strapped for cash.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the lessons to be learned from our roundtable conversation with Bishop State Community College in Mobile, Alabama couldn't be better timed. Bishop State is one of 107 HBCUs across the country that is sure to play an increasingly important role

in diversifying the American manufacturing workforce in years to come.



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1 Denise Smith, "How Can We Promote Diversity and Help Students if Affirmative Action Falls?" June 14, 2023, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/how-can-we-promote-diversity-and-help-students-if-affirmative-action-falls/>

2 The Century Foundation, "HBCUs Are Exceptional Institutions—But Vastly Underfunded," September 27, 2022, <https://tcf.org/content/facts/hbcus-are-exceptional-institutions-but-vastly-underfunded/>

# HAVING TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

Attitudes around race in America vary widely based on each individual's background.<sup>3</sup> While the events of 2020 and murder of George Floyd sparked a national reckoning on race, our nation's progress has never been linear.<sup>4</sup> In the first paper for this Industry & Inclusion Cohort focused on Lorain, Ohio, we noted that employers have a skills gap when it comes to recruiting and retaining employees of color, and a shared responsibility to address this gap.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, we recognize that many workforce partners, community organizations, and community colleges will confront employers that need support. In the words of Akareem Spears, the Dean of Workforce Development at Bishop State, "the reality is that when you start talking about DEI, we are still in the State of Alabama, and some of the mindsets that we've historically encountered may still be lingering."

Sharnee Hobbs, Director of Adult Education at Bishop State, talked about the strength she has gained through the Industry & Inclusion cohort to

broach hard conversations with employers about diversity in their workforce. She described the daunting feeling of entering spaces that lacked diversity, and where she felt the conversation may not be welcome –

"I didn't really know how to bring that conversation up without offending anyone. These meetings [with the I&I cohort] have given me examples of how to have these conversations, and to have some positive feedback from it. And to find the people in my college that could actually speak about those things when I'm not there."

What Sharnee is describing is not new, nor is it going away anytime soon. The North Baton Rouge Industrial Training Initiative (NBRITI), based out of Baton Rouge Community College, previously discussed some of these fraught and sensitive dynamics that echo the experience at Bishop State. NBRITI rightly identified that the Black community in Baton Rouge had been negatively impacted by manufacturing

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3 Juliana Menasce, Anna Brown, Kiana Cox, "Race in America 2019," Pew Research Center, April 9, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/>; Frank Newport, "American Attitudes on Race," June 17, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/312590/american-attitudes-race.aspx>

4 Candis Watts Smith, Rebecca J. Kreitzer, Feiya Suo, "The Dynamics of Racial Resentment across the 50 US States," Cambridge University Press, September 25, 2019, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/dynamics-of-racial-resentment-across-the-50-us-states/1B1AB5DED49BFEE80A9C4BE7E4FBF5C2>

5 Urban Manufacturing Alliance and The Century Foundation, "I&I Roundtable Conversations: Building an Inclusive Manufacturing Sector in Northeast Ohio," July 2023, <https://www.urbanmfg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/II-Profile-Lorain-OH-v4.pdf>



in their communities, including economic and environmental harms. They described a highly individualized and tailored method of outreach to build pathways for repair –

“We wanted to be as inclusive as possible to address the challenging circumstances in communities that live with poverty, environmental injustice, and racial tension. We were very individualized in our approach, not the most efficient, but [the] most effective in supporting workers that have experienced trauma.”<sup>6</sup>

In both Ms. Hobbs’ experience and in Baton Rouge, the importance of networks, allyship, and community support to broaching challenging

conversations and building long-lasting systems to tackle these issues cannot be understated.

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6 Tanu Kumar, Sophie Kelmenson, Ph.D, and Nichola Lowe, Ph.D, “Inclusive Innovation in Advanced Manufacturing: Centering Community for Economic Mobility,” December 2022, [https://www.urbanmfg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Made-with-Equity\\_Baton-Rouge.pdf](https://www.urbanmfg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Made-with-Equity_Baton-Rouge.pdf)

# TRAUMA-INFORMED WORKPLACES

Many individuals don't seek treatment from a professional counselor or therapist because of the stigma surrounding mental illness or mental health challenges. This stigma crosses borders, classes, race, and ethnicity. Not only has this led to undertreatment of mental health the world over, it has also led to an American culture and society (and therefore its workplaces) that are unskilled and unfamiliar with conversations around mental health.

While frontline supervisors or C-Suite executives cannot play the role of health care provider, it is imperative that employers build a culture of awareness around trauma, including what it means for their employees and how they can build an environment to support treatment. Why? In addition to caring about the general wellbeing of their workers, it's also in a business's best financial interest. Toxic stress and trauma contribute to safety issues on the shop floor, loss in productivity, and absenteeism.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Spears spoke about academic staff or employers that may see students or employees

falter without accounting for the whole picture – “we don't look at the things that happened prior to them coming. We just see the product that is before us.”

What is trauma? According to SAMHSA, “Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or *set of circumstances* that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”<sup>8</sup>

This means that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) isn't just limited to populations commonly associated with this illness, such as veterans returning from deployment or survivors of acute violence. Trauma can also come from insidious, entrenched, or diffuse sources around us, like racism and poverty. In particular, the Department of Veterans Affairs notes that, “racial trauma can lead to an increased risk of physical and mental health problems. Emotional difficulties, such as stress, anxiety, depression or PTSD, can impact

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7 Vickie Choitz and Stacey Wagner, “A Trauma Informed Approach to Workforce,” April 2021, <https://nationalfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/A-Trauma-Informed-Approach-to-Workforce.pdf>

8 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, “SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach,” July 2014, [https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)

daily functioning in school, work, or at home.”<sup>9</sup>

In order to build and retain a diverse workforce, it is critical to acknowledge that two-thirds of all adults have experienced at least one adverse experience in their household, community, and/or environment that may continue to affect them throughout their lifetime.<sup>10</sup> PACES Connection, a resource for trauma-informed practices, that outlines the many realms in which individuals can experience trauma throughout their lifetimes (see Figure 1 in appendix).

This isn't to suggest that every woman in the workplace is coping with trauma from sexism; nor are we claiming that every person of color is in need of trauma-informed approaches. But what is clear is that every organization should be investing time and resources in becoming trauma-informed. As a starting point, SAMHSA has provided 4 key assumptions, 6 principles, and 10 implementation domains for becoming a trauma-informed organization, which are summarized in Figure 2 in the appendix at the end of this report.

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9 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, “PTSD: National Center for PTSD - Racial Trauma,” [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/racial\\_trauma.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/types/racial_trauma.asp)

10 PACES, <https://www.pacesconnection.com/pages/3RealmsACEs>

# AFFINITY GROUPS AND EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS (ERGS)

Perhaps one of the more common methods for fostering diverse communities within a company's workforce are the creation of employee resource groups (ERGs). The very first one in the United States was created by Black employees at Xerox in the 1970s, and they are now utilized by roughly 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies.<sup>11</sup> In their most basic form, ERGs are internal communities of workers with shared identities and interests.

During the roundtable, Dani Pendleton, a Talent Partner at AM/NS Calvert, discussed some of the components of their ERGs that have made them successful. One key is to make them accessible. Through the company's intranet, employees have an array of options that are easy to join. With a few clicks of a mouse, AM/NS Calvert employees can see groups formed around race, ethnicity, age, and many other factors. Ms. Pendleton also noted that these groups have buy-in from managers for support and sponsorship, and are largely driven from the ground up for their formation and activities. This reflects an ideal mix of top-down and bottom-up participation and investment.

ERGs can be a critical tool for fostering community and support within a workplace; however, even Ms. Pendleton noted that their reach can be limited for those that spend less time at a desk or online –

“As an organization, there's still a lot to learn. We have a lot of work to do. We're still trying to figure it out. The affinity groups [are] a big part of how we can connect with people. [But] out in the mills, people who are working on the floor, who don't have the same access to everything that we're pushing out online, or in our newsletters... How can we connect to the people on the floor and meet those needs for them, too, and let them have a voice?”

Indeed, employees already stretched for time or family commitments may not necessarily have the bandwidth for extra activities with their coworkers. Further, leadership of ERG groups can take on substantial unpaid work that provides meaningful benefit to their employer. Therefore, ERGs are a laudable step in the right direction, but should be but a component of a broader strategy for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

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11 Natacha Catalino, Nora Gardner, Drew Goldstein, and Jackie Wong, “Effective employee resource groups are key to inclusion at work. Here's how to get them right,” December 7, 2022, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/effective-employee-resource-groups-are-key-to-inclusion-at-work-heres-how-to-get-them-right>



# CONCLUSION

Notably, this roundtable featured the only HBCU in the current I&I cohort, and reflected many unique community dynamics of the American South. All of the participants remarked that the strong relationships among

the major organizations in the region was a major contributing factor to their success and a fundamental building block towards making more strides in the future. Key lessons from this conversation include –

**1. Having tough conversations.**

In some parts of this country, bringing up racial and ethnic diversity is akin to acknowledging the elephant in the room. Don't expect employees and diversity advocates to already have an innate sense of how to tackle these conversations. Instead, Bishop State (and the I&I cohort) developed a culture of support and best practices around individuals that must broach sensitive topics with their workforce partners.

**2. Trauma-Informed workplaces.**

Frontline supervisors or C-Suite executives cannot play the role of health care provider, but it is imperative that employers build a culture of awareness around trauma, including what it means for their employees and how they can build an environment to support treatment.

**3. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) best practices.**

ERGs are a tried and true method for bringing communities of support to a workplace, and thoughtful implementation can go a long way to ensuring employees have cultural sustenance that will boost their sense of belonging. However, businesses should keep in mind those employees on a shop floor or away from a desk that may not have access to these resources, and find equitable ways to reach all employees.



In light of the Supreme Court’s decision to ban race-based affirmative action in higher education admission policies, all workforce partners – beyond community colleges – will need to redouble their efforts to carry DEIB values forward. The potential chilling effect this could have on the private sector, in particular, could be dramatic. Thirteen Republican Attorneys General have already written to the CEOs of the nation’s Fortune 100 companies in July of this year asking them to review their employment and contracting practices to comport with the Supreme Court’s ruling.<sup>12</sup> Whether this is a foreboding signal for diversity goals across the manufacturing sector is yet to be seen. Regardless, we believe some words from Justice Sotomayor’s dissent bear repeating here –

*Notwithstanding this Court’s actions, however, society’s progress toward equality cannot be permanently halted. Diversity is now a fundamental American value, housed in our varied and multicultural American community that only continues to grow. The pursuit of racial diversity will go on.*



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<sup>12</sup> Trisha Thadani and Jacob Bogage, Washington Post, “The campaign against affirmative action shifts to corporate America,” July 19, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/07/15/affirmative-action-workplace-diversity-equity-inclusion/>

# APPENDIX

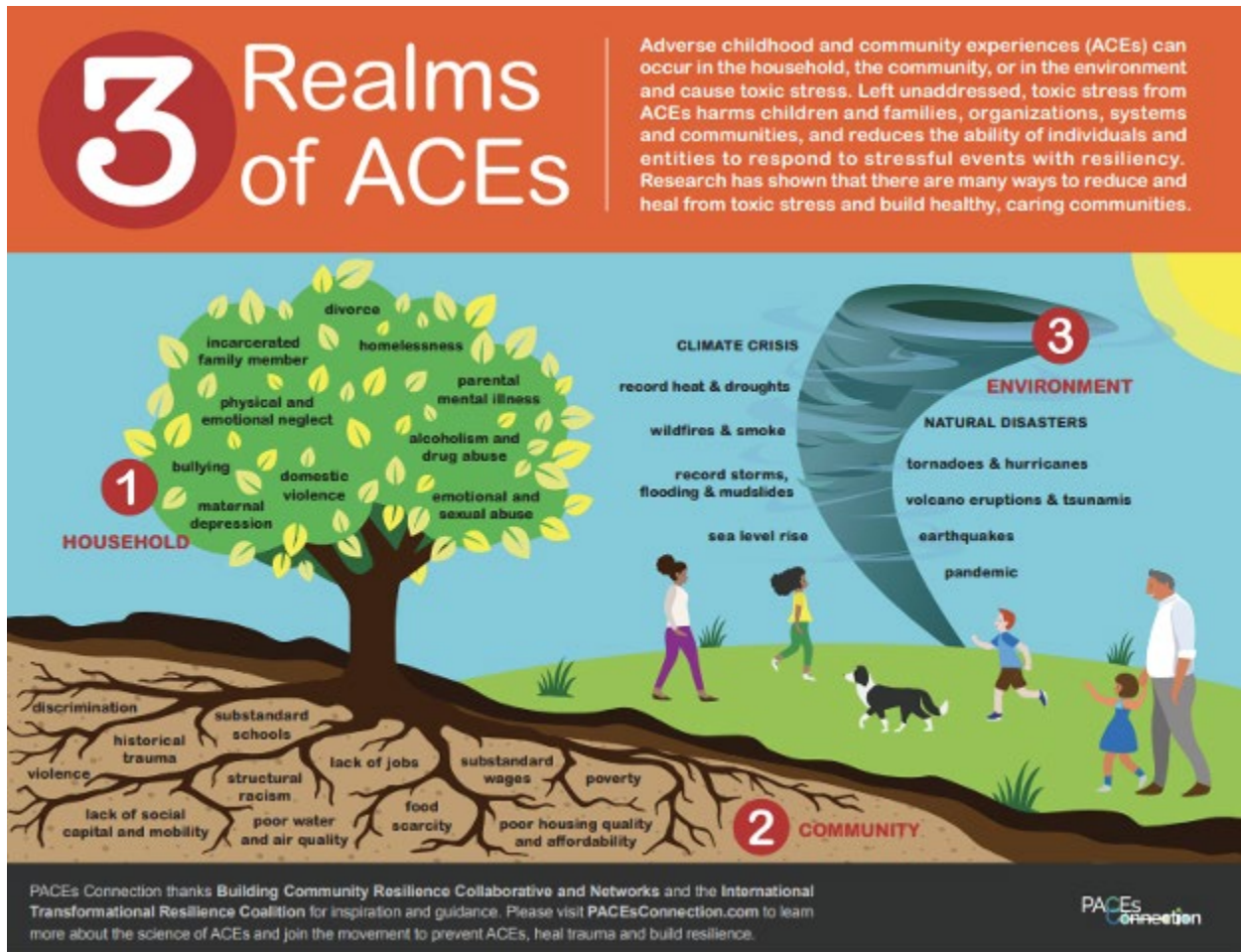
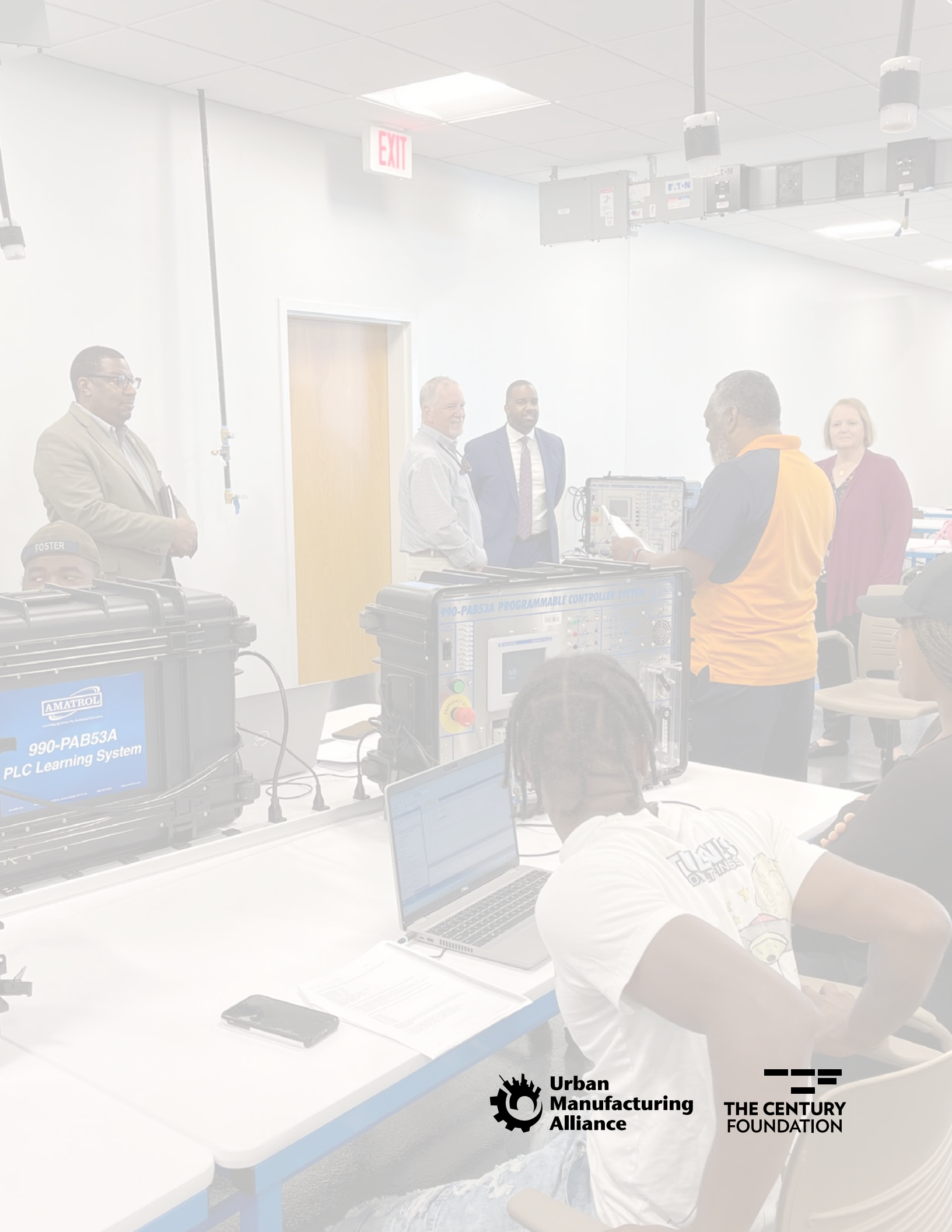


Figure 1. Positive & Adverse Childhood Experiences (PACES) Connection diagram on the realms of trauma and toxic stress.

<b>4 assumptions</b>	<b>Realization</b>	widespread impact of trauma and understand paths for recovery
	<b>Recognize</b>	signs and symptoms of trauma
	<b>Respond</b>	Integrate knowledge into policies, procedures, & practice
	<b>Resist Re-traumatization</b>	
<b>6 principles</b>	<b>Safety</b>	
	<b>Trustworthiness &amp; transparency</b>	
	<b>Peer Support</b>	
	<b>Collaboration and Mutuality</b>	
	<b>Empowerment, Voice, &amp; Choice</b>	
	<b>Cultural, Historical, and Gender Inclusion</b>	
<b>10 implementation domains</b>	<b>Governance &amp; Leadership</b>	
	<b>Policy</b>	
	<b>Physical Environment</b>	
	<b>Engagement &amp; Involvement</b>	
	<b>Cross Sector Collaboration</b>	
	<b>Screening, Assessment, Treatment Services</b>	
	<b>Training and Workforce Development</b>	
	<b>Progress Monitoring &amp; Quality Assurance</b>	
	<b>Financing</b>	
	<b>Evaluation</b>	

Figure 2. Summary table of SAMHSA’s key assumptions, principles, and implementation domains for becoming a trauma-informed organization. Source: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)



EXIT

AMATROL  
Leading Systems For Technical Education  
990-PAB53A  
PLC Learning System

990-PAB53A PROGRAMMABLE CONTROLLER SYSTEM