

BRAIN FUTURE'S

Integrating Psychedelic Coursework into Higher Education

A Toolkit for Academic Leaders

With Gratitude to Our Donors

**BRAINFUTURES' WORK IS
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Foundation

Cammack Family
Charitable Gift Fund

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our appreciation and gratitude to the following contributors who provided critical input and feedback for this toolkit, including:

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The recommendations presented in this paper are solely the views of BrainFutures, and participation as a reviewer or contributor does not mean a formal endorsement of this issue brief.

Background

Psychedelic research has proliferated in recent years, demonstrating both safety and efficacy across this class of interventions, and building momentum for mainstream clinical application.¹ The work has generated an attendant interest from students in learning more about the history, science, and clinical protocols of psychedelic therapy.² In response, a handful of universities throughout the United States recently introduced curriculum covering psychedelic research and potential clinical applications across various departments and courses, with instructors generating original course content and materials.

Generally, these courses focus on providing introductory knowledge of psychedelics, familiarizing students with potential therapeutic use, clinical trial protocols, mechanisms of action, safety, and ethics. Many courses cover a combination of additional topics depending on the interests and expertise of the instructor. These may include drugs-in-development, treatment models, the historical context or global history of psychedelics, policy issues, diversity challenges in the field, and more.

1. For purposes of this document, we use the term “psychedelic research” when referring to the exploration of innovative treatments using psychedelic compounds.
2. For purposes of this document, we use the term “psychedelic therapy” when referring to the use of a psychedelic compound as part of a clinical treatment protocol, whether or not it is paired with psychotherapy.

Toolkit Introduction

Instructors experience varying levels of support and resistance as they work to respond to student interest in psychedelic therapy by introducing relevant coursework at their institutions. For example, some face understandable institutional challenges such as hesitancy about nascency of the data. Some face infrastructure challenges like funding for protected time to dedicate necessary attention to developing curriculum or conducting research. Some struggle to find knowledgeable instructors.

The toolkit is drawn from the experience of the first generation of curriculum developers and instructors and targets the second generation—those who will build upon this foundation to broaden the reach and scope of these efforts. It identifies a set of fundamental best practices these next instructors can use as they face hurdles to introducing psychedelic therapy coursework, increasing the ease of their work and allowing more interested students to have access to such education.

While some educational institutions have developed coursework and even certificate programs focused on preparing practitioners to practice psychedelic-assisted therapy, this toolkit focuses on didactic courses providing foundational knowledge.³ For some students, such as those who eventually wish to make psychedelic-assisted therapy a focus of their practice, instructors would welcome pairing this didactic education with clinical experience, training students to provide hands-on, high-quality care to patients. Today, very few sites offer an opportunity for such clinical experience. Thus, while building the infrastructure for specialized training and clinical experience is key for the field, it is not the focus of this toolkit. This toolkit is primarily intended to be used by instructors introducing didactic coursework.

3. For purposes of this document, we use the term “psychedelic-assisted therapy” when referring specifically to the use of a psychedelic compound “in the context of a short-term (time limited) sequence of therapy sessions that are structured to inform, shape, and interpret the psychedelic experience” (Nielsen & Guss, 2018).

Introducing the Idea

Undoubtedly, an initial conversation with colleagues about introducing psychedelic therapy coursework can be challenging. It is important to prepare the appropriate content, language, and tone for a candid and meaningful conversation.

1. EMPHASIZE SCIENCE, SAFETY, AND STUDENTS

- Put students at the center of the conversation. Suggest that a department survey the community to gauge interest in psychedelic therapy curriculum. Data indicating student interest offers confidence to the institution and instructor that the course offering is meeting student needs and justifies the work ahead to establish a course.
- Speak the listener's language relative to science, safety, and the academic environment. When discussing potential course content, focus on topics relevant to prospective students, which may include an overview of clinical evidence, pharmacology, mechanisms of therapeutic action, therapeutic methods, and ethics, depending on the discipline.
- Share the listener's potential caution relative to the safety of psychedelics. Emphasize a focus on the ethical issues surrounding psychedelic

therapy, as well as the importance of screening and assessing patients for treatment, including knowledge of potential indications and contraindications.

- Discuss potential coursework and learning objectives in the context of existing educational frameworks from relevant professional organizations. Consider and introduce how the coursework relates to core competencies of the professional field students will enter.
- ## 2. BALANCE CLINICAL POTENTIAL WITH THE NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH
- Ground initial conversations about the introduction of psychedelic therapy coursework in recent and ongoing clinical research. Emphasize the promise shown in Phase 2 and 3 trials, highlighting rapidity of response, magnitude of symptom reduction, and potential durability of effects, as well as relative safety.
 - Quantify the breadth and depth of suffering associated with diseases such as treatment-resistant depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorder today. Discuss the promise of recent innovations in mental health treatment that may reduce this suffering and highlight psychedelics' potential contribution to this momentum.
 - Balance these points with acknowledgement of the small clinical trial sample sizes, as well as the



presence of adverse effects, challenging experiences, and lack of response for some patients. While the first New Drug Application (NDA) in this class was not approved by the FDA with current data, the research pipeline of psychedelic medication and indication pairs is quite wide and deep. Addressing these and other concerns in a thoughtful manner positions psychedelics not as a panacea but another potential treatment option for targeted mental health and substance use disorders and other indications.

3. SHARE WORK AT SIMILAR INSTITUTIONS

- Share examples of courses currently offered at similarly situated institutions. Where possible, share data on student enrollment and student satisfaction so that colleagues may better appreciate demand for such curriculum.
- Depending on availability, share curriculum, syllabi, press releases, newspaper articles, and other materials from courses at similar institutions to

help paint a specific picture of what such coursework could look like.

- Remind colleagues that psychedelics are a surging area of research. Institutions that fail to meet the demand for education in this area may risk losing students and faculty in psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, and other areas who have an interest in this body of work.

4. DEVELOP A VALUE PROPOSITION

- Every new endeavor requires an investment—time, personnel, effort, and finances. Institutions need to know that this investment will yield a return.
- Potential instructors should be prepared to make a value argument, specific to their home institution, that will resonate. In addition to the fundamental purpose of meeting student need, this value proposition could include student recruitment, faculty recruitment, increased departmental budgets, future NIH dollars, organizational prestige, private funding opportunities, and media coverage.



Building a Teaching Cohort

Many instructors see student demand and are interested in introducing psychedelic therapy curriculum, but do not have a comprehensive background in the topic themselves. Others have this comprehensive background but need to build a larger cohort of prepared colleagues to develop and deliver meaningful coursework. How do individuals gain sufficient foundational knowledge to become instructors?

1. CONFERENCES

- Conferences are one avenue for instructors to expand their knowledge of psychedelics. The psychedelic field hosts multiple conferences per year that offer a range of educational opportunities. While not all sessions may appeal to academic instructors, some will include discussions of current research, public policy questions, harm reduction, specific populations like BIPOC, veterans, or LGBTQ+ individuals, specific diagnoses like PTSD, and more. They may provide a useful introduction to the field for instructors looking for additional background.

- Conferences also offer attendees the opportunity to network with like-minded individuals who may serve as a resource.
- Blossom Analysis maintains a database of conferences available at: blossomanalysis.com/events

2. STAND-ALONE PROGRAMS

- Individuals can also build their psychedelic therapy education via stand-alone programs offered by companies and universities. Many of these programs were founded by clinicians with experience in psychedelic research and offer foundational education in the elements of psychedelic-assisted therapy. Such supplementary learning is similar to continuing studies in areas such as cognitive behavioral therapy, child and family therapy, or addiction. Unfortunately, many of these programs can be costly.

3. CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

- Hands-on clinical experience delivering psychedelic-assisted therapy provides potential instructors with a dynamic level of understanding about the model of care. Today, this experience is available only through very limited clinical trial sites or ketamine-assisted psychotherapy clinics (which offer relevant, though not identical, clinical experience).

Building Momentum

After these initial actions, potential instructors may receive the green light to take a step towards introducing psychedelic therapy coursework. Any next small step – sharing materials, socializing the idea, making a presentation – will be better received by an audience prepared to hear the information.

1. BUILD A TEAM

- Introducing psychedelic therapy coursework will be less burdensome if done in a cohort of instructors rather than alone. Find colleagues to join in the work.
- Identify tenured or tenure-track professors, inside or outside of your area of expertise, to add legitimacy and weight to the effort.
- When possible, reach across disciplines to find teaching colleagues. Psychedelic therapy presents a good opportunity to increase cross-pollination between departments, which can enhance the richness of perspectives and may be appealing to administrators.
- Give a talk on psychedelics at a department or school lecture or speaker series or invite a colleague from another institution to give such a talk. These engagements help enhance exposure to the material, socialize the notion of introducing such curriculum, and identify potentially interested colleagues among attendees.

→ Locate individuals within or connected to your institution involved in psychedelic research to interview, guest lecture, provide insight on course materials, or otherwise collaborate with course development or curriculum building. These relationships may also prove useful if instructors build practicum opportunities in the future.

2. LISTEN FOR CONCERNS

- Nearly as important as identifying collaborators is engaging those who may be skeptical and uncertain of an effort to introduce psychedelic therapy curriculum. Engage these colleagues early and often, listening to their concerns with understanding and sympathy.
- Be open to compromise with colleagues who express skepticism, such as devoting a section of the course to addressing the risks of psychedelic therapy. Be humble and conciliatory, incorporating their points of view.
- Uncertain colleagues can be comforted and engaged using the strategies described above: using the language of science and safety, introducing a strong value proposition, and sharing the progress made at other institutions.

3. STUDENT ENROLLMENT

- Publicize the course in related schools within the institution, so that all interested students can learn about the opportunity.
- As registration begins, ask the registrar to keep a waitlist, if necessary. A significant waitlist demonstrates student interest and may justify expanding the number of sections of the course offered, or the number of credits/weeks allowed.

Building Curriculum Materials

Contributors to this toolkit were the first movers on introducing psychedelic therapy education at large academic institutions. They built curriculum from scratch, pulling materials together from a variety of sources and experiences. Fortunately, the next generation of instructors may benefit from the work of these early endeavors.

1. DON'T START FROM SCRATCH:

- Contributors to this toolkit have already built six programs in psychedelic therapy, amounting to over 10 distinct, didactic courses. Most of their work is available for sharing, with appropriate credit, and many are intentionally creating open-source curriculum.
- Existing coursework can offer a foundation for any instructor seeking to develop course material for their own institution and will allow future instructors to adapt pieces from various sources to match the needs and interests of their institution and students.

Finding Additional Support

Introducing new coursework at a large academic institution can be a challenging task, and even this toolkit may leave potential instructors with additional questions and hurdles.

1. FIND A MENTOR

- Find an instructor who has already introduced new coursework – in psychedelic therapy or another field – and learn from their experience. A person at the same institution can offer clues and insights specific to the workings of the institution.
- Mentors from other parts of academia can be found at conferences or other professional meetings. Alternatively – or additively – contributors to this toolkit are eager and willing to share their experiences and expertise specific to psychedelic therapy coursework.

About BrainFutures

BrainFutures is a national non-profit dedicated to accelerating the equitable access of effective, evidence-based, neuroscientific interventions that enhance mental health and wellbeing. We are a trusted collaborator and educator creating resources for insurers, policymakers, and providers to help inform decisions on insurance reimbursement, infrastructure, and workforce training.

Our Work in Psychedelic Therapy & Supporting the Field

In 2021, BrainFutures launched a three-part issue brief series and coalition-building effort focused on psychedelic therapy. BrainFutures has released three reports and an accompanying mini-brief in hopes of laying an unbiased foundation for the regulatory and reimbursement work needed in the field.

- [*Psychedelic Medicine: A Review of Clinical Research for a Class of Rapidly Emerging Behavioral Health Interventions*](#)
- [*Expediting Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy Adoption in Clinical Settings*](#)
- [*An Expert-Informed Introduction to the Elements of Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy*](#)
- [*The Future of the Field \(Mini-Brief\)*](#)

In 2023, BrainFutures released a medical coding guide describing a reimbursement strategy to enable psychedelic therapy providers to receive equitable reimbursement from payers for these services as well as a white paper describing current legal access models for psychedelics in the US. We also collaborated with the American Psychedelic Practitioners Association to copublish the first set of guidelines for mental health providers on the practice of psychedelic therapy, informed by existing clinical research and expert consensus.

BrainFutures' 2024 brief offers insights on the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA) and how this law could pave the way for comprehensive insurance coverage and equitable access to psychedelic therapy for those who stand to benefit.

- [*A Guide to CPT and HCPCS Codes for Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy*](#)
- [*Psychedelic Access Pathways: Differentiating Medical, Wellness, and Religious Access to Psychedelics*](#)
- [*Professional Practice Guidelines for Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy*](#)
- [*A Path Toward Parity: Ensuring Equitable Access to Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy*](#)

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Integrating Psychedelic Coursework into Higher Education: A Toolkit for Academic Leaders is a production of BrainFutures, Inc. Workgroup meeting facilitation and writing support were provided by the Rockingstone Group, LLC (Jordanna Davis, MPP, and Jacqueline Lampert, MPP) and overseen by BrainFutures, Inc.

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Suggested Citation:

Davis, J., & Lampert, J. (Rockingstone Group). (2024, October). Integrating Psychedelic Coursework into Higher Education: A Toolkit for Academic Leaders. Glastra, J., Harbin, H., LaDou, A., McGarry, E., & McQuillan, B. (Eds). BrainFutures. <https://www.brainfutures.org/mental-health-treatment/future-of-psychedelic-medicine-therapy-education>

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