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Can We Flourish?

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CONNECTING

Can We Flourish?

Christy I. Wenger

Teachers and students alike can agree on one shared truth of this past academic year: it was tough. Even though many of us found our way back into classrooms, sometimes masked and sometimes not, Covid continued to present new hurdles to our tried-and-true active teaching methods. Students struggled to keep up with the social and emotional demands of the face-to-face classroom after so many pandemic interruptions over the past two years, and teachers struggled to foster engagement and make meaningful learning gains in their classes. I met weekly with the instructors in my writing program to talk through classroom engagement and to brainstorm new ways to keep our students participating, learning, and simply just showing up for class. Just about every campus-wide workshop I held through my Center for Teaching and Learning focused in some way on getting students engaged in class and involved in their learning. Inevitably, these pedagogical discussions of our classrooms gave way to connected conversations about the emotional state of those in attendance, faculty and staff who were not only carrying the burden of increased emotional labor through the pandemic as teachers but also as sisters, brothers, spouses, and more. The consensus was clear: no one on campus was flourishing.

The widespread burnout and low morale that has transformed higher education culture has been dubbed the “great disengagement” by many who have attempted to account for the somewhat lower percentage of job turnover in higher education but the overwhelming fracture in belonging and community on university campuses across the nation (Lubell; Fea). Faculty may be remaining in their jobs (in part because of the abysmal academic job market) but they are discontent and distant. Unlike in other sectors, “faculty members are not walking away in droves, but they are waving goodbye to norms and systems that prevailed in the past,” says Kevin McClure and Alyssa Hicklin Fryar in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article. We could view McClure and Fryar’s statement with caution and wonder how higher education could possibly perform its mission without the boundless passion of its professoriate to tend to the needs of our increasingly academically malnourished students. Faculty may well be examples of the phenomenon of “quiet quitting” which has been much-discussed of late. According to NPR, “Quiet quitters do only the work assigned and nothing more” (Kilpatrick). Quiet quitters aren’t flourishing, and they do not see the value in going above and beyond the letter of their positions.

We could use these stories as a sign that the sky is indeed falling. Or we might use these observations as an opportunity to question the norms that have prevailed in higher education that are simply no longer tenable; we might use it to create new systems that work better for more of us. Quiet quitting and the great disengagement may be signs that we need to examine ways to create healthier work-life boundaries and a larger indication that the norms and systems that prevailed in higher education prior to Covid will not suffice as we move into a world marked by endemic Covid. We might see them as a call to create a culture better committed to flourishing and wellbeing.

We know that some of those norms and systems that prevailed in higher education were not serving our teachers, our staff, or our students. Covid itself exposed long-held distrust against distance learning. My residential, regional university, which prides itself on small class sizes and intimate instructor-student relationships, is an illustrative case. During the worst of Covid, we transitioned to emergency remote teaching like everyone else and celebrated our success. But as emergency remote teaching gave way to more thoughtful and prepared discussions of distance learning, as we were called upon to create a measured response instead of a knee-jerk reaction to Covid, the celebrations gave way to entrenchments. Face-to-face teaching is such a deeply rooted norm at my institution that higher administration assumed it should and could return to its pre-Covid level of offering less than ten percent of courses online this past academic year even while Covid still raged our campus and community outbreaks were common. Our students rebelled, and some faculty who discovered immeasurable benefits of teaching online dug in. In the end, we ran closer to thirty percent of courses online. As a campus leader of online education efforts at my university, the rapid growth of remote leaning options and infrastructure is one of the most exciting of Covid outcomes for me though my excitement is certainly not shared by all.

Covid didn't create all of our problems in higher education, but it did certainly help to make visible where our systems needed changing and norms needed addressing. In my career as an academic, I've been committed to considering how higher education has promoted *eudaimonia*, Aristotle's term for flourishing, a happiness based in long-lasting well-being and not a fleeting emotion. Too many institutions have neglected to create an environment where individuals can flourish, a place where a commitment to well-being remains a feature. My academic research and labor has centered on encouraging well-being in the academic workplace by intervening in the status quo and by inventing different creative environments in which flourishing can take place. Sometimes sustaining well-being is about enabling better work/life boundaries for our faculty and staff, and sometimes it is about embracing an online teaching environment that enables accessibility to more students, especially non-traditional and rural.

I read this edition of "Connecting" through the lens of well-being and encourage others to as well. To figure out how we claim a culture of flourishing, we need not only to address the phenomenon of disengagement but to also look more deeply at our existing successes as well as the failed norms and systems that need revising to promote well-being. Maybe it is time to take another look at passion, as Joanna Smitherman Trapp does in her opening piece. Smitherman Trapp finds hope in her discovery that passion may well indeed be the catalyst for career engagement, even in our current cultural climate that is hostile to the profession. Passion for teaching is a norm Smitherman Trapp finds worth redeeming. Jamey Gallagher too investigates the stakes of passion for teachers. He urges readers to rediscover passion by upending norms and by embracing the nontraditional: non-traditional ways of teaching; non-traditional students; and non-traditional deadlines. Gallagher reminds us that if we are looking for passion in our classes and from our students and teachers and cannot find it, perhaps we are defining it too narrowly or looking in the wrong places; it is our norms that need addressing not the emotional investments of our students and teachers. Naomi Gades rounds out our section with two poems that reconsider the process and value of two of our profession's

most emotionally laborious tasks: grading and applying for positions. We may not know where Covid will take us this academic year, but one valuable practice we can continue together is investigating and advocating for what will make us flourish together.

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