

What Are We Fighting For? Ending Crisis Thinking to Consider the Future of Higher Education

Melanie Shell-Weiss*
Laurence José
Grand Valley State University

Introduction

No one wishes for a crisis, even though it may sometimes work to highlight shortcomings that otherwise went unnoticed, or at least were conveniently ignored. The way COVID-19 continues to affect higher education is no different. It has amplified inequity and disparities among students. It also brought to light a growing rift between teachers and administrators with the development of two distinct narratives and perspectives on what the current crisis means and requires. While we understand each university is different and leaders are facing impossible decisions, we hope our words here will emphasize the urgency for coming together to create a future for higher education that aligns with shared values of equity, inclusion, and access.

In this paper, we interrogate the narrative that has developed over the last two years with the goal of using our own middling positions as a platform from which to appeal to decision-makers within our own university and the myriad others in higher education leadership across the country whose institutions face similar challenges. We make this entreaty as two individuals whose own professional roles leave us with a foot on either side of what feels like a widening cavern between “the administration” and “the faculty.” We are tenured, women faculty in the humanities and social sciences who hold, or have recently held, elected and appointed leadership positions within our institution. Between the two of us, this includes chairing a large academic department and directing more than seven interdisciplinary academic programs, undergraduate and graduate. One of us is now an associate dean. Individually, we have chaired and/or co-chaired a range of university- and college committees, were appointed to different task forces, held multiple elected seats in shared governance, including the Executive Committee of the University Academic Senate before, during, and after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and serve on our college’s leadership council. We are the faculty managers charged with figuring out how to translate policy into practice for the teams of faculty and staff who work with our programs, without any appointing authority and often without a seat at the table where key decisions are made.

* **Corresponding Author:** Melanie Shell-Weiss, Brooks College Dean’s Office, 224 Lake Ontario Hall, One Campus Drive, Allendale, MI 49401. Email: shellm@gvsu.edu.

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Our university does not define our roles - nor that of appointing officers, deans, or vice provosts - as being “administration” (Grand Valley State University 2022). This matters. As Kathy Johnson Bowles recently highlighted in a blog post for *Inside Higher Ed*, the perceived divide between faculty and the administration is often vague and rhetorical. “For some in academia,” she writes, “‘the administration’ is defined as a shadowy, amorphous group of suit-wearing, exorbitantly paid employees...to be vilified for making knuckleheaded, illogical, tone-deaf decision that put the institution at risk, insult the faculty, demoralize the staff, enrage students and underestimate the power of the alumni” (2022). The problem with such caricatures is not only that they are dehumanizing; they also do nothing to pinpoint the real sources of power, authority, and decision-making. Without that precision, there can be no successful action or activism.

Who are we?

How we have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic is, of course, shaped by our own positionalities. As Phillippe Vincent-Lamarre, Cassidy R. Sugimoto, and Vincent Larivière succinctly put it: “We are all in the same storm, but not in the same boat” (n.d.). Our employer, Grand Valley State University (GVSU), is a master’s large, public institution with around 22,000 students, making it one of the biggest providers of undergraduate education in the state of Michigan. We represent two of total 928 women faculty here, making up just less than half (47.4%) of 1,704 total faculty at Grand Valley and 45.2% of the 670 faculty who are tenured. One of us is a full professor. Women at the rank of full professor make up only about a third of those who achieve that rank at our institution (37.6% out of 319 total faculty), a percentage that has declined since 2017 with real numbers also falling within the past year (Grand Valley State University Institutional Analysis 2022).

While we each carry other marginalized identities, as authors we share a great deal in common with a majority of our faculty colleagues: we both identify as being “white” (79.2%). Like many faculty at our institution, we were the first women in our immediate families to graduate from college and/or graduate school. We each came to Grand Valley a little more than ten years ago after amassing significant higher education experience at other national and international institutions, both public and private. For the vast majority of the time we have worked here, we have felt well-supported, forging close, collaborative relationships with faculty and staff colleagues, administrators, and students. Grand Valley is where we hope to continue to advance in our careers, giving back by applying our expertise to the betterment of our institution, not just the profession writ large. Here, too, we represent a majority of our colleagues - or we did as of the 2019-2020 academic year. At the time of the most recent HERI survey in 2019, Grand Valley faculty consistently reported much higher degrees of satisfaction with their working lives than faculty at comparison schools. This included “significantly more positive” responses about relationships with “administration,” relationships with student affairs and institutional support staff, clarity of promotion criteria, and feelings of job security compared to faculty at other large, midwestern publics. Nearly 60% of Grand Valley faculty respondents said they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their prospects for career advancement and institutional advancement, compared to half or just less than half of respondents at peer institutions (Batty 2020).

Our satisfaction with working at GVSU is tied strongly to the ways that the university has expressly supported women faculty and administrative professional (AP) staff. We have directly

benefited from this commitment. For decades, women have occupied many of the most high ranking positions within the university and enjoyed strong representation among all ranks of leadership. Its first woman provost, Gayle Davis, was hired in 2002; she was only the second provost in the university's history. Her two successors are also women. Women hold, or have held, a critical mass of vice presidencies within academic and student affairs and make up the majority of appointing officers. University-level support for women to attend national higher education leadership training programs, formal and informal mentoring programs to support women to advance professionally, and leadership succession planning that makes leadership by and for women and non-male faculty and staff a priority were made part of the fabric of the institution since well before either of us joined the university. To become a tenured woman faculty member at GVSU, then, is also to be reminded of the responsibilities one has to other women, queer, and non-binary colleagues on campus, being attentive to the particular combination of privilege and marginalization that marks our intersectional identities.

Our location in this long line of strong women leaders also compels us to speak up, joining our voices to a larger, national conversation about the impact of COVID on higher education. We need a way forward that does not sacrifice equity. Acknowledging the growing chasms that now divide our campus has never been more important. There is urgency in our appeal. The very life of our institution - and others who face parallel circumstances - depends on it.

A Shared Narrative

In July 2019, Grand Valley welcomed its fifth president, Dr. Philomena Mantella, the first woman to occupy this role. Mantella had previously served as Senior Vice President and CEO of Northeastern University's Lifelong Learning Network where she worked for nearly two decades, and promised to lead Grand Valley to "embrace the opportunities technology brings...touch[ing] thousands of learners of all ages -- those in front of us, and around the globe....shap[ing] education to learning styles that are as numerous as individuals are different" (Mantella 2019). In addition to an emphasis on technological advancement, Mantella revealed an agenda that would increase the institution's national profile and promote a "growth mindset" with respect to enrollments and revenue streams and immediately began creating "accelerator teams" to plan and carry forward ambitious actions in a variety of areas that included K12 charter schools, health care education, and graduate education (Dawes 2019). Many saw this promise as stretching GVSU in new and exciting directions. Still, the primary story that GVSU leadership and faculty alike told about the institution focused on providing an accessible, high-touch, high quality educational experience to students across West Michigan. Faculty saw themselves as central characters and drivers within this plot line even while they disagreed with each other, and the university's leadership, about some of its finer points. There was always some narrative tension. But fundamentally, the majority of actors recognized they were reading from the same script and occupying parallel or complementary roles.

Roughly nine months later, a state-level Executive Order compelled all Michigan schools to close their doors and move to fully remote instruction within days due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the face of this new and unprecedented situation, President Mantella wrote in an op-ed piece, published in April, "Let's move from remote and distance delivery of education to intentionally shaped high-engagement online learning, virtual experiences and forms of hybrid learning that recognize as essential what we are all longing for today: community and connection" (Mantella

2020). Her views aligned with an overwhelming majority of presidents who took a similar stance nationally. According to Hanover Research's 2021 Survey of College and University Presidents, nearly 80% of the 433 individuals surveyed from public, private nonprofit, and for-profit institutions expressed even more confidence in their institution's financial stability as a result of the pandemic with many citing specific innovations around technology, finances, and campus operations to back up their optimism (Lederman 2021).

Most Grand Valley faculty, staff, and students did not view Winter 2020 as a time of innovative disruption so much as a period of mounting costs: educational quality, intellectual community, health and well-being of faculty, staff, and students, racial and gender equity among them. Some, like philosophy professor Andrew Spear who published a swift response to Mantella's op-ed in early May 2020, understood the call for innovation as a push for online learning as a panacea (Spear 2020). Others at Grand Valley, as at institutions nationally, expressed fears that the pandemic could become a convenient mechanism for pushing through a variety of cost-cutting measures and policies that had previously been blocked because they were seen as running against long-held institutional values. It is this type of thinking that Anna Kornbluh described as "Never let a crisis go to waste," in her much cited, "Academe's Coronavirus Shock Doctrine" (Kornbluh 2020).

Still, despite the tensions between these perspectives, the core issues were not new (Carlson and Gardner 2020). Grand Valley had long maintained a network of regional campuses across the state and several departments had been early adopters of online and hybrid learning, winning national awards for outstanding adult learning and accelerated online programs. Yet many faculty teaching in traditional disciplines were skeptical about online learning and preferred working with on-campus, FTIAC students. Shrinking budgets, course caps, and faculty salaries were also difficult topics. Nevertheless, most senior faculty could recite the reasoning that drove Grand Valley's budgetary decision-making and institutional history by heart. Although the Grand Valley's financial stability was A1, senior leadership had warned of mounting budget concerns for at least a decade, tied primarily to projected declines in FTIAC enrollments resulting from Michigan's decades-long population decline, sometimes described nationally as the "demographic cliff" (Feather 2020; Guarino 2021). A drop-off in enrollments would mean less in tuition revenue, a lifeblood for the university. One of the newer, large publics in the state of Michigan, Grand Valley historically has received far less in state appropriations than its older or better politically connected cousins (Hodge 2015). Nor has it generated significant revenue through patents or external contracts like more heavily research-focused universities. In essence, disagreements about budgets and online learning were longstanding but complicated with a variety of competing viewpoints among, not just between, faculty and administrators.

Faculty were often nearly as likely as those in administrative leadership to propose ways to streamline academic budgets or cost-saving measures that could serve as compromise solutions, viewing those in leadership as well-intentioned and sharing many compatible values with themselves. Administrators, in turn, celebrated faculty as teacher-scholars, supported in this work through a host of institutional efforts that included robust internal funding initiatives to incentivize sustainable scholarly and creative efforts and innovative, highest quality teaching. Tuition and living expenses for students - whether on campus or through a robust array of study abroad opportunities - were kept as low as possible, recognizing the economic vulnerability of

the institution's heavily first-generation-to-college student body. Good value liberal education was a lifeblood that required little internal discussion or justification.

The tradition of shared governance at Grand Valley was equally robust, with faculty leadership and administrators working mostly hand-in-glove with one another through the University Academic Senate and its various standing committees. When problems arose, they were often resolved interpersonally, by picking up a phone or walking across campus. The prevailing institutional culture was strongly collaborative and conflict averse.

A shared script about institutional values and ways of working still held together despite these mounting tensions. Through the first months of the pandemic in Winter 2020, then, most teaching faculty responded not by questioning leaders' decision-making but by "suck[ing] it up, [doing] the hard work, and put[ting] in the time that it took," to use a phrase from Andrew Spear's May 2020 response, moving all instruction remote, supporting students in crisis, and trying to salvage whatever learning was possible through the end of Winter 2020. This prevailing view of shared struggle persisted into the first months of Spring, even as the prediction of significant budget cuts became a reality. Already exhausted by renewed waves of last-minute planning to rework the scores of experiential and community-based learning required by most of the university academic programs, as well as all spring/summer courses university-wide as stay-at-home orders were extended, faculty and staff kept their heads down, focused on doing the needful.

Most Grand Valley faculty are employed on nine-month contracts and paid from August-April. Unlike in past years where, after annual contracts had ended faculty tended to focus full-time on their scholarship or sought paid overload to do a little additional summer teaching, through Spring-Summer 2020, dozens of faculty volunteered to serve on committees and working groups unpaid in order to support re-opening the university's main campuses and plan for a financially difficult fall semester. Others readily joined the university's racial equity efforts, announced by President Mantella in the wake of large-scale demonstrations protesting police brutality and riots that rocked the Grand Rapids metropolitan area through May and June -- bringing to campus work many had long been performing off campus as part of community-based organizations. Teaching faculty were encouraged to devote time to professional development activities to supporting online learning prior to fall start-up. Unit heads and professional support staff busied themselves reworking fall and winter class schedules to support social distancing. Administrative leaders also saw their working hours and responsibilities balloon that spring and summer, sometimes stretching well beyond previous understandings of their job descriptions. Assembling an internal "Virus Action Team," physically reworking the campus to support social distancing, developing large-scale testing and tracking systems, and reworking both internal and external communication mechanisms were just a few examples.

The Narrative Splits

It was at this point when everyone was working their hardest, that the institutional narrative describing Grand Valley's pandemic response began to splinter, ultimately splitting in two by late August 2020. On May 1, President Mantella convened a Town Hall for incoming students and their families in which she announced that the university would return to face-to-face learning in August (Barnes 2020). No public mention was made of the university's fiscal worries. Internally, however, fed by a great deal of national press around similar issues at other

universities, many GVSU faculty speculated that the decision to begin Fall Semester face-to-face was directly tied to fears that a remote start would negatively impact enrollments, resulting in substantial job losses for faculty and staff (Jaschik 2020). Meanwhile, Grand Valley leadership increased expenditures in a number of strategic and/or new essential areas: creating multiple new, full-time upper level administrative positions to support digital infrastructure, adult learning, and enrollment development, building physical infrastructure necessary to support a return to face-to-face learning with social distancing, hiring external consultants to help design a COVID surveillance, tracking, and testing plan, run a COVID call center, and ultimately create its own surveillance testing laboratory. Mirroring patterns nation-wide, some essential workers in areas like food-service and facilities at Grand Valley were laid off or let go (Barnes 2020; Carlson and Gardner 2020).

For faculty, the greatest upset came when in May they were told that tenure-line faculty teaching loads would be increased for the 2020-2021 academic year and that a majority of sabbaticals which had previously been approved would be delayed for one year. As at other universities around the country, full-time faculty and staff were also told that they would need to apply to be able to work remotely and have their cases evaluated individually, even if they were already scheduled to teach fully online (Pettit 2020). These forms required employees to make specific health declarations about COVID-19 related risk factors that would be reviewed by deans and unit heads or supervisors. Compared to the types of large-scale demonstrations and lawsuits that accompanied similar announcements at places like Northern Arizona University, University of North Carolina, or Ohio State University, to name just a few, conditions at Grand Valley looked relatively calm (Marris 2020). But behind closed doors, in social media, and in shared governance settings, tension flared.

Teaching face-to-face safely required either large-scale changes to campus classrooms or greatly reduced class sizes to keep students and faculty at least six feet apart. Faculty raised a host of concerns about how they would adapt their pedagogies to these conditions. For an institution that prided itself on smaller, more intimate classroom spaces focused heavily on discussion-based, high impact learning practices, the socially distanced settings imposed by the pandemic greatly limited students' ability to work in small groups or engage in most types of active learning. Faculty also questioned the logic of how the university could expect significant financial savings if class sizes were also dramatically reduced to meet face-to-face social distancing capacities - resulting in the need to increase section offerings if enrollments did not decline. They also questioned the administration's continued push to maximize face-to-face instruction even as community numbers of COVID infections continued to rise county-wide (Frick 2020).

While on the ground, then, there were still pockets where the complexities of large-scale responses were acknowledged on all sides, by late August, the loudest narratives had clearly divided into two, becoming so bifurcated that they were essentially incompatible. To some, most publicly the senior leadership team, the six months from when the pandemic first forced the university to shutter its doors to the start of Fall 2020 semester, was a time of disruptive innovation, persistence in the face of difficulty, and ultimately of creativity and resilience winning the day. For others, including at least one particularly vocal group of faculty, it seemed that university leadership had ultimately committed itself to chasing dollars in the form of enrollments, power, and control over principles of shared governance, intellect, quality

pedagogy, and even human life and well-being. Both narratives largely ignored staff interests, including significant numbers of administrative professionals (AP) like those in advising, residence life, and admissions, as well as others in housing, dining, and facilities, to name just a few (Cohn 2021; Kim 2020; Selingo 2020).

As these bifurcated narratives became more entrenched, dialogue across roles and lines of responsibility petered out, in some cases quite publicly. Distrust among and between individuals in both camps ballooned. At the same time, attempts to lump all administrators or all faculty or all staff into one narrative camp or another masked a host of micro- and macro-level decisions and disagreements. Where at other universities both in Michigan and nation-wide, faculty brought “no confidence” votes against their presidents or on-campus tensions boiled over into the national spotlight, by the time Fall Semester 2020 commenced, nearly all of Grand Valley’s faculty and those staff who had not been furloughed or chose early retirement quietly returned to work -- amassing ever more hours, battling illness and fatigue, telling themselves that the most important thing was to put students first (Burke 2020; Pettit 2020). Those in administrative leadership positions kept working, following up what for many had already been one of the most intellectually, emotionally, and physically exhausting periods in their professional lives.

Classes began as scheduled on August 31, 2020. The number of COVID positive cases began climbing almost immediately (Managan 2020). Two weeks later, the county health department issued an emergency stay-at-home order for all Grand Valley students living on the Allendale Township main campus (Frick 2020). The order cited the significant uptick in COVID cases among Grand Valley students and staff as well as the impact of spread to local families and businesses across the county (Hubler and Hartocollis 2020). As Nick Moran, editor-in-chief of Grand Valley’s student paper, told the *New York Times*, for many students the order “felt like an eternity” at best (Reporting Live 2020). Hundreds of students were put into quarantine or isolation in both on campus and near off campus housing - in some cases multiple times, as successive waves of COVID exposures shut down sororities and fraternities, stopped athletic practice, and otherwise disrupted students’ ability to do much on campus other than log onto computers for classes and remain in their dormitories or apartments. For others, the experience of one disruption after another though fall semester took a major toll on students’ mental health, with an unprecedented number of students struggling with anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. County officials issued a second order soon after the first, keeping students in place through mid-October. After a few weeks’ respite, cases began rising again both on campus and regionally (Frick 2020). On November 15, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services issued an order suspending face-to-face learning two weeks earlier than the university had planned (Gordon 2020).

The remainder of the 2020-2021 academic year passed for many in a sepia toned haze. Eighty-five percent of Grand Valley’s courses remained online through Winter 2021, with the campus often feeling like a washed out version of itself. Then came the successive waves of resignations, lay-offs, and early retirements (Kelderman 2020). Although the university has not made numbers publicly available, in all colleges across campus, faculty, staff, directors, and deans can easily list scores of GVSU employees who left for other jobs. This also included many in leadership. At the same time, the university also created a significant number of new administrative professional

and Executive Administrative Professional (EAP) positions in areas including student life, enrollment, and lifetime learning.

A breakdown of resignations and retirements by sex and/or ethnicity was not available at the time of this writing. But the university's "Diversity Dashboard" provides a glimpse into these larger trends: among executive and administrative professionals at the university, the percentage of individuals of color increased by less than 1/100th of a percent while the overall number of AP/EAPs declined by more than 6% between 2019 and 2021. The percentage of female AP/EAPs declined by .3% over that same period while the overall number of AP/EAPS declined by just over 4%. Among tenure-line faculty, the percentage of men rose from 51.7% to 52.8% even as the overall number of faculty declined by nearly 5%. The percentage of white faculty remained the same even as the total number of tenure-line faculty declined by 6%. These numbers would appear to indicate that women made up the majority of the executive and administrative professionals and tenure-line faculty who left the university since the start of the pandemic, with little real increase in the overall number of non-white AP/EAPs or faculty.

In short, then, by the start of Fall 2021, there was a strong perception among many faculty and staff that the number of highly paid administrators had grown while faculty and staff on the frontlines of directly serving students and supporting essential campus operations had shrunk. As faculty and students returned to launch the 2021-2022 academic year, frustration over breakdowns in basic university functions were amplified by other obvious labor shortages in student employment, housing and dining. In a letter sent to members of the GVSU community in early September following widespread criticism on social media about the lack of available dining options, long lines, and similar barriers to basic on-campus services, university leadership noted that they had 30 full-time job openings (out of about 100 total positions) and 502 vacant student employee positions in campus dining (Lovern 2021).

Elsewhere across Michigan, and nation-wide, other public universities faced similar challenges (Gardner 2021; George Washington University 2021). GVSU responded by offering significant bonuses to students who stayed in on-campus positions through the academic year and boosted hourly pay. This, too, was reflective of larger state-wide and national trends, where starting wages at light industrial, warehouse, general labor, and other semi-skilled positions jumped by more than 42% between Fall 2021 and Winter 2022, contributing to inflation and increasing other costs, including with student tuition, housing, and dining (Sanchez 2022). As far as the waves of resignations among GVSU's faculty and AP staff members, senior leadership largely gestured to national trends such as those cited by *Inside Higher Education* - which noted that well over half of college provosts said that faculty were leaving their institutions at higher or significantly higher rates than previously (Flaherty 2022). Among higher education employees more generally, according to a 2022 survey taken by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, more than half of employees working in higher education said they were likely to leave their current jobs within the next year, citing a desire for better pay, more flexible hours, and greater possibilities for remote work (Bauer-Wolf 2022).

Looking back: from togetherness to 'the great resignation'

While the specifics may vary, what we have seen at Grand Valley over the past two years reflects a larger, national story. The crisis brought on by COVID-19 first elicited a sense of solidarity and

desire to all work together. After the March 2020 disruption that shuttered physical campuses nationally and what could best be described as operating in triage mode to finish the semester, educators quickly proposed new, bold solutions for adapting teaching practices, often reinventing our systems and ways of operating. Innovating together in order to privilege teaching seemed to be a common goal. For example, as early as in April 2020, Rebecca Barrett-Fox's essay, "A plan for saving the fall semester" shared a compelling vision for Fall 2020 where all resources would be (re)directed to support faculty and students. On May 11, 2020, Cathy Davidson reminded administrators and instructors alike that online teaching in these extraordinary times required an approach focused not on technology but rather on students, ways to help them regain agency, and move beyond trauma. In a powerful conclusion, she wrote:

We need to be human first, professor second. We need to design as humans for humans in a global crisis. We need to design our courses with the awareness of pain, dislocation, uncertainty, and trauma now central to all our lives. It's a lot to ask. It is the one and only essential as we design our courses for this disrupted fall.

In their June 2020 essay, "Stop bailing and build a better boat," Kate Brennan and Kristen Cerelli called on universities to account for the current challenges by innovating and letting go of habits that lead us to retrofit current models instead of building anew. Though different, what these essays all shared in common was a refusal of business-as-usual solutions and a resolute attention to the fact that universities are and must be spaces designed for learning and teaching. In other words, they each powerfully argue that what was happening in the classroom should inform the design of the system supporting it, not the other way around.

As at our home institution, unfortunately the response at most colleges and universities was primarily reactive. Faculty across the country watched anxiously through summer 2020 as schools announced one reopening plan after another, often moving from a push to fully return students, faculty, and staff to face-to-face learning toward increasingly online models. They continued to watch, advocate, and frantically adapt through the 2020–2021 rollercoaster of an academic year with calls to embrace a "new normal" and return to full on-campus operations even as the pandemic raged.

The 2021–2022 academic year was hailed as a turning point with a "return to the full experience campus offers" (Barnes 2021). However, the body of the institution had not begun to recover from wounds that a vaccine alone could not address. The severity of these injuries became starkly clear in the first limping, lurching weeks of Fall 2021. Reductions in essential areas like housing, dining, and facilities management made it difficult for those on campus to meet basic needs with hour-long lines, traffic snags, supply shortages, and kindred infrastructure issues greeting those who returned to campus. Recruiting for clerical and technical positions was challenging. Student absenteeism reached an all-time high. Enrollments continued to decline. Staff and faculty morale reached an all-time low. In addition to the resignation of faculty and executive administrative staff who found other opportunities, early retirements further shrunk the ranks of experienced faculty and staff, dulling institutional memory, and feeding insecurity and grief among those who remained. While the particulars may differ, what we have experienced at our home institution represents what has played out at many colleges and universities nationwide. As the much-cited 2020 *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey of faculty showed, 35% of

faculty nationally are considering a change of career, 31% are considering a change of role, and 38% are considering early or not previously planned retirement. “The era of the great resignation” became a descriptor for current times in higher education (Shroeder 2021). These conditions are not sustainable. Our institution and the larger communities who rely on us deserve better, however much we may be struggling right alongside our regional and national peers.

At the heart of the matter: crisis or opportunity?

We are not naive enough to think that these two narratives are mutually exclusive — one focused on revenue generation, embracing change, and innovation, the other on scarcity, exhaustion, and loss. Attention to financial stewardship does not inherently mean a lack of focus on teaching and learning. Similarly, posing teaching and learning as the premise does not mean ignoring budgetary realities. What we caution against is losing sight of what should be the guiding focus of institutions like ours: meeting the needs of the communities who rely on us. This is one part about ensuring that those who want and need it have access to high quality, higher education. It should also be about longevity: not just getting students in the door but retaining them to successful graduation and beyond while also cultivating a committed workforce of employees who see their current and future well-being reflected in the success of the institution.

If we forget that expanding access to high quality teaching and learning are the heart of public education, the decisions we make now may well inflict long-term harm. In medicine, when the heart is in danger, all efforts are directed toward saving it. These steps are taken even if that means losing something else, or at least delaying care for another part of the body. Why? Because without the heart, all is lost. There is no sense in saving a kidney if the heart fails in the end. This is not to say the heart is the only essential organ. But if the heart quits, all other vital organs will ultimately fail and the patient will die.

From early in the pandemic, specialists from a wide range of fields began sounding alarms, noting that academic workload increases risk irreparably setting back achievements by women and faculty of color. In one of the first published recommendations, Leslie D. Gonzales and Kimberly A. Griffin called on higher education systems to not “let go of equity” (2020). They appealed for colleges and universities to “acknowledge and affirm a slow-down” in research productivity to “center faculty learning in the evaluation of teaching.” Reasserting the central value of teaching and learning is what set these recommendations apart from others that proposed remediation primarily based on temporarily scaling back scholarly expectations or extending tenure clocks. By December 2020, more than 50 scholarly societies had endorsed calls to temporarily adjust review and reappointment processes for tenure line and contingent faculty. These measures underscored the disproportionate burden of care work born by women — particularly women of color — within their universities. Even though one recent study called into question whether the pandemic ultimately compromised women’s scholarly productivity (Jemielniak, Ślawska, and Wilamowski 2022), there is broad consensus that the pandemic amplified gendered inequalities with women reporting far greater working hours, greater volumes of care work in their classrooms and at home, and kindred responsibilities that have long gone unrecognized and under-valued within professional structures. This has been documented in the United States and Western Europe and has been even more pronounced across the Global South (Regulska and Lin 2022).

Universities need faculty and staff who are committed to care work because ultimately it makes the biggest difference for students. As Melissa Ezarik noted in a recent piece for *Inside Higher Ed*, now more than ever, students cite personal connections to faculty as one of the most important factors in how satisfied they are with their college experience. “Many students want more from professors than content knowledge,” she writes. “Over half want introductions to people working in fields of interest or advice on choosing a career direction, while nearly half want help landing an internship or first job or for instructors to listen to them about personal issues” (Ezarik 2022). Students also catch on quickly when university systems become heavily impersonal, or infrastructure breaks down. Staying competitive in higher education is maximized when students perceive high quality teaching, timely and useful feedback is provided by instructors, teaching styles of instructors are engaging, learning experiences are rewarding, and class sizes are kept smaller. These elements have been shown to be every bit if not more important as easy access to student services, level of infrastructure support provided by an institution, and facilities such as classroom spaces, leisure and sports facilities, IT facilities, and study areas (Wong and Chapman 2022).

Recognizing how the choices made by colleges and universities throughout the pandemic have grown gendered divides is thus critical. This inequity does not just impact working mothers or result from changing factors within women’s personal lives; it is directly tied to the ways that women’s work remains gendered within the academy. As Kirsty Duncanson, Natasha Weira, and their co-researchers recently documented in a study of Australian research institutions, before the pandemic, female, queer, and non-binary researchers were more likely to cite resource constraints and disproportionately high teaching and mentoring responsibilities as constraints impacting their ability to research and write compared to male-identified colleagues. With the shift to predominantly online teaching and greater service expectations, non-male faculty reported routinely working 50 or more hours each week, including through many nights and weekends owing primarily to their being “employed in the teaching-heavy, casualized levels of the academic hierarchy” (Duncanson et al. 2020). Studies conducted in the United States highlight similar patterns, amplified by institutional choices made by university administrators.

Women’s presence in key leadership areas is also not itself enough to guarantee that a working environment is truly supportive of gender equity. Fuller measures include women’s representation among the tenured professorate across all disciplines as well as in areas of leadership and fields like technology, data analytics, and finance where women are much less likely to be represented or given a direct hand in upper-level decision-making (Rosa and Clavero 2022). Other scholars have noted the extent that universities may rightly be considered “women serving institutions” given that female and non-male students make up the majority of college students in the United States (Ahluwalia and Riemer 2022). At Grand Valley, women make up 56% of entering transfer students and 64% of entering FTIACs, percentages that have been steadily increasing over the last several years (GVSU Institutional Analysis, Incoming Class Profiles, 2019-2021). Access to childcare support for students, faculty, staff, and administrators and flexible work options are additional steps institutions may take to ensure that they are indeed meeting the baseline needs of their largest constituencies. But we also must protect against going backward: ensuring that harassment and bullying behavior against women does not reassert itself in our workplaces, actively addressing violence against women and non-male identifying members of the campus community, making intersectionality a key part of anti-racist efforts to

more fully support women of color at all levels. Those in leadership must give voice to these efforts, making women's equity a priority in public rhetoric and in day-to-day operations.

These choices also directly compromise racial equity. As at least one university leader put it, we have been overwhelmed by two pandemics: one being COVID-19 and the other, racism. "Scanning the landscape of both pandemics, I cannot help but think that too many of us are plagued by an overabundance of individualism and an inadequate sense of collectivism," wrote Vassar College President, Elizabeth Bradley, in an op-ed published in *Forbes Magazine* (2020). Quoting Audre Lorde, she continued, "Difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark a dialectic. Only then does the necessity of interdependency become unthreatening." Justified by a need for expediency or the practice of divorcing financial decision-making from more collective efforts like shared governance, the process by which academic institutions have made many of their most important decisions in recent years has not been equitable, eroding the trust of faculty, staff, and students.

As in so many other contexts, both public and private, individuals and communities that are already vulnerable are the most likely to become even more vulnerable in a crisis. In a powerful editorial, Shaun Harper recently outlined at least 12 direct, material threats to racial equity posed by the pandemic on college campuses (2020). Among those, were: disproportionately placing essential workers at risk, sending infected students home to vulnerable families and communities, placing black men's football and basketball players at disproportionately higher risk due to players' reliance on scholarships and university's reliance on them to generate revenues, barriers to digital access, off campus housing and food insecurity, and increasingly racialized input and stakeholder feedback amplified by breaches of shared governance. As Harper argued, "seemingly color-blind" decisions about re-opening campuses, budget allocations, and policies that were made primarily by "well-intentioned white institutional actors... have unintended consequences on communities of color." It is not enough for institutions to gesture toward racial equity efforts, appoint committees to study the issues, or rest that work in the hands of select individuals. Racial equity must be directly tied to university budgets, structural and cultural institutional changes, and collective not just individual benefit.

A Way Forward

What have we learned in the past two years? And what must we do differently in the months and years ahead? Here we offer seven specific suggestions targeted to those with the greatest amount of decision-making power within our institutions, those in senior leadership including provosts and presidents.

1. Build trusted relationships with faculty and staff at all levels.

Members of senior leadership would benefit by cultivating more trusted relationships with faculty at all levels as well as with deans and unit heads. While the president, senior leadership team, and provost may hold most of the decision-making power, it is those of us charged with operationalizing those decisions who ultimately shape what form those directives take. Valuing the social capital, local and systemic know-how, and experience of long-time employees (both faculty and staff) is just as important as recruiting faculty and staff who bring fresh perspectives and new ideas. Without local experience, it can be very difficult to get things done. Cultivating broader networks also means administrators benefit from critical faculty "friends" who show

their support by asking difficult questions, giving candid feedback, and ultimately improving communication across all levels of the institution.

Building such honest, trusting relationships not only takes time but can be difficult - all the more so, because of the hierarchies in which we operate and the degree to which COVID has changed our patterns of physical interaction with each other. One approach employs radical listening. The concept of “radical listening” was first coined by Joseph Kinchloe in the early 2000s and has been employed as a form of critical pedagogy and social justice engagement for decades. It refers to a disciplined way of hearing that suspends judgment and questioning when listening as a way of valuing collective knowledge and implementing community-designed solutions. It is the opposite of a defensive posture (Kinchloe 2005). It requires setting aside the more siloed, hierarchies of specialization which govern so much of what we do and say within academe. It also means dispensing with clear answers, dichotomies, singular explanations, and positivity - all trappings that dominate the culture of academic leadership and managerial strategy. Radical listening recognizes that getting people to honestly share what they need or want must go beyond feedback surveys and Town Halls; truly engaging in radical listening means building trust — including with those who may have the greatest number of reasons not to trust the radical listener in the first place.

What does this look like in practice? It can be loud, messy, and vulnerable. At the same time, it is equally loving and practical, drawing people in and building real connections with each other that point a way forward. At its best, it is the epitome of good leadership because it results in honest feedback that empowers leaders to move their organizations forward. Three approaches that administrators might consider:

1. Make sure your questions significantly outnumber your assertions. One way to do this is to follow up on feedback when it is offered. Asking questions is both an effective way of demonstrating a leader’s commitment to listening but it can also elicit how committed others may or may not be to engaging in the exchange. This type of exchange goes beyond rambling discourse, empty platitudes, and giving opinions. It provides a way for both speaker and listener to show their commitment to the exchange, creating a foundation to move forward together.
2. Recognize your filters. Successful, intelligent people consistently use filters to process large volumes of information. Yet these filters also twist what we are hearing and may prevent us from connecting with others, seeing possibilities, or fully understanding what we are being told. Examples include confirmation (“I know that...”), assessment (“I agree” or “I don’t agree”), utility (“how can i use it?”), time-saving (“cut to the point”), and resignation (“tried this and it will never work”), among others (Heneghan 2015). Performing well in front of others is also a regular part of these exchanges for most people, heightened in larger groups or in spaces where professional stakes may be high. Being mindful about how you are listening, including what filters you may be listening through, will help you to set those aside to more fully hear what is being said.
3. Provide lots of low stakes opportunities for conversation. Building trusting relationships takes time. The best way to promote honest communication and minimize performance

by lowering the stakes, is to offer many opportunities to have a real exchange. This also allows you as a leader to hear not just the loudest voices but to look for those who are committed to the exchange by showing up. It also creates avenues to draw out those individuals who may ultimately prove to be your greatest assets.

2. Provide more support for inclusive and equitable teaching innovation.

There is a critical difference between “crisis-informed pedagogy” (Mintz 2020), which compels faculty to be aware, connected, and supportive of the very real struggles facing students who are trying to learn in the middle of a global pandemic, and “crisis pedagogy.” Crisis pedagogy is the direct result of continually pressing faculty to rework their teaching to fit needs that are neither student-focused nor learning-driven nor ethically sound. These pandemic years could be a period of great opportunity that not only puts learning first but is also forward-looking. Those of us who occupy mid-level faculty leadership positions see our colleagues working each-and- every-day to embrace these possibilities.

Administrative leaders can help support inclusive and equitable teaching in several ways: Cultivating a culture of Open Educational Resources (OER) has never been more important. Providing infrastructural and technical support, in partnership with teaching faculty, to create classrooms without walls, support high-impact learning opportunities, and give students flexibility to optimize their learning is key. This suggested approach is fundamentally different from compelling faculty to do more with less. We are fortunate to work at an institution that has made tremendous strides to increase support for initiatives like these over the past several years. Still, we need to do more. Envisioning the future of our institutions requires going beyond siloed, emergency management decision-making to support truly innovative, collaborative pedagogy. This also requires a shift in how we think about and reward academic work. Collaboration is not often counted in the types of key performance indicators that institutions use to assess or determine how resources are allocated. But it should be.

3. Expanding the boundaries of liberal and professional education within an ethic of care for students.

Wealth -- specifically how much an individual student must pay for a college education -- plays a significant role in shaping whether education is seen as contributing to the betterment of society as a whole, supporting personal growth, or preparing individuals for the labor market (Gupta 2021). Trying to separate discussion of teaching and learning from economic structures sets up a false dichotomy. The people we teach face competing demands that cannot just be pushed aside. They are balancing care issues, unprecedented levels of financial insecurity, and battling exhaustion. As highlighted in a report by the Brookings Institute (Austin and Hershbein 2020), our home state of Michigan suffered the steepest employment losses in the nation between March and April 2020 due in no small part to political battles that disproportionately worsened the impact of COVID-19 on working-class communities. Michigan suffered the fifth-highest death toll as a result of the pandemic, with the vast majority of those deaths within communities of color in the Detroit metropolitan area.

Academic administrators need to resource even more wrap-around support if we are to effectively retain students facing these challenges to graduation. This includes additional academic, mental health, community-building resources for primarily and exclusively online

learners. Greater access to high impact practices in online spaces are also needed. This is particularly true with respect to community-based learning, undergraduate research opportunities, internships, and practicum. These efforts will do the most good if they support students to successfully accomplish challenging and innovative work. Faculty willingness to teach where they are most needed, to support working adult learners, and to adapt high impact practices to online and hybrid learning spaces has never been more sorely needed.

Meeting these needs also compels faculty to think in more interdisciplinary and cross-sector ways. In states like Michigan, manufacturing-intensive regions face significant workforce reductions. The pandemic has also accelerated the collapse of production-oriented jobs and businesses that are not likely to return. This is changing the skills demanded by regional employers. One hope is that institutions of higher learning might support retraining workers who lag behind in postsecondary education. Institutions of higher learning can have the greatest positive impact within the communities we serve by staying anchored in guiding values of democratic education. This means teaching the so-called “soft skills” of critical and creative thinking, resilience, persistence, collaboration, ethical reasoning and complex problem-solving alongside the latest technologies. This melding of liberal and professional education supports our students to not only enjoy greater confidence, but also to make more meaningful contributions within their communities. This kind of training will also never become out of date. In this way, we will teach students not only the skills they need right now, but also ensure they have the tools to continue to learn across their lifetimes. That is quality education.

4. Make time to think and plan.

Planning has fallen out of fashion in many higher education circles, dropped in favor of strategy (Eckel and Trower 2019). In spirit, moving away from prolonged planning sessions is not a terrible idea, as anyone who has ever sat through weeks or months of arguing over the proper wording for goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes can attest. Where these strategy efforts may go awry, however, is in their reactivity on the part of both faculty and administrators. For administrators, reactivity may take the form of persistently exigent decision-making where everything becomes a crisis demanding immediate action. Acceleration, quick pivots, and “building the plane while flying it” have become familiar refrains across a range of industries from health care to higher education in the past two years. Among faculty, reactivity is more likely to take the form of disengagement, obfuscation, or resistance to change altogether. Both approaches are equally problematic because they prevent meaningful work from getting done and are likely to harm collaborative relationships.

To be sure, higher education is notoriously slow-moving. A host of recent articles and op-eds have highlighted the extent to which colleges and universities fell behind nearly all other industries technologically, creating greater levels of chaos for students, faculty, and employees in the pandemic’s wake. For some, like Sean Gallagher and Jason Palmer (2020), these delays mean that AY2020-2021 “is likely to be remembered as a critical turning point between the ‘time before,’ when analog on-campus degree-focused learning was the default, to the ‘time after,’ when digital, online, career-focused learning became the fulcrum of competition between institutions.” Maybe. But reactive decision-making and stand-offs between faculty and administrators have also compromised fuller adoption of user-centered design choices. As a result, it seems equally likely this moment will be remembered as a crossroads when persistent

inequalities amplified by digital divides and those institutions that truly moved to the cutting edge maximized the benefits of technology to increase access and provide flexibility for students and faculty without forsaking the high-impact, high-touch signatures of quality education. In other words, the moment amplified that more progressive and hopeful outcomes can only be possible if faculty and administrators keep talking to each other, making time to plan forward constructively together.

5. Prioritize equity and inclusion as an extension of care for each other.

The pandemic will have lasting effects within academia. Acknowledging that faculty's gender, race, ethnicity, and standing within the institution impact their working lives is only the first step. Many of our shared governance bodies, unit heads, deans, and provosts took additional positive, emergency steps during the pandemic to automatically extend tenure clocks, temporarily suspend and revise practices surrounding student evaluations of teaching, and to provide faculty with proactive guidance on how to effectively document their pandemic-era work in order to make lasting changes to policy and practice.

How do we extend this momentum while building lasting institutional transformation? For one, efforts taken by administrators to promote equity and inclusion must prioritize employee and student retention, not just recruitment. Administrators, faculty leaders, and the faculty rank-and-file need to acknowledge that women and minoritized faculty were already disadvantaged before the pandemic. While important, emergency steps alone are not enough to level the institutional playing field or bring about a lasting cultural change. This gap is what Dessie Clark, Ethel Mickey, and Joya Misra (2020) have called "institutional short-term memory loss." By focusing only on forward-looking action steps, institutions may actually reverse progress made by women faculty and faculty from marginalized racial groups over the past decade by ignoring the impact of long-standing patterns, practices, or cultures — both positive and negative — on faculty career trajectories, eroding successful structural and individual supports. Warning signs that an institution may be losing its positive supports for equity and inclusion could include: significant resignations and/or previously unplanned retirements by tenured women and minoritized faculty as well as those in leadership or administrative positions, low morale among high performing faculty, and/or a belief among mid-career and senior women and/or faculty of color that advancing in their careers will require leaving the institution. It would behoove equity-minded administrators to be attentive to these warning signs.

The proactive steps to move equity forward must address both individual and collective needs. Fostering cultures of support by designing tools that give language to faculty to formally document the impact of COVID-19 in review and promotion processes is one of these steps (Riley and Subramaniam 2020; Riley and Subramaniam 2021). One constituency worth supporting are the individuals Clark et. al. (2020) call "organizational catalysts": faculty leaders and others who press their institutions to remain focused on equity as an extension of core mission and also "serve as bridge builders to leverage change" across "different domains and levels of the institution." Who exactly are these catalysts? Among faculty, they are the university's middle managers: associate deans, unit heads, shared governance leaders, program coordinators and directors. They are the individuals who must, by the very nature of their jobs, bridge different constituencies within the institution. These individuals serve as connecting nodes that relay information across hierarchies and divisions about the concerns of other faculty, staff,

and students. Catalysts play a critical role in identifying needs and advising about best practices for addressing concerns. They can also implement direct action steps needed to yield positive, demonstrable results that will ultimately make our institutions more equitable.

6. Without trust, very little good work ever gets done.

For nearly a decade, public commentators and scholars have pointed to the declining public trust in higher education, amplified by growing political divides and economic instability. This trust gap widened dramatically after 2019. One 2020 study noted that as many as half of all college students lack trust in their college and university leadership, with as many as four in 10 college employees expressing similar distrust with their administrations (Calderone and Fosnacht 2022). Race and ethnicity also impact these divides. According to NSSE, students of color are far less likely than white peers to trust leadership, academic advisors, and faculty at predominantly white institutions. To address these concerns, leaders in higher education are guided to be transparent, strengthen communication, and amplify voices of students and employees. Many have done this to extremes: social media campaigns, slogans, and strategies abound.

Faculty and administrators alike need to remember that the loss of trust that many are currently feeling includes how our students perceive us. At the same time, this reality is also a primary reason why so many faculty are demoralized. There are few things worse for conscientious faculty than being stretched so thin that it becomes impossible to do justice to students' needs. The feeling of not being seen or supported to do one's job well, further erodes faculty trust in leadership. This extends to all ranks of leadership, reaching crescendo with the administration. Isolation and fragmentation of workplaces through COVID has also stripped away the softer dimensions of human interaction over time, leaving behind mostly sharp edges. The only solution, as McClure and Fryar have underscored, is "rebuilding relationships, and the foundation of that project is trust" (2022).

Administrators can build back trust with faculty by re-investing in strong shared governance structures. They can work shoulder-to-shoulder with faculty on meaningful efforts that directly support classroom-based efforts. They can listen to more than the loudest or most persistent voices, building trusting relationships with organizational catalysts and others outside their immediate realm of influence. They can acknowledge hard work done well and meaningful results without prompting or asking for more. Faculty, in turn, can remember that administrators are human, too. They also face competing pressures, steep learning curves, and incompatible demands often under the harsh and unforgiving light of a public spotlight.

7. We will be stronger if we struggle together.

Now is not the time to retreat into our separate corners. Those who occupy administrative leadership positions within the university are responsible for the overall health and well-being of the institution. They are privy to information and material realities that are not necessarily available to or within the purview of faculty or faculty leadership. This is true even in the context of shared governance. By the same token, those who are interacting with large volumes of students on a daily or weekly basis, teaching in classrooms, and carrying out the day-to-day operations of the university also carry a wealth of knowledge that may not be known to those in leadership. As scholars and researchers, faculty carry additional specialized knowledge that could be used to the benefit of the institution if only those faculty were asked.

Rather than falling prey to the allure of simple binary narratives and caricatures, we would all be better served if we strengthen our ability to acknowledge and shift between close and distant readings of our institutional realities. To borrow a quote from Franco Moretti: “Reading ‘more’ is always a good thing, but not the solution.” Faculty provide the close reading of university business, with all of the attention to specific details and highly specialized knowledge that entails. This is a good thing. There is also value in the much broader gaze, one that encompasses the full reach of university effort within its regional, national, and even international context. Working together, through honest, straightforward, and respectful communication, has the potential to yield far greater benefit than either approach alone.

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