

Dealing with My Disengagement

Dear Colleagues,

Like millions of Americans, I recently got COVID. Even double vaccinated and boosted, let's just say that it was much more than merely a bad cold. It lasted longer and affected my work more than I anticipated it would. As I struggled to find the will and motivation to fully return to the office it also made me reflect on the many challenges faculty have faced and my role in Faculty Advancement throughout the pandemic. In my [last reflection](#), I wrote about the passing of bell hooks and how her belief in the transformative power of education was such an inspiration to me. That may be useful to some, but others, like me, on some recent days, may still be searching for reasons to get up and go to work.

I am sure that many of you saw the [article](#) and [follow up piece](#) in the Chronicle on faculty disengagement. I have been thinking about them for several weeks. While the article largely focuses on the effect of the pandemic on faculty it also cites the numerous long-term challenges to higher education such as cuts to public funding, continuing culture wars and slow progress on DEI issues.

The articles were especially difficult for me to read. They reminded me of the questions that I have struggled with over the past two years: How can we help and support faculty when our options are so limited? How can we do something that will make a difference in the face of such daunting obstacles? How can we maintain a flexible and inherently human response in the midst of such significant administrative challenges? Looking back, I am proud of much of what we have done. As the [Year at a Glance](#) report for my office notes, Faculty Advancement took many steps to provide flexible options for faculty through the pandemic. Thanks to Remy Van Wyk, Manager, Faculty Lifecycle, we ran special cycles of many processes (retirement, sabbaticals, promotions etc.) to accommodate faculty and developed COVID Impact Statement Guidelines that allow faculty to articulate how the pandemic has affected their work and can be submitted as part of Faculty Annual Review and Promotion processes. As the report notes, many faculty took advantage of these options as well as the early start to half-day Fridays in 2021. In addition, I listened -- probably not long enough or intently enough -- but I listened to Department Heads, Deans, and faculty colleagues and tried to assist in managing difficult individual circumstances with humanity and grace.

We are all working harder than ever to accommodate students, toggle between remote and in-person instruction and adjust to a new world in which remote everything is now expected. As the Chronicle article noted, this effort to simply keep up over the last two years has at times taken "herculean effort" and has led to an intense weariness, a loss of the joy in our work and a profound erosion of a sense of meaning in what we do. As the article says: "The work is getting done, but there isn't much spark to it."

For me, being reminded by colleagues in the last few weeks as I have recovered that sometimes it is OK to just do what needs doing -- that managing the day-to-day might be all I can do for a bit and that that is enough -- was very helpful. It was also helpful to feel comfortable enough with my team to be able to share my struggle and receive their reassurance. Acknowledging my struggle has been a critical first step for me in my own return. As COVID eases, perhaps only for now, but perhaps longer, and as we return for a spring quarter, I am beginning to think about what I want to accomplish in our new reality. I haven't completely gotten my mojo back, but I am feeling better each day.

Acknowledging that our world is fundamentally changed, that we are weary beyond words, and that in some way we must go on, may be the first steps on a path forward. Taking time to think about what that path will be for you is important and necessary work. It may be worthwhile to share your experience and thoughts with trusted colleagues. It may take time to find your own new path and it may require change. Saying out loud that we are tired, we are stuck, and we may be somewhat bewildered by our current reality is a good first step.

Warm Regards,

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