21. Tools for improving academic mental health and holistic wellbeing

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, with eight books, nearly 20 years of teaching, and tenure under my belt, I went back to school. I am a political scientist specializing in gender and sexual politics. Now, I am also a graduate student training as a therapist. I am firm about professor–student boundaries regarding mental health support. I feel strongly that faculty who 'play therapist' with students risk violating ethical precepts. With that caveat in mind, I find the foundations of counseling are valuable for the professoriate—in the classroom and beyond. We are not trained in these skills, yet counseling principles can be translated for academia in meaningful, impactful ways to promote mental health and help to prevent psychological and physical distress among faculty. This can only serve our students well as we role model wellness and help to shift the cultural assumptions of academia. These professional norms all too often emphasize and reward the idea that what matters is our brain, not our hearts or our health.

CHALLENGES ON CAMPUS

The COVID-19 pandemic, contingent labor issues, distress and adjustment needs among students have profound impact on faculty wellbeing. Exacerbating these current conditions are the impacts of neoliberal logics within the academy that demand increasing speed and productivity from professors (Mountz et al., 2015). For those of us teaching critical politics or theory, the often-painful paradox is that we analyze and teach information about neoliberal impacts on collective consciousness while simultaneously subjecting ourselves to its pressures—even reproducing these patterns on students through timed assignments, judged by metrics, rubrics, and other accounting measures dictated by the corporatized university.

As with other measures of capitalist impact, this has globally gendered and racialized dynamics. Around the world, women report chronic stress and feeling that life is out of control more often than men (Mountz et al., 2015). Curiosity and smart inquiry are the foundations of academic life, but we cannot flourish if only the life of the mind is valued. An ethics of care—for self and others—takes time and tools, not speed and institutional abandonment. This value for time and attention is at the core of academic mental health and holistic wellbeing.

I want to share a vignette that speaks to these issues: My colleague Josie (not her real name) intended to write about academic mental health for this same anthology but texted to say, 'I want to but I'm so maxed. Two students contacted me about having Covid [*sic*], so I need to revise lectures to put online for them. And then another student said they have cancer and have four weeks to live.' What is more, Josie is facing wellness issues of her own: anxiety, chronic hypertension, and acute migraines—each the direct result of an academic workplace rife with

toxic culture and scant on support or attention to basic mental health principles. Josie is not yet forty and she is not alone. This chapter is intended for every Josie in academia.

We need a focus on professors as people, with attention to mind, body, and spirit. But we need more than that. Mental health and wellbeing are *we* problems, yet in the neoliberal academy, these are met with *you* solutions. We need pragmatic strategies that we can modify as unique individuals. We need ideas that can be adapted for the expectations of our particular fields of expertise. We need norms shifts in the profession, which includes attention to intersectional issues and the disparate impact of academic pressures. We deserve meaningful institutional change that goes deeper than box-checking administrative workshops.

Universities are facing wellness challenges at alarming rates. Data reveals that mental health disorders impact 60 percent of college students (Leonhardt, 2022), and the rate of faculty reporting they feel extremely stressed tripled between the end of 2019 and November 2020 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). McMurtrie (2020) describes how crushing workloads and child-care challenges impact women, who are still responsible for the bulk of caregiving and second-shift work, the burden of expectations that faculty are counselors and technology experts on top of our regular responsibilities, and the additional weight on Black and Latino professors in supporting students of color during flaring, and ongoing, racism. 'Meanwhile,' McMurtrie writes, 'adjuncts are barely hanging on, hoping that budget cuts don't end their careers' (McMurtrie, 2020).

Among 153 respondents to my own survey, collected via snowball sampling between November 2022 and January 2023, 3.5 percent report experiencing happiness and consistent emotional equilibrium and 21.7 percent report feeling at ease and mentally healthy most days. An additional 39.1 percent of respondents report that some days are emotionally challenging, which seems reasonable enough. But 30.4 percent are getting by with difficulty and 5.2 percent are in mental health crisis. Given what we know about the political realities of gender, it is no surprise that female, nonbinary, and transgender faculty shared higher rates of discomfort or distress. Furthermore, despite experiencing these wellness challenges, nearly 90 percent of faculty report that they were expected to support student mental health—even while their home institutions overwhelmingly failed to provide meaningful institutional support for faculty's own mental and emotional health. This discrepancy between expectations and support was true whether the institution was a community college, or a private, public, or for-profit college or university. Efforts have been made but these seem woefully inadequate. Asked by open-ended question to share examples of campus support for faculty wellness, survey responses ranged from pragmatic reportage to what I can only call a sense of despair. One respondent wrote, 'There is a wellness program. I have never participated.' '[N]o email on evenings and weekends per the President; yoga, mindfulness meditation,' reported another. Yet a fair number of respondents shared more distressed sentiments much like these:

> [The administration] asked us to do so much for our students without actually supporting that work. For example, I started advising a couple years ago and had to stop because the workload was unacceptable.
>
> Some things are available, like wellness programs. But they are offered alongside a cascade of new responsibilities and initiatives we are expected to support while teaching, publishing, and service on committees. The wellness efforts are sort of cancelled out.
>
> There are no available supports except [Employee Assistance Program], which is backlogged.

> There is an [Employee Assistance Program], but a lack of local therapists (esp. good ones). More to the point, there's no effort to create more-sustainable working conditions—quite the contrary, the workload just keeps burgeoning.
>
> … for faculty, not for contract lecturers …
>
> This is mostly stupid stuff, entirely online. More care and support is given to students …
>
> I wouldn't trust HR/admin/staff to take out my garbage.

Most striking is the running theme across survey comments describing current experiences of faculty anxiety, stress, and overwhelm that are problems being met with *you* solutions in the neoliberal academy. What's more, these workplace expectations to provide unremunerated, unrecognized, invisible, or even denigrated care labor lands harder and more frequently on female faculty, queer or gender-expansive faculty, and faculty of color. We cannot support student wellness when our own wells have run dry.

CAVEATS FOR THE NEOLIBERAL ACADEMY

In 'Not Another Yoga Session: University Wellbeing Programs and Why They so Often Miss the Mark,' Zoë Ayres (2022) writes that yoga and meditation help a whole host of people, but in some cases, campus 'wellbeing programs imply that the problem—and therefore the solution—is *you*' (p. 62). The neoliberal logic here is that if only faculty could—or would—better manage their workload and wellbeing, the problem would be solved. In the process, institutional culpability in creating this culture is elided. In effect, a collision of neoliberal individualism and deeply rooted deficit models in clinical psychology suggest that distress is due to professors' individual deficiencies or failures to cope.

Depending on one's department or field of expertise, faculty may teach students about racism, sexism, mental health, issues of systemic discrimination, institutional shortcomings, labor organizing, organizational psychology, or spiritual toxicity and harm. Yet the painful paradox is that we lecture on these topics while impacted by them in our own profession, and without open conversations and pragmatic solutions and preventions for problems within our own profession. Teaching to transgress against the racial, sexual and class boundaries of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is for bell hooks academia's most important goal. This is how we achieve the gift of freedom. Holistic wellbeing is a radical act at the heart of the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994).

There are multiple causes for what can arguably be called an academic mental health crisis (Lemon & Barnes, 2021). While student mental health is of concern, research indicates that forty-something faculty are at greater risk of suicide (Oswald, 2018). We are encouraged to identify our personhood with our intellectual prowess and productivity. Faculty do not clock out at five o'clock. It is difficult to stop thinking at the end of the day—and thinking is our job. Academics don't just spend many hours at work. We live, breathe, eat, sleep our work. We have anxiety dreams about grad school long after tenure. In 2023, Andréa Becker (2023) asked on Twitter (now X), 'when do I stop dreaming that I'm months into a semester and about to fail a class I forgot about? I have a phd.' In response were nearly 6,000 likes, 4,000 retweets or quote tweets, and an outpouring of similar personal experiences shared by faculty in the comment thread.

Political stress, the COVID-19 pandemic, pivots to remote teaching and other rapid technological changes, shifting student norms, needs, and expectations (Dohaney, 2022; McNaughton & Billot, 2016), intense, if different, pressures of contingent labor or the tenure clock, and intersectional disparities in hiring, promotion, retention, and emotional labor creates a recipe for distress and dysfunction. Think Academia and the Cactus Mental Health Survey finds that one out of every three professors has experienced workplace bullying (Cactus Foundation, 2022). Academic culture dissolves the line between our personal and professional lives (Dohaney, 2022). Ours is not a unique profession in this regard, but given the challenging sociopolitical change, rapid technological shifts, and epidemiological concerns, the impact is taking a toll (Lemon, 2022).

The problems of distress and collapsing mental health among campus faculty may, of course, be due to individual issues or stressors. However, deeper-going, structural sources point to university environments and management, intersectional discrimination or patterns of bullying and abuse, and then exacerbated by administrators' box-checking approach to problem-solving. In sum, this ignores cultural differences, sidesteps epistemic humility, and still leaves faculty without training or support in skill-building and institutional change.

Efforts to focus on personal growth and institutional change are not mutually exclusive. While we radically overhaul our academic institutions, there are bottom-up solutions that will prompt top-down change. Holistic wellbeing engages the whole person, but also the whole workplace. Academic mental health and holistic wellbeing requires collective, systemic support and institutional change, not white knuckling through the challenges. Our wellbeing is promoted by our personal actions, but in the big picture, academic mental health is not met or measured by persistence or even attempts at purported work–life balance. This is the neoliberal perspective of atomized individualism. It embeds and renders nearly invisible highly gendered and racialized presuppositions about how we live our lives and maintain our families or communities. This you-fix-it perspective ignores the serious realities of intersectional impact and the exigencies of academic expectations to publish, teach, and perform. As professors, we are trained in the life of the mind, but faculty cannot think our way out of these problems. We are a collectively intelligent bunch; if we could solve these structural, institutional, and somatic situations by thinking harder about them, we would have already cracked the case.

In her year-long chronicle of self-care and academia, Kelly Louise Preece (2022) writes about this broader crisis in higher education. The neoliberal, market-oriented university's culture of overwork rewards determination, grit, and perfectionism. Rather than encouraging us to refresh and renew as integral steps to maintaining personal and professional wellbeing, we are instead expected to take on another committee, chair a panel, review a manuscript, while quantifying the measurable outcomes of our creative or intellectual work.

Preece (2022) and Ayres (2022) note the resulting widespread mental health problems impacting doctoral students, faculty, and university students. Yet the bulk of administrative focus largely ignores faculty experiences, instead prioritizing students' welfare. Paradoxically, faculty are being asked to meet student needs while struggling with our own ignored conditions. Laura Mayne's (2022) tweets convey this experience of academic creep:

1. It starts with the PhD. PhDs are training in co-dependency, and a masterclass in hooking your self-worth so closely to your career that you become entirely defined by it.

2. It doesn't happen all at once—it happens bit by bit. Do a bit of writing for free here, take on one 'knowledge exchange' project because it looks good in the long run on your CV, and then another. Everyone does it …
3. Soon all you begin to talk about is work, and all you begin to think about, even at 2am (especially at 2am) are the publications you're not writing. You juggle 12 different roles (some in your contract, some not), from therapist to teacher to administrator.
4. You do none of these jobs very well, because you were never trained to do them. You were trained to do only one thing: research. Ironically, that's the thing you no longer have time to do.
5. Everything is an existential crisis, and that's because your chosen profession is not just a job anymore: it's you. A criticism of an article is not just a criticism of your work, it's a criticism of your very existence.
6. You ask yourself, but what could I do, if not this? You are degraded not all at once, but by inches. You learn not to expect better, and you learn this from management, but you mostly learn it by internalizing the behavior of your colleagues, who also do not expect better.
7. You say 'yes' to overwork, and with each personal boundary you erode you tell yourself that you have a higher purpose, either to the research, to the students, or to both […]
10. And also: there's the dissonance. On some level you must know that your values are in opposition to your actions. You are concerned with equality and yet you exploit yourself. You criticize neoliberal ideology and yet you find it hard to clock off after 6pm.

Mayne's anecdotal observations may come from a sample size of N=1, but other research supports her claims. Responses to my preliminary survey, Tools for Academic Mental Health and Holistic Wellbeing, expressed similar experiences sparked by systemic stressors. The challenge is in finding ways to feel better personally when the sources of distress are baked into the institution.

IF 'SELF-CARE IS AN ICKY WORD,' THEN WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

In the opening passage of her edited collection of essays, *Creating a Place for Self-Care and Wellbeing in Higher Education*, Narelle Lemon writes 'Self-care is an icky word' (2022, p. 1). Encouraging self-care is often the first suggested approach for promoting mental health and wellbeing.

I share Lemon's sentiment. It is not that I am opposed to self-healing or that I would ever refuse a sheet mask, a shopping spree, or a massage. If there were a doctorate in this kind of self-care, I would have earned mine by now. The problem is that no amount of individualistic or consumer-based self-care will solve the problems of systemic toxicity or institutional dysfunction if these self-care practices are dissociated from political change and acknowledging the impacts on marginalized or historically excluded communities (Ahmed, 2014; Lorde, 2017). This means expanding self-care as a personal act to a transformative, political act focused on social justice (Knapik & Laverty, 2018).

When self-care is reduced to a consumer practice, it is then easily dismissed as a silly, feminized class-privileged indulgence. Yet paradoxically, self-care is also promoted as

a requirement for mental health. Apolitical or de-institutionalized self-care is both too much and not enough. The Self-Care Inventory developed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2008), identifies six elements of self-care, which are important components of mental health and wellbeing: physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, social, and professional. We can address these elements of tending to our wounds and wellbeing while simultaneously shifting academic norms and policy.

TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP: CAMPUS POLICIES MEET PERSONAL PRACTICE

A recent *Psychology Today* article proclaims that 'done right, therapy is tough work' (Fagan, 2022, p. 40). So is being a professor. Developing rapport in therapy enables security and frees clients to open up (Fagan, 2022). The same applies in the classroom. Therapeutic rapport can be enhanced by a well-placed splash of self-disclosure by the therapist. Again, the same holds true for faculty. We might even expand these therapeutic–academic parallels by applying them to conference panel Q&A sessions, notorious for the passive-aggressive not-so-much-a-question-as-a-comment interactions, or to help tone down Reviewer 2's reputation for harsh and belittling feedback on manuscript submissions (Watling et al., 2021).

What follows are ideas for adapting select therapeutic foundations to foster faculty well-being. Developing healthy rapport with our colleagues and students enhances an integrated, holistic sense of self while modeling these values and shifting social norms. Positive rapport means staying curious, listening attentively, and remaining nonjudgmental—all within a culture that too often values pedantic communication or snarky criticism veiled with big words. We are grown and smart enough to already know these things. Consider these ideas as support for taking action that feels ethical and good and as reminders that we are not alone.

Tools gleaned from the therapist's office have wide application for higher education (Lawson, 1989, p. 122). Rogerian characteristics of a good therapist—congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard—are the same qualities that make a good educator (Lawson, 1989 p. 124). Understanding the process of transference and countertransference is valuable in developing healthy empathy and rapport. Simple reminders about kindness can serve academia well. Stated slightly differently, we can develop 'realness, caring, and understanding listening to fit the classroom situation' (Lawson, 1989, p. 125).

Congruence

This concept borrowed from therapeutic professions simply means being real, not presenting a façade, being oneself. Mentioning congruence might seem like stating the obvious, but because academia rewards a certain kind of posturing (and only for certain kinds of people), it bears mention here. Lawson (1989) reminds us that professorial congruence means stepping away from positioning ourselves as an all-knowing, over-powering presence. For women of color, congruence in academia is an act of radical self-care that demands being unapologetically true to oneself despite 'unrelenting pressure and expectations to be otherwise' (Nicol and Yee, 2017, p. 134). Congruence means that the genuineness and realness of a professor in relationship to their students is paramount. Instead of staying stuck in rigid, limiting roles 'it pays to be human in the classroom' (Rogers, 1980, p. 9).

Clearly, there is a tension invoked between congruence and our role as evaluative educators or 'playing the part' of a facilitator. Rogers' response is that being congruent while teaching requires *being* facilitative as a natural part of one's behavior, not *acting* like one (Kirschenbaum, 1979, pp. 335–336; Rogers et al., 2013).

Empathy

According to Lawson (1989), empathy is Carl Rogers' most widely misunderstood characteristic of effective therapists (p. 124). I do not know what it feels like to be a six-foot tall white dude-professor in the classroom (Messner, 2000). But being female, femme, and five feet tall, and due to persistent built-in double standards of gender, I know how vulnerable I can feel when I express empathy or care for my students. I am willing to use my personal experience as an example; I am intimately impacted by the issues I explore in this chapter. But this is not about me. Where white, straight, tall, and putatively distinguished-looking men are still thought of as the 'real' scholars by students as well as by colleagues (even among those who claim progressive politics), faculty of color and historically excluded communities continue to experience intersectional discrimination in forms large and small, despite lip service to so-called diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

Incorporating empathy into academia could look like taking a moment to acknowledge and reflect on students' comments or questions before moving on to impart further wisdom from the podium. It can involve acknowledging others' frame of reference, even when this point of view is flawed or inaccurate. In a field that is founded on being right, being smarter, having sound, airtight arguments that are well-supported by the data, and being good at tearing down other scholars' ideas by using big, fancy words that thinly veil snark and intellectual derision, developing tools of empathy creates rapport, which is a foundation for learning and improved campus relations. At its core, empathy enhances compassionate detachment, which enhances our mental health and holistic wellbeing.

Empathetic communication—and listening more than we speak—is hard to do with our closest friends or family, and even more challenging in academia, not only for intra- or interpersonal reasons, but also because depending on what we teach, there is information we need to convey; political and social justice issues at stake; data, science, details, and accuracy that matter. There are truths that we hope to impart, and we still need to evaluate our students. So how do we maintain empathy and intellectual integrity?

Rogers suggests a very simple exercise: The instructor 'restates the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker to that speaker's satisfaction before going on to make a presentation' (Rogers, 1971, p. 184). This is empathy by letting the speaker know they are seen and heard. Following this suggestion does not require saying the speaker is accurate, correct, or right. By 'simply' acknowledging what they have said, we center our students rather than centering our own agendas and ourselves. The goal in therapy is to help the client become the best they can be—'not the person the therapist thinks they should be' (Fagan, 2022, p. 41). The same principle holds true for professors and students.

Unconditional Positive Regard

The 'warm acceptance of each aspect of the [student's] experience as being part of that person' (Lawson, 1989, p. 124) is the heart of unconditional positive regard. Anyone who

has faced classroom incivilities, emotional dumping, plagiarism, cheating, or the onslaught of dying grandmothers at finals time each semester will easily see the challenges. What Rogers emphasizes, though, is the distinction between the person and their actions. Caring for students in non-controlling, non-judgmental, non-possessive ways does not mean that we must accept all behavior unconditionally. If congruence means that we show up for ourselves as human—with our flaws, inconsistencies, and all—this also means there will be days (and interactions) marked by conditional, or even negative, regard. In this sense, unconditional positive regard is an intention, an outlook, a journey (Rogers, 1980). In a profession that demands perfection and chronic excellence, allowing ourselves the healing grace of being human is not always so easy. Prioritizing active listening, mindful presence, and integrity can help. Rogerian person-centered therapy emphasizes the transformative power of human interaction in-and-of-itself. Similarly, there are quantitative indications that integrating Rogerian core conditions into higher education correlates with greater learning efficacy (Swan et al., 2020). Aspy and Roebuck's (1972) early research on secondary education finds that the most successful teachers are also the most person-centered. Their data indicates that increased positive regard for students translates into higher levels of cognitive functioning (Aspy & Roebuck, 1972; Rogers et al., 2013).

Granted, prioritizing active listening, mindful presence, and integrity is a tall task in the context of neoliberal academies. But when and where we can build this muscle, doing so frees us up mentally, emotionally, and professionally, while empowering students in developing their own curiosity, initiative, and intellectual engagement. In other words, when we engage with unconditional positive regard, this frees up our students, as well.

Transference and Countertransference

How should we respond to the student who announces they 'just want to play devil's advocate' or who argues, challenges, manipulates, or even threatens? These incivilities can impact any faculty, but projection, blame, have uniquely gendered, raced, age-based, and intersectional dynamics. These challenges exacerbate faculty stress and anxiety, and it is not our job as faculty to single-handedly solve systemic issues. However, understanding conflict that is uncomfortable, not criminal, helps in developing our own mental health and overall wellbeing. We can practice remaining attuned when we feel activated, and we can learn to offer empathetic responses distinct from triggers or countertransference.

Understanding transference and countertransference informs healthy, ethical, and kind-hearted rapport. Sherry, Warner, and Kitchenham (2021) suggest that most educators experience countertransference and transference daily in teaching, but 'with limited understanding of how these crucial ideas impact their relationship development with students, consequently impacting their teaching' (p. 137). Research further finds that 'educators are aware of transference in their students but may not always be aware of countertransference in themselves' (p. 151).

Transference is the 'unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings and behaviors from a previous significant relationship onto current relationships.' Countertransference is the therapist's—or in this case, the professor's—reactions to the client (or student) based on unresolved conflict (Robertson, 1999, p. 151). These are not personal flaws, but part of the human condition. We learn how to build relationships from our families of origin. Our past informs our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the here-and-now, and this experience guides

how we relate to others throughout our lives. Researchers identified two distinct triggers that impact faculty: challenging student behaviors, and frustration or identification with students. For example, a professor showing excessive concern for one student while feeling activated, annoyed, or angry toward another may have its roots in similar previous experiences in that professors' personal life (e.g., caretaking for an alcoholic parent, or younger siblings). Through information, psychoeducation, and thoughtful reflection, we can become aware of this imprinting and make conscious, deliberate choices in how we engage.

Research on how well professors understand or manage their countertransference in college classrooms reveals that we do not do it so well at all. These findings led researchers to recommend that faculty receive formal training and facilitated discussion among colleagues to share their experiences and strategies with managing countertransference (Sherry et al., 2021). Sherry et al. (2021) suggest there are rich opportunities for teaching professors to identify transference and countertransference in the classroom and for building upon this. Adapting an understanding of countertransference for academic settings means that we can develop empathetic detachment to minimize how we may internalize classroom friction. In short, when we understand how students may project their assumptions or struggles onto us, we can also learn to better notice when and why we become activated (countertransference). This awareness can help us effectively maintain the integrity of our emotional and intellectual boundaries while easing potential distress.

Kindness

This simple concept is worth discussing given that academic culture is rife with its opposite: bullying. Obviously, do not be a bully toward others. However, for those targeted by this mistreatment, it is helpful to (a) personally understand the problem of bullying in higher education while (b) institutions design policy to prevent and remediate it.

Academic bullying includes patterns of harassing, offending behaviors, repeated over time. This health-harming mistreatment includes verbal or nonverbal, passive or overt abuse, insult, humiliation, social exclusion, spreading gossip, or professional sabotage. Because bullying shifts workplace norms to allow such mistreatment, this can result in co-workers ganging up on the target (Duffy & Sperry, 2014; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009). Targets are often high achievers, which can threaten or disrupt group norms. When targets express distress to administrators, there currently tends to be little response (Duffy & Sperry, 2014; Lemon & Barnes, 2021). Even worse, those in leadership may be among the bullies (Bechtoldt & Schmitt, 2010). Administrators typically express disbelief and refrain from taking official steps to stop the bullying. Unless the target is a member of a protected class or historically excluded group, getting help from legal avenues or campus equity offices is foreclosed (Tarrant, 2022).

The rates of campus bullying among faculty are serious. A statewide survey of California State Universities, the largest public four-year university system in the U.S.A., finds that 43.6 percent of tenured or tenure-track faculty experience bullying now and then/rarely, and 8.4 percent daily/weekly (Lemon et al., 2022). Leah P. Hollis (2018) further identifies the complex intersectional impact of workplace bullying on Black women, and religious, gender, and sexual minorities in higher education.

Much like Title IX awareness in the United States is helping to shift social norms regarding gender and sex-based discrimination, campus anti-bullying policies can set expectations for positive regard. The University of California (UC), for example, is currently developing anti-

bullying policies. In a 2016 letter to all nine campuses, former UC president Janet Napolitano writes that cultivating a positive workplace is paramount, and bullying undermines these ethics. Working groups have studied ways to improve working climates on UC campuses, yet findings reveal there is confusion among employees about what bullying is and how best to address it (Napolitano, 2016). We do not have to be besties at work, but we do need to be kind. If our profession needs a policy to remind us not to bully, then so be it.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON STRATEGIES

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, and the swift pivot to remote teaching, resulted in campuses further promoting use of online learning managements systems (LMS). As my survey respondents shared, the unintended consequences of these technological bells and whistles includes built-in surveillance, cookie-cutter learning, and the sense that faculty are being asked to produce more widgets (i.e., graduates) at a faster, more efficient pace (i.e., emphasizing time to graduation rather than quality of the overall experience). Much as therapy centers the client, not the therapist, grading styles can shift to student-centered practices instead of prioritizing bureaucratic expediency.

With or without LMS, there are signs that current grading practices in higher education need improvement. Mintz (2022) provocatively states that 'most undergraduates exit college pretty much as they enter it: scientifically and culturally illiterate; unable to write well; incompetent in math, data and statistics; unfamiliar with the methods and theories of the social sciences; and lacking fluency in a foreign language.' Graduation rates remain distressingly low for Black and Latine students, older students, part-time, and community college students—despite intense efforts by campus administrations (Mintz, 2022). If Mintz is correct in suggesting that university teaching remains largely an amateur enterprise, then perhaps we might expand our repertoire with attention to grading alternatives that promote student learning while broadly enhancing holistic wellbeing.

In its best iteration, grading practices center student learning by communicating and modeling intellectual engagement and accountability. This parallels the therapeutic relationship: Good therapists listen well and empathize with clients, but great therapists go beyond this to promote accountability and change even when this is uncomfortable (Fagan, 2022). As professors, we can do the same. We know that each of us learn at our own pace. Yet who among us hasn't felt frustrated by students who self-sabotage or otherwise drag their heels with turning in work or showing up to class? When faculty react to student slackers or strugglers, we are centering ourselves rather than our students. And why wouldn't we? In doing so, we are recreating internalized expectations of the profession that we are taught in graduate school. This cycle magnifies stress, anger, and distress, while forgetting that students' academic learning journey is theirs, not ours. We perpetuate the problem. Emotionally sensitive faculty further risk taking on students' energy, ideas, opinions, projections, and needs. All of this can leave us feeling empty, stressed, and vulnerable to illness or burnout.

As an alternative, we can foster a culture of healthy detachment exemplified by this generously revised passage from Irvin Yalom's novel, *The Schopenhauer Cure*. Swapping out professors for therapists, and students for the intelligent, narcissistic patient, Philip Slate, we can find examples for staying optimistic and mindfully detached:

> Maybe those classes had changed [the student]. Maybe [they *were*] a late bloomer—one of these [students] who needed to digest the [information taught] by the [professor], one of those who stored up some of the [professor's] good stuff, took it home, like a bone, to gnaw on later in private. [This professor] had known [students] so [anxious, shy, or overwhelmed] that they hid their [learning process] just because they didn't want to give the [professor] the satisfaction (and power) of having [taught] them [or because they were unaware of the process they were experiencing. But this, the professor realized, was surely nothing personal]. (Yalom, 2006, p. 14)

Faculty (and our students) deserve humanizing, and generative relationships. Work relations do not have to be 'our everything' but academia surely should not have a reputation for destroying its people. As alternatives to unhealthy workload pressures or toxic grading systems, we might adapt from the Slow Scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015) and Ungrading communities (Buck, 2023) in ways that make sense for our goals and fields of expertise.

CONCLUSION

These tools and resource ideas are a start, not an ending. They have deeply personal elements, but they cannot be successful without profoundly needed institutional changes to the profession. To improve our campus experience today, we need to interrupt generational patterns of mistreatment in academia for the future. We need to stop hazing graduate students to expect and internalize mistreatment. Graduate training rarely rewards its students for developing empathy alongside intellectual rigor. Academic faculty are trained in doctoral systems that fail to acknowledge or support mental health. It should be no surprise that we emerge from graduate school as professionals without the training or institutional safety nets that promote holistic wellbeing (Ayres, 2022).

The list for needed institutional change is serious, and it is long. We need support and policy accommodations for caregiving or parenting faculty. Campus centers for professional development need workshops and support groups that address bullying cultures, academic abuse, harassment, and strategies for emotional success. We need our campus policies to be as honest and real about gender and race equity as the information about sexism and racism that we teach our students. It is possible to transform foundational counseling concepts into appropriately designed tools for academic faculty (Butler et al., 2022). These tools provide resources and a culture to support mental health and holistic wellness.

In the meantime, we can say no and stick to it. We might listen to supportive podcasts such as "The Self-Compassionate Professor" (De La Mere, 2023). We could get curious about polyvagal theory (Porges, 2017) and therapeutic yin yoga (Meyers, 2022). We can remember that professors are somatically feeling whole people, far more than the strength of our brains or the size of our curriculum vitae. When campuses sponsor therapy dogs for students to cuddle during the stress of final exams, we can include the faculty, as well, and we might call this program Puppies for Professors.

We benefit from amplifying Carl Rogers' core conditions for good therapists—empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard—by integrating these therapeutic qualities into higher education. Being genuine, real, caring, and an understanding listener are the same attributes or skills that make good educators (Lawson, 1989; Swan et al., 2020). So does awareness of projection or counter-transference that can emerge in the teaching–learning dynamic. Practicing regardful relationships amplifies humane and generative qualities unlike

interpersonal dynamics 'in which people cater to their self-interests when interacting with others' (Shefer et al., 2018, p. 63). Staying optimistic, empathetic, and encouraging kindness invite pragmatic ways for incorporating Rogers' core concepts into the academic workplace.

Admittedly, a person-centered framework is a mark for easy appropriation by the neoliberal academy, or for covering up our institutional *we* problems with individualistic, *you* solutions. Yet, this strategy remains worthwhile. Skills and resources borrowed from the therapeutic professions stand to create powerful improvement to our individual and collective wellbeing, contribute to constructive interpersonal dynamics, and shift the social norms of the academy. We can develop deeply personal practices while simultaneously demanding systemic change and policy improvements. While administrations figure out how to go beyond box-ticking measures to create meaningful mental health workplace policies, there are simple steps that we can remember: sleep, good food, sunshine, stretching, unplugging, connecting with friends, and just breathing.

Finally, faculty are being asked to provide mental health support for students without sufficient training or resources for our own. Because responsibility for this work generally falls along intersectional lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, this inequity requires attention. Adapting foundations of the counseling professions offers promise in attending to our individual and collective welfare. We can do this with intention, and without 'playing therapist' or crossing ethical lines. Academic culture may not (yet) sufficiently promote mental health and holistic wellbeing among its faculty, but this radical care is something we deserve.

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