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Indignant

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Indignant. That word sums up how I felt at a recent departmental Zoom meeting when our chair mentioned that the Dean wanted to know about–and highlight–faculty who made the transition from face-to-face to online learning well. Who, we were asked, had gone above and beyond?

My indignation focused on two assumptions behind this request. The first is the failure to see that everyone who is continuing to work with students in this time is going above and beyond, and the second is that the remote options most faculty around the country were asked to throw together in less than a week are not the same thing as online learning.

Let me start with the first. The remarkable capacity of my colleagues in my program and around this country to adapt quickly and effectively should be lauded. When life changed suddenly, and while struggling to figure out living situations with partners and children and parents and friends, getting access to needed equipment and bandwidth, figuring out the challenges of groceries and prescriptions, making masks, and coping with the stress, faculty mounted classes and supported students who have often been displaced, are frequently frightened, and sometimes are sick or are struggling with others who have taken ill. Even more, we kept holding virtual committee meetings to determine whether or not students should have options with regard to grades this term, to do the routine but necessary work of our departments and programs, and to consider ways to mark graduations that would be missed.

No, we are not the frontline healthcare professionals, first responders, or even the “necessary”

workers in our grocery stores and pharmacies, but we are keeping the educational mission of our schools alive. And at many institutions, leaders forgot to say “thank you” to the faculty for doing what was demanded and doing it in the best way folks could manage from the places where they were.

Many faculty also simultaneously found out that what works well in the face-to-face environment in terms of preparation and activity is not often what works best online. I have been teaching fully online courses in a primarily face-to-face department for more than 15 years and so my classes this term were set. But what I saw at my institution and in online forums when helping others get ready to go remote was faculty quickly recognizing that the tricks of our trade in the traditional classroom do not transfer readily to the digital world. Indeed, even when faculty want to do some of the “simple” best practices, like making useful short video lessons, it is not as easy as it seems. Then, for those “live” sessions, there are the joys of losing connections or having things freeze up or drop at key moments. And lots of faculty now know that our supposedly digitally savvy students are less so than we might think. That is before you even get to structuring and pacing sound learning activities and assignments that evaluate student progress toward learning goals or planning for meaningful student interaction or group work.

In pondering these pedagogical learning curves, it becomes clear that if this pandemic keeps us physically distanced from one another into the next academic year, many faculty will need more help thinking about how to mount classes that make the best use of the platforms and materials that are available to do a fully online course. And more help to feel less swamped.

In addition, we are also now also seeing that the policies of many of our institutions are not geared appropriately to this effort. How we think about seat time and contact hours, faculty workload, office hours, evaluation, or even the academic calendar itself, are for a world we are not living in right now. Indeed, they are for a world that has been disappearing for a long time. These concerns prompt even more about other areas of our work life. What about the health and well-being of the journals and publication houses? What about the conferences where we interact with our colleagues and learn? What about our granting agencies? How will changes in these areas impact tenure and promotion considerations? Will this economic environment sound the final death knell for tenure? Will we have students? Will we have support from our states? We do not know. Many of us remember all too well the struggles of education post-2008. Now we must also wonder for ourselves: Will new contracts even come? What will the post-pandemic economy hold?

We cannot control much of what happens. But many of these issues are about academic governance. And while we have all been working hard while worrying not just about our immediate health, we also must think ahead. If that future is not to be dictated solely down the administrative chain, faculty are going to have to be ready to lead, and perhaps must do this work in the near term--likely over the summer. Now is the time to realize that faculty who adapted quickly and capably in the classroom can also offer some powerful insight into how to plan for the next phase.

And so indignant is my word. Indeed, I could not help but think that many of our leaders should be less worried about calling out who we should give a gold star to for the best transition, and more concerned with marshaling the expertise at their fingertips to start planning for the future. Don’t give us pats on the head. Use our knowledge, listen to our voices, and practice sharing governance. Now is the time to call us together to work toward a future in higher education. There is much to be done.

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