**Title: Faculty Stressors during COVID-19 and Civil Unrest**

**Abstract**

This Roundtable Discussion will facilitate a lively discussion about faculty stressors from shifting responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as current social justice and political issues in the United States and beyond which have led to a more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment and how this shift has impacted faculty support of students and self. We will discuss the interactions between the VUCA environment and faculty burnout, emotional labor, and student support needs. Participants will reflect on their own stressors, share current practices and brainstorm ways to improve student support and faculty self-care.

**Key Words: Faculty Burnout, Emotional Labor, Student Support**

**Introduction**

If you are feeling a bit stressed – come join the crowd! Stress is not new to our faculty profession, but today it seems like a more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment than ever before. Together we will investigate our ideas about connections between the current VUCA environment and a) our responses to that environment and b) how our activities to support students have changed. We will share current practices and brainstorm new ways to improve student support and reduce faculty stressors.  These session activities will result in:

1. Understanding and connecting current environmental, higher education, and personal factors to faculty members’ journey in supporting students
2. Discussing tactics and strategies for minimizing stressors in order to enhance job satisfaction.
3. Providing a forum to engage with colleagues to share strategies to address student needs within the VUCA environment.
4. Establishing a network of colleagues to survive and thrive in VUCA environments.
5. Exploring various impacts on marginalized communities (BIPOC and women) in higher education and how systems and individuals can best support newer faculty.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implication**

In 2013, CareerCast shared results of a survey ranking University Professors as the least

stressful job in the United States (*10 Least Stressful Jobs*). This ranking was largely due to the level of autonomy, amount of vacation time, and weekly hours worked within the profession (Adams, 2013). In 2017, CareerCast released another survey in which University Professor was in the top 10 of least stressful jobs, landing at number five, with a small caveat. The number five spot was narrowed to *Tenured* University Professors (Ward, 2017). These surveys spurred public forum responses from professors/faculty who wished to counter this finding, citing the stress of research requirements, lack of funding, emotional labor from supporting students, and the ambiguity and stress of obtaining a tenure-track position.

There are, of course, additional stressors related to program and curriculum development, director or chair duties, and other administrative demands. Cornell University

published a report noting the growing administrative burden on faculty naming the “shadow work” that accompanies our positions, including but not limited to data entry, central office calls for information, writing grants, requesting reimbursements, and risk management (Flaherty, 2016). Indeed, “while faculty shadow work is a widely acknowledged problem, it’s gone unaddressed at many institutions” noting that “nothing is more corrosive to academic excellence than squeezing out all time to think” (Flaherty, 2016, n.p.).

The stressors of the role of University Professor have been further exacerbated by two significant events in the year 2020 – COVID-19 and civil unrest. The murder of Mr. George Floyd in Minneapolis in the United States catalyzed nation and world-wide protests and crucial conversations about systemic racism, policing, and social justice. Professors bring their own emotions to this work as they seek to emphasize anti-racist pedagogy in their curriculum, all the while understanding that students are carrying emotional weight in both their personal and professional lives as well. The onset of COVID-19 has also resulted in the redesign of nearly all aspects of faculty work, including a transition to remote learning. This impacts work-life balance for faculty who are finding themselves with increased at-home responsibilities (Supiano, 2020); sorting out how to effectively engage with students via remote-only learning environments (Kim, 2020); and in the ways that faculty present and interact with students on topics of controversy, which are oftentimes reserved for in-class participatory discussion (Pettit, 2020). All of these additional stressors result in faculty needing additional skills for compassionate teaching and socio-emotional management skills to both support students and to manage faculty’s own processing of these events with a potential lack of university training to be able to accommodate these additional stressors. And in a recent survey, November 2020, Course Hero found that more than 50% of faculty show signs of burn-out with near 40% indicating that they are looking at a career change (*Faculty Wellness and Careers*). This same survey continues to indicate the impact of learning new technologies, new forms of communication, and new online class management techniques could be contributing to the burnout (*Faculty Wellness and Careers*, 2020).

**Emotional Labor of Faculty**

Limited peer-reviewed academic journal articles exist attempting to explore the job satisfaction of university and college faculty. Of those that do exist, the emotional labor of professors and the impact of emotional labor and resulting job satisfaction are key constructs that need further exploration. Defined broadly, emotional labor is a set of explicit and implicit rules that workplaces expect of their employees to follow or to meet as they provide customer service (Grandey & Sayre, 2019). Research on emotional labor has largely been focused on roles that have a customer facing position such as bank tellers, customer service representatives, and flight attendants (Mahoney, Buboltz, Buckner & Doverspike, 2011). More often in the last decade, professors have been included in this research group due to the nature of their roles in the classroom as well as their role in advising and mentoring students.

Emotional labor is further examined by research indicating that one of the key factors of student success is interaction with professors. Student success factors for college graduation include positive mentoring relationships with faculty; this relationship between student-faculty interaction and success is even stronger for graduate students. The key benefits for students of a mentor relationship are increased career prospects, learned academic expertise, and professional development (Lechuga, 2011). Research supports the idea that the reciprocal is true as well which may further complicate a dyad relationship. As more mature and experienced stakeholders return to the educational environment to re-tool, better prepare, or to navigate this increasingly complex workplace, faculty may experience “reversed mentorship” (Murphy, 2012; Finkelstein, 2003) where workforce experienced students may actually represent a new level of power distance as they offer expanded knowledge corridors in certain professional domains.

Research has also suggested there are benefits to an “intergenerational mentoring model” whereby tenured faculty from Gen X and Boomer generations seek out mentorship from “novice professor positions” from the Millennial generation, in acknowledgement of the strengths that each generation brings to the circle of learning, which is “based upon the notion that *everyone leads, everyone learns*” (Satterly, Cullen, & Dyson, 2018, p. 446). University departments can adopt this mindset by intentionally “assessing… matching… and implementing… intergenerational faculty mentoring relationships” (p. 448).

Finally, the relationships professors have with students have a positive aspect on the faculty members’ job satisfaction (Martini, Guidetti, Viotti, Loera, & Converso, 2019). Understanding how professors both positively and negatively experience emotional labor can have a direct impact on their job satisfaction and their relationship with students. Therefore, a discussion of how more self-care, introspection, intergenerational mentoring, and increased collegiality with other professors will be critical as we navigate a “new normal” in a post-2020 academic world.

**Marginalized Employees and Emotional Labor**

As academic institutions continue to challenge the status quo, increase numbers of diverse faculty and students, and develop policies to support marginalized employees and students, one must understand the enhanced impact emotional labor has on marginalized professors. In one recent study, Post-docs were studied in an attempt to understand why they leave academia; researchers found that stress played a factor. In addition, researchers found that stress-related factors impact almost exclusively were attributed to women versus men as reasons for leaving academia (Dorenkamp & Weiss, 2018).

If the policies and rules of higher education institutions reflect majority culture in the location that the university is located, then according to research in emotional labor, those that are members of a minority culture will bear the brunt of navigating the culture in order to be a part of the institution. This can include individuals needing to moderate their emotional responses to discrimination, microaggressions, and unfair treatment to be in alignment with dominant culture practices (Evans & Moore, 2015). It is imperative that this aspect of faculty emotional labor be considered with high priority in increased VUCA environments to ensure that the burn-out rate is not more significant for our female and/or Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) faculty.

Emotional labor is further compounded by the increasing demands for trauma-informed approaches to pedagogy in this complex and volatile learning environment, particularly for marginalized students and faculty. While some faculty recognize the role that more compassionate pedagogy design and increased emotional safety plays for students as well as themselves, many are often ill prepared to handle the emotional intensity that finds its way into the online or student engagement experience (Lindner, 2004, Berman, 2001). Professors face additional risks and emotional labor as an ineffective handling of classroom engagement can yield student re-traumatization or secondary traumatization resulting in low student performance, high absenteeism, and low retention (Horsman, 2000; Lindner, 2004).

**Session Description**

Throughout this roundtable session, participants will be active by sharing ideas and experiences in large group discussions and working in small groups. We will build a session in which participants walk away knowing that they are not alone being stressed in our current educational environment, yet feeling positive about having shared and learned new methods and skills in supporting our students and ourselves in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

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| **Session Timeline** | |
| **Time** | **Activity** |
| 10 minutes | **Welcome & Introductions** |
| 10 minutes | **Background**   * Describe VUCA environment (causes of some stressors) * Discuss the interactions between the VUCA environment and faculty burnout, emotional labor, and student support needs. * Share our strategies for dealing with stressors |
| 15 minutes | **Small Group Discussions**   * Share current practices and brainstorm ways to improve student support and reduce faculty stressors. * Determine if strategies are applicable to for both in-person and online offerings |
| 20 minutes | **Debrief in Large Group**   * Investigate participants reactions to the connections between the current VUCA environment and  1. faculty responses to that environment, and 2. how our student support activities have changed  * Create a list of strategies in two areas: faculty burnout and student support * Review key learnings from small group discussions. |
| 5 minutes | **Wrap-up** |

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