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### Questioning Care in the Academic World

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# Questioning Care in the Academic World<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The arrival of COVID-19 has altered the world of academia in ways that we are only beginning to understand, just as it has reshaped and reconfigured expectations and enactments of care. As faculty navigate the seismic upheaval wrought by this pandemic, we question whether the semblance of care for faculty has disappeared from this new landscape.

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## **Questioning Care in the Academic World**

The arrival of COVID-19 has altered the world of academia in ways that we are only beginning to understand, just as it has reshaped and reconfigured expectations and enactments of care. As faculty navigate the seismic upheaval wrought by this pandemic in academia - while meeting the reworked requirements of teaching, research, and service - we question whether the semblance of care for faculty has disappeared from this new landscape.

### **The Figured World of Academia**

As scholars in teacher education, we exist within the particular “figured world” (Holland et al., 1998) of academia. In this socially and culturally constructed world, unspoken guidelines and unseen social forces influence behaviors (Gonsalves et al., 2019), particular people are recognized, particular acts are given significance, and particular outcomes are valued (Holland et al., 1998). Academia, as a figured world, is produced and reproduced through experiences, expectations, and interactions that alter interpretations and understandings in overt and covert ways. When the figured world is reformed - through internal responses and/or external events - past experiences may assist in situating people in the newly reconfigured world but those past experiences do not necessarily prepare us to respond in supportive or productive ways.

The concept of care is one continuously shaped in and by the world of academia. For example, gendered expectations of women influence assumptions of how care is enacted, experienced and received by faculty and students. Women faculty are often assigned (or assume) heavier teaching and service loads since the acts of teaching, assistance, and caring for others are “most closely aligned with characteristics and behaviors culturally defined as feminine” (Bellas, 1999, p. 107). In keeping with these misconstructions, women faculty are more likely to receive

lower course evaluations from students due to gendered expectations of how ‘caring’ professors act toward and respond to students (Chamberlin & Hickey, 2001).

The commodification of education also influences the enactments, experiences, and expectations of care in the world of academia. Decades of efforts to remake education according to business principles have “transform[ed] what were social process[es] of teaching, learning, and research into a set of standardised and measurable products” (Ball, 2004, p. 14). The view of student as customer and learning as commodity ignores the educational mission of academia, turning leisure rivers, state-of-the-art recreation centers, and premium dining experiences into selling points to the detriment of authentic social interactions and opportunities for learning (see Katopes, 2009), while redefining the ways in which universities engage with and care for students.

### **Care in a Refigured World**

Care is a fraught concept in the world of academia, where the acceptance of *in loco parentis* is personally and continuously re-interpreted with regard to what it looks like and how it is received: Where one student may interpret a professor’s question as a concern for well-being, another may see it as an intrusion into personal privacy. As teacher educators, we are well aware of the complexity of care in education. Care is an act of responsiveness, requiring us to listen to others so that we can best address their expressed needs (Noddings, 2005). As a result, care takes many different forms, in and out of the classroom (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

Despite differences of expectation and enactment, care for students is essential to the mission and vision of higher education - even more so as academia grapples with the effects of COVID-19. Academia’s care for faculty, however, was a questioned act well before the pandemic arrived. As noted above, women faculty are disproportionately engaged in the heavy

lifting of teaching and service, reducing the time and energy available for the more valued work of research and publication. An emphasis on teaching and service is not typically recognized within established university reward structures (e.g., tenure and promotion) or necessarily seen as an inequity in the first place. Since work with students and colleagues is associated with care (even if not recognized as such), women faculty are expected to be better suited to such work than their male counterparts, putting them in the position to care more for and in specific ways toward the labor of teaching and service (see Bellas, 1999).

The arrival of COVID-19 has exacerbated the tensions of care in (un)expected ways. Teaching has become a more contested space, as universities determined whether to move instruction online or continue with face-to-face classes. Regardless of the medium, good teaching is linked to acts of caring (Rogers & Webb, 1991), which includes relationships with, acceptance of, and responsiveness to students as individuals (Noddings, 2005). Such care for students “clearly [involves] substantial amounts of emotional labor but [is] generally not seen as involving valued skills and [is] consequently poorly rewarded” (Bellas, 1999, p. 107). The difficulties of teaching and learning amid a pandemic have intensified the emotional work of care placed on and expected of faculty, yet this work remains largely unacknowledged and unvalued by university administration.

Unsurprisingly, the expectations of care in academia have increased with COVID-19’s arrival. As evidenced by news reports (e.g., Sainato, 2020), faculty across the nation were infrequently brought into instructional decision-making as universities made plans for the fall semester. Yet faculty were expected to remain responsive to student needs and flexible in the face of changing instructional directions, while care for/of faculty to support and sustain the work of teaching and supporting students was largely absent from universities’ reopening plans.

## **Bothering to Care about Faculty**

Realistically, for universities to function and faculty to be paid, students must return to the university in some form, which raises questions of how to ensure their physical and emotional care. There is a perversion of care in academia, however, when faculty are expected to ensure students are heard and supported, while little of that same concern is afforded to those expected to do this emotional work (see Brabazon, 2020). Instead, faculty are used as a first line of responsive caring for students with little, if any, care extended to faculty. In effect, the care offered to faculty in the academic world often seems to exist in word only.

Care is an organizational concept that requires action beyond acknowledgement. Universities can enact policies and take action that demonstrate care for faculty beyond emails of praise from university leadership. Our current circumstances highlight that academia needs to listen to and exhibit care for faculty. We are all reimagining how to care within the figured world of a profession that places limits on how and why we care, in part because the nature of our work is already limiting the ways in which personal lives, time, and spaces remain personal.

The issues of navigating care and emotional work in academia are not personal issues. They transcend and carry import across varying and intersecting identities of the faculty who do this work on college and university campuses. Yet, those who speak up to call attention to issues of care are often seen as individuals asking for personal responses rather than faculty addressing an academic need. As the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare, the need for authentic care is inescapable in higher education and the consequences of words that do not match actions are far-reaching. If not now, then when can we expect academia, writ large, to show care in meaningful ways?

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