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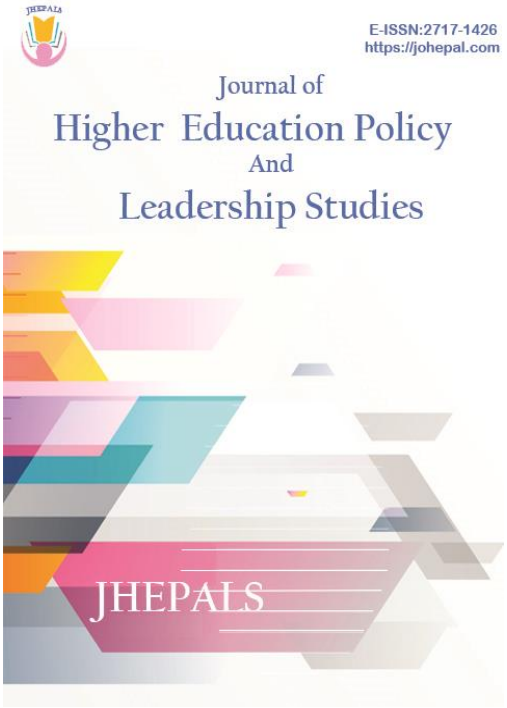

Book Review: The Caring University: Reimagining the Higher Education Workplace after the Great Resignation

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The Caring University: Reimagining the Higher Education Workplace after the Great Resignation

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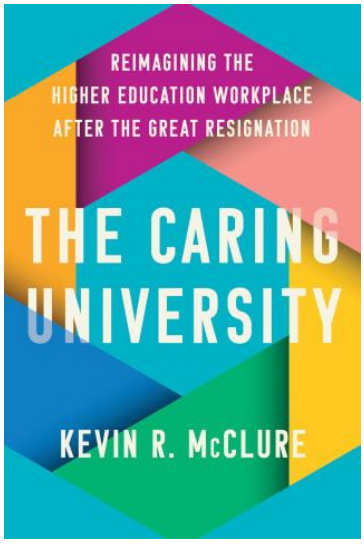

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Higher education institutional performance is frequently measured by various standards of student success or faculty output; employment by the same institution that touts excellence may be little more than drudgery, sometimes even a toxic working environment, for its employees. Many of the problems in U.S. higher education were exacerbated by COVID-19, and like much of the landscape in the years following 2020, higher education faced significant employee turnover, called The Great Resignation. Kevin McClure addresses

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several issues in higher education employment and then reimagines higher education as a place in which employees at all levels can thrive through six organizational changes, resulting in an idealized institution that reprioritizes cultural and structural ideals and utilizes transformational leadership and equitable employment practices to achieve what he calls The Caring University. Within these six categorical changes, he identified multiple practical approaches to demonstrating organizational care. He utilized interviews with constituents in postsecondary institutions as both narratives outlining several problems inherent in higher education as well as success stories, and each chapter intersperses these personal, real-person-and-place stories (only some anonymized) and sizeable uses of well-placed theory. Highlighted are several pop-out case studies, and each chapter concludes with summaries of actionable items to be taken to achieve an organizational shift toward developing The Caring University.

Chapter Themes

Making the Employee Experience a Strategic Priority

Strategic plans may include enrollment, student success, faculty impact, and/or research facilities, but rarely include mentions of staff; in fact, in McClure's research, he found it was "not unusual to see colleges and universities giving more attention to construction projects in their strategic plans than employee well-being" (p. 67). While the absence of staff or employee well-being in strategic plans doesn't mean that they are not valued in campus culture, it is difficult to align culture with unstated values or for individuals to picture themselves involved when they are not represented, resulting in employee disengagement and dissatisfaction. McClure also draws from examples of corporate culture in including employees in organization value-setting and recommends doing so in higher education by using feedback opportunities that target the employee experience to better learn their roles, rather than trying to measure their engagement. In better understanding what employees do, and more consistently communicating institutional values and cultural norms, higher education employers can engage in talent management as a strategic priority, with an emphasis on not only recruiting great employees, but retaining them.

Creating Working Cultures and Conditions for Real (Not Ideal) Workers

In higher education, workplace standards are based on employees who are far from standardized. McClure includes as examples working parents who experienced multiple hardships during COVID-19 shutdowns when daycare was unavailable, on top of inequitable working conditions with nebulously defined and enforced definitions of "essential" employment; despite work and non-work responsibilities having no choice but to exist in the same sphere, employees were given no lenience for either, and stress levels were monumentally high. Many employees, remembering the unrelenting standards they were still expected to maintain during this period, fled these roles when able. As McClure put it, "[h]igher education workers are increasingly unwilling to take part in the 'machine culture' and sacrifice their well-being" (p. 128). He traces the history of the phrase "work-life balance," which many interviewees and survey respondents indicated lacking, and found the phrase to be rooted in historical gender-segregated workplaces that continue to be upheld by professional socialization standards. When workplaces prioritize productivity over humanity, cultures of machine learning thrive, and employees disengage. An example to the

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contrary is Rutgers University, which adopted a flexible work week; employees could work across 4 days instead of 5, and internal meetings on Fridays were discouraged. Rather than being less available for students, this structure better served them as it created more opportunities for later hours to meet the needs of commuter and remote students, while employees who wanted to participate had the same hours to work condensed into 4 days, and meetings were set with greater intention.

Committing to Professional Growth and Fair Compensation

One of the fundamental issues in higher education is high quality employees not being paid enough. McClure cites studies indicating that one of the few fallbacks that higher education has been able to lean on in lieu of compensation, benefits, are being reduced or restructured by many so that buying power is diminishing. McClure draws on research on DDOs—deliberately developmental organizations—to define some practices that would improve higher education compensation, starting with clearer pathways and ladders to career progression (demystifying the path to faculty tenure being one), and including robust professional development. If the role of colleges and universities is to create and perpetuate knowledge as well as teach students, it has to take care of the people it employs who do these things, or, according to McClure, "[i]f institutions want to fulfill their core purposes, they also have to attend to their responsibilities as *employers*" (p. 153).

Pursuing Cultural and Structural Change for Equity and Belonging

This chapter focused on the challenges of creating and supporting an equitable workplace despite the many intertwined systems of oppression at work. McClure uses a generalized misnomer of "marginalized employees," and from the many narratives shared, it occurs to me that this topic could be explored in greater depth while giving more attention to individual identities, or those identities at play in different institutional settings. Historically, higher education is overwhelmingly white, and as McClure notes, leadership in most cases remains so; practices of ensuring that institutional employees more resemble the diversity of communities that they serve are relatively recent. As a result, there are swaths of literature regarding marginalized employees' tokenization, discrimination, harassment, and even abuse, resulting in not only poor job performance, but poor mental health and well-being resulting from stressors and traumas. Some practices to reduce the experiences of these employees include incorporating equitable hiring practices and outcomes (for example, by making all individuals on a search committee share a responsibility for equity in the search instead of one individual designee) and valuing the labor of marginalized employees. One of my favorite success stories from this book was in this chapter, with the example of the University of Utah taking on a shared equity leadership model, in which they moved away from the "wheel and spoke" model to a "woven" model of equity responsibility, meaning equity work is a responsibility of every job on campus, as opposed to designated equity official roles in separate units.

Empowering Employees' Rights and Voice

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Shared governance in which employees have a say in their workplace is often lacking in the American job expanse. One area in which there has been ground toward equitable employment practices is through the unionization of employees, something which is not common practice in higher education. However, at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC), a union representing both contingent (part-time or adjunct) faculty and tenure-track faculty has found success in collaborating with institutional leadership to create structures and processes to facilitate organizational learning through discussion and debate. Unionized employees like at UIC are rare, but other institutions have identified alternative methods to championing employee rights, such as the University of Denver, which added a separate employment track resulting in contingent faculty protection. Ensuring more competitive pay, evaluations, and opportunities for advancement, such as promotions from lecturer to senior lecturer, result in a situation that makes it difficult for the institution to hire lecturers cheaply to offset tenure-track faculty, for the good of both parties.

Cultivating and Sustaining Caring Leaders

The higher education structure and environment make the expression of care difficult; leaders have increasing responsibility with greater distance between themselves and the employees that they lead, resulting in the leader's stress and loneliness, and reduction of the leader from a real person to a figurehead for the employee. One campus leader indicated part of the difficulty in leadership is that on one side, employees are unhappy with you, and on the other side, the board is unhappy with you. On top of this, it's rare that institutions provide the support that individuals need to be developed into leaders; McClure identified in prior research that search consultants at top firms provided the example of interest in candidates that demonstrate "executive material," an undefined quality that most commonly advantages outspoken, extroverted men who can command the room. As a result, individuals with marginalized identities or who present less traditional leadership styles have an interest in leadership as service may be overlooked. "Caring leadership" has been the subject of limited study, but the qualities of compassion, trust, and vulnerability in leaders are well-documented, and for an institution based on care, qualities like these should be sought as well as developed in prospective leaders.

Areas of Improvement and Implications for Future Work

One critique or area of improvement played out as a question as I read the book, and it was "And how will this be funded?" McClure provides a response in the conclusion: institutions must choose to fund any initiative strategically, and plan for expenditures associated with certain approaches. While the response may seem an easy out, it is in line with the theme of the book in the necessity of choosing to make radical transformational changes. As was stated, "caring is not a substitute for sufficient compensation" (p. 63), and inevitably there are skeptics who would read this book and choose the mindset that finances would be an insurmountable hurdle, regardless of success stories to the contrary. One example demonstrated is Amarillo College in Texas receiving a sizable donation *in response to* (in other words, not to fund measures toward) a cultural shift that led to exemplary student success and employee satisfaction.

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The book tacitly acknowledges that The Great Resignation was not a singular event with short-lived implications; rather, a post-pandemic working world was introduced and in it, what defines institutional success and employee satisfaction continues to be negotiated. Adding to the "new normal" is an uncertain future for higher education institutions and environments as they continue to face political, ideological, and legislative onslaughts. This book was published in a precarious calm between storms in higher education and provides valuable insights and strategies for institutions to choose from in planning to weather further tumult. There are twenty distinct approaches to developing facets of The Caring University; some may be more easily adopted, and the book is less of a blueprint to achieving the utopian employer than it is a guide for developing organizational care within an institution, with vast opportunity to continue developing the concept of organizational care in research as well as practice.

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