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A Small Festschrift in a Big World (Chapter 1)

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Balancing Care and Excellence in Higher Education

A Festschrift in Honor of Jeffrey W. Cornett

Edited by

Carolyne Ali-Khan and Daniel L. Dinsmore



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Cover illustration: Balancing in the web of life, Jacksonville. Photograph by Carlyne Ali-Khan, 2022

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A Small Festschrift in a Big World

Carolyn Ali-Khan and Daniel Dinsmore

Abstract

In this chapter, we provide our personal contexts for *Balancing Care and Excellence in Higher Education: A Festschrift in Honor of Jeffrey Cornett*. In so doing, we address the place of care and excellence in the 2020's in our lives through a critical lens, and we examine the ways that these have led to this book. We also place this book in broader contexts to analyze the ways that care has been distorted and weaponized. Further, we examine how care is operationalized in higher education. Through all of this, we argue that each of us bears responsibility for reclaiming care. Finally, we explain why care is not enough – we connect care to excellence as we lay out our vision for this book.

Keywords

care – excellence – higher education – compassion – Anti-CRT – critical theory

1 The Distortion of Care

When we began this book, we envisioned it as both a tribute to a scholar and a way to continue to move a theoretical ball forward. And that is still true, but I, Carolyn, feel the need to note how the context in which we publish this work has changed. These changes necessitate that I place this work in a broader political context, one that has shifted, morphed, and metastasized of late. So, although the reflections of the authors in this volume are largely about interpersonal and institutional change and care, they nest in a broader landscape. As I write this, we collectively teeter on the brink of unprecedented ecological disaster, we slide ever further into the quiet horror of health disparities, and the muffled, desperate, violence of poverty through income inequality. Further, the atrocities of the invasion of Ukraine continue, and now as the Israeli-Palestinian crisis deepens, Israeli bombings kill thousands of children and civilians in Gaza while also incurring loss of Israeli life. As I try to understand the plight of those who are the victims of the war crimes that fill our screens,

I recognize that I must think also think of those who were sent to commit these crimes, who – in the name of care for their country – have been pushed into a place that strips them of their humanity. This is care made monstrous.

In 1870, Julia Ward Howe issued the original Mother's Day proclamation, and in the spirit of care, she called on mothers to "be too tender" to allow their sons to inflict harm on the sons of other mothers, reminding them that "the sword of murder is not the balance of justice." Speaking truth to power, Howe radically dared to decouple justice from violence, while firmly linking social justice to care. She knew that care is complex, nuanced and unevenly scattered through the world.

As we move through the graphic knowledge afforded to us by the information age of the 21st century, we are provided more than glimpses of how care is inequitably distributed. As humans our vision is selective, the way that the world aches for some suffering while ignoring others is largely based on race, and although Ukraine and Gaza may now be at the forefront of our consciousness, cruelty is not owned by one regime or one historical period. Nonetheless, I cannot write about care without acknowledging how, because of the media attention given to this moment, I am pushed to contemplate how deeply the world needs care, and how much we all are shaken by current world events.

I recently lived in Florida, and in this state there are currently focused attacks on both educators, and on those who have just recently begun to receive a small measure of the attention that they deserve concerning their long history of brutal and unfair treatment – namely LGBTQ-plus communities, and communities of color. Anti-CRT policies, like the "Stop Woke" and the "Don't say gay" bill along with attacks on tenure in Florida are visceral enactments of everything that is the opposite of care. These bills are nothing short of an instrumentalization of cruelty; they are cruelty codified, enshrined, and lauded. They are what happens when we care only for those we perceive as our own, when care is weaponized as a zero-sum game, where to caring for "us" can only happen at the expense of caring about "them." I do not believe that those who are behind these bills are devoid of care for their fellow human beings, but rather that their conception of care is deeply problematic. These times have taught me that the opposite of care is not a lack of care, but a distortion of it. When the language of care and respect is grotesquely torn away from its roots in compassion it does not shed its name, it simply becomes all that is its inverse. I now see how care can be weaponized against children, as they are taught – in the name of caring for family values – that only *some* families deserve to be named. I witness with horror as parental care for children's mental health is twisted into banned books and teacher witch-hunts. I feel both outraged and helpless as I watch care-for-self contorted into an intellectual

straitjacket that chokes growth by criminalizing discomfort. These political and ideological machinations are the rack on which care is being stretched, disarticulated, and made monstrous. As I struggle to emerge from these understandings, I become increasingly convinced that thinking seriously about care matters more than ever, and theorizing care might be the best hope that we, collectively, have in the journey to protect our most vulnerable populations from harm. I believe we are at a historical juncture, a moment in which care desperately needs redemption. If it is to be in the service of good, care needs to be re-grounded in compassion, and must be fortified by our collective intellectual energies. Together we can both narrow and broaden the focus, we can think about how care operates in our spheres of influence and how these impact the world more broadly. Along with our co-authors, we attempt here to offer some thoughts on the path forward, in the hope that this book can, in some small way, help.

2 Contextualizing Care in the Place of Higher Education

At the time of this writing, I, Dan Dinsmore, have been associate dean in the College of Education and Human Services at the University of North Florida for the past three years. My broader experiences as a teacher and my specific training as an academic in a specific subfield, as well as my previous eight years as an assistant and associate professor, left me ill-prepared to tackle the challenges of an administrative role in higher education while holding care at the center of this role.

Like other administrators, I have spoken to, in this job there are almost daily challenges that require complex solutions. On a good day, these solutions help all parties involved and make everyone happy, or at least satisfied. On a bad day these solutions can be fraught with competing interests from different parties with one group benefiting and another not, one group happy and another not. In higher education, the wants and needs of the political establishment, educational leaders, faculty, and students are sometimes at odds. While the good days help sustain my role as a leader in higher education, those bad days can be downright soul-sucking and make me want to return to the faculty life I was trained for. The writing of this book has helped me re-center care in my work and hopefully can help others do the same. The centering of care is what transforms administrative work in higher education and gives meaning to sustain it.

As I try to make sense of those bad days, I am incredibly fortunate to have had numerous people in my life that have given me sage words of wisdom, or more

importantly, have acted in ways in that I both admire and try my hardest to emulate. Importantly, most of these individuals have *not* been in higher education. These people range from my formative experiences with my loving and caring parents, Tom and Linda, teachers I have had throughout my formal and informal schooling, and Dr. Hewitt who was the first principal I worked for as a teacher. In addition, I have had within higher education two individuals that helped me better understand care. Dr. Patricia Alexander, who was my doctoral advisor and a life-long mentor and friend to me, began my journey of centering care in higher education. However, in my role as a higher education administrator, no person has had an impact on trying to center care like Jeffrey (Jeff) Cornett.

As an example, even though this conversation was at least six years in the past I do not have to paraphrase these words of advice from Jeff because they have stuck with me – “If you want to be popular, don’t be a dean.” One could of course apply this to a variety of academic roles – chair, dean, provost, president, etc. As is typical with Jeff you usually get both a joke and a nugget of wisdom all in one. When he uttered it, the joking nature of those words made me laugh. However, I have come back to that phrase time and again dissecting exactly what it means, trying to understand what he meant by this, and trying to understand how I might interpret it to better make sense of my place in my Higher Education organization. I have come to two conclusions about these words. First, these words are, 100%, universally true in the capital “T” sense of truth. Second, they encapsulate an important lesson that I have only begun to appreciate early on in my career as an administrator. Being liked, or popular is not a good reason to be a leader. Being liked as a leader is not always synonymous with being a caring leader. On the “good days” they do line up. But these words have helped me reframe the “bad days” as ones in which expecting everyone to like me should not be the goal, rather the goal is to ensure that I have tried my best to care for everyone in the organization to the best of my ability.

As Carolyn alluded to earlier in this chapter, the context around higher education – as well as higher education itself – is shifting in monumental ways. Some of these changes no doubt are well-intentioned. For instance, the focus on retention and graduation in institutions of higher education was intended to ensure that students do not place themselves under, sometimes, enormous debt, without being supported sufficiently through their higher education journey. Other changes, however, appear to be devoid of compassion, particularly for those individuals that have been systemically and historically oppressed. As we navigate the nuances and intricacies of these laws, I hope that this work may help me and others to center care.

This book is full of wisdom from many of Jeff’s colleagues – as well as Jeff himself – who also have care as their north star. The words in this book will

continue to serve as a framework that I can use to reflect on situations in my daily life in Higher Education. I am grateful to these chapter authors, and Jeff for a tome that will continue to guide me for however long I am lucky to remain in Higher Education. I hope for you, too, they will provide words of wisdom that will make our organizations more human institutions.

3 Why the Need to Juxtapose Care and Excellence?

There are volumes written about promoting excellence in organizations, higher education, and otherwise. If the belief is that the sole focus of a higher-education organization is to increase enrollment, build an endowment, or churn out a steady supply of workers to fill jobs in various roles, this volume may seem extraneous to these goals. However, we see two primary issues with goals such as these, that have driven the corporatization of higher education (cf., Mills, 2012).

First, we believe that in institutions of higher education, defining excellence through these types of narrow goals, without considering the construct of care, both within those institutions and their surrounding communities, is morally bankrupt. For example, the relationships between universities and their surrounding communities are often fraught. While these institutions of higher education may provide some economic impact on their communities, they also often take a huge toll on them as well. A case in point is Yale University which contributes to the local economy, while also having enormous property holdings that are tax exempt – which brings into question whether the University's excellence comes less from excellence in organizational decision-making and more from a "plundering" of cities (Baldwin, 2021). These issues are particularly salient given the effects of the global pandemic and reckoning with racial injustice on local and national communities, particularly those of color. These injustices are just beginning to enter public debate. For example, in 2020, New Haven residents and union workers engaged in multiple protests about Yale University's strain on local finances, these protests prompted an exposé about the local impacts of universities as tax-free zones (Baldwin, 2021). The work of institutes like the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery at Yale was also instrumental in exposing the disconnect between the rhetoric of excellence and the reality of economic exploitation. A conference held at the Center exposed the university's historical relationship to slavery and racism (Yale, 2021) and may have contributed to forcing the University to respond. Perhaps the times are changing, in 2015 the *New Haven Register* lauded Yale for contributing more than two billion dollars to the local community (Turmelle, 2015),

and by 2021 the same local newspaper, spotlighted the mounting political pressure for Yale to “meaningfully increase” financial support of the surrounding area (Stannard, 2021). These kinds of moments speak to the possibility of universities moving beyond institutional platitudes and the rhetoric of excellence to instead examine their impact on the world – a move that begins to connect excellence to care.

These moral questions are not restricted to institutions of higher education. Examples of these types of analyses are rife in the corporate sector as well. One common metric of corporate status and excellence is total market capitalization. As of the writing of this volume, multiple high-valuation companies have struggled with the notion of care for the global climate, e.g., Saudi Aramco (Jessop, 2020), and our body politic, e.g., Facebook (Dwoskin & Timberg, 2021), as well as care for the workers that help produce goods, e.g., Tesla (Siddiqui, 2021) and services, e.g., Amazon (Wasserman, 2021). We believe that excellence without care is counterproductive and untenable for the health and well-being of humanity.

Second, we believe that by considering the nature of care, excellence will be *easier* to attain for organizations – higher education and otherwise. There is now a plethora of evidence that the considerations of individuals (e.g., their goals, and desires) and the organizational dynamics (e.g., trust) are crucial for organizational success. In a related family of models to Jeff’s practical theories, the literature on organizational sensemaking has demonstrated that understanding and responding to the needs of everyone within an organization has a multitude of benefits including increased worker safety (e.g., O’Keeffe et al., 2015), better productivity (e.g., Krush et al., 2013), and communication (Gephart, 2004). In other words, care should not be seen as detracting from excellence. Rather, care is an integral part of an organization. The remainder of this volume is dedicated to exactly this notion.

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