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Frameworks for Balancing Care and Excellence in Higher Education (Chapter 2)

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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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Frameworks for Balancing Care and Excellence in Higher Education

Daniel Dinsmore and Carolyne Ali-Khan

Abstract

In this chapter, we explain our theoretical grounding and provide a framework for what follows. We outline the twin purposes of this book, as we explain our conceptions of care and excellence and the relationship between the two. Like all academic texts our work here stands about other established frameworks, and we diagram this to illustrate where this text fits in the field. Finally, we include an overview of the chapters that follow to serve as a reader guide.

Keywords

organizational excellence – care – dignity – Nel Noddings – higher education

1 Core Constructs

This volume has two non-mutually exclusive purposes. The first of these purposes is to honor the academic and human legacy that Jeff has left with everyone he has touched throughout his long and successful career. We hope that this volume acts as a physical manifestation of the love and admiration that each of these authors has for Jeff and his work. The second purpose is to serve as a guiding framework for higher education educators and administrators who wish to not only strive for excellence in their organization but do so in a way that maintains the dignity and humanity of those they work with, for, and on behalf of. We say these goals are not mutually exclusive because sharing what we have learned from Jeff with the readers of this volume to help make other organizations more caring is the highest honor we can think of.

Our goal for this chapter is to introduce the core constructs of care and excellence, attempt to juxtapose the two, and overview how the following

chapters will contextualize care and excellence in specific higher education contexts. Finally, we will offer our more personal insights into how Jeff operationalized care and excellence and how this helped shape our academic and personal journeys.

2 Conceptualizing Care and Excellence

2.1 *The Ethic of Care*

In introducing these two core constructs, we begin with the ethic of care since it is more straightforward. While the word *care* has multiple different meanings in our everyday language and a variety of conceptualizations in the academic literature (e.g., Held, 2006; Ruddick, 1998; Tronto, 1999). In this chapter, we will adopt the framework that Jeff has utilized throughout his career – Nel Noddings’ Ethics of Care (Noddings, 2002). The Ethic of Care is a feminist philosophical perspective that situates care within specific contexts and provides a moral direction for decision-making (Larrabee, 2016). Rather than relying on ethical principles – such as Lawrence Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development (1976) – the Ethic of Care requires us to carefully consider *who* it is we are caring for and *where* the caring situation occurs. Importantly, unlike other developmental theories of morality, Noddings theorized that the impulse to care was universal. Thus, we do not need to convince people to act morally, rather, we need to focus on helping individuals recognize how they can employ the ethic of care to humanize the organizations in which they are a part.

Noddings’ conceptualization of care has three primary components. First, the caregiver (i.e., the one caring) must exhibit what Noddings referred to as engrossment. Engrossment refers to the caregiver understanding the needs of the person being cared for. Second, the carer must engage in motivational displacement. Motivational displacement refers to the carer acting within the best interest of those being cared for. In other words, the carer needs to set aside what is best for themselves and act on behalf of what the person being cared for needs at that given time. Third, the cared for must recognize and accept that this caring has taken place. It is not enough to act in someone’s best interest if the one being cared for cannot recognize the motivational displacement of the caregiver.

We can think of no better illustration of these three components than Jeff himself. An academy is a busy place and the time required to exhibit engrossment can be difficult. Being a chair, the context in which we knew Jeff, is especially fraught with a multitude of student, faculty, and administrative issues daily. However, there was never a question that Jeff would stop whatever he

was doing and take as long as needed to listen to whatever problem we brought to him, large or small, to understand the issue. What is so remarkable to us is that this disposition to take time to listen was true whether Jeff was having a good day, or one filled with the administrative headaches that come along with being a department chair. Our department was not without disagreement; however, the one constant was that there was never any doubt that Jeff understood each of us and where we were coming from. Department meetings often included debates that touched upon fierce ideological or theoretical differences. They also included ideas about the implementation of policy that was sometimes deeply at odds. In this, there is nothing unusual. What was unusual, exceptional, and close to unheard of, was that our resting state was one of peace, and solidarity. Jeff would listen attentively to each side of a debate with piercing attentiveness, then he would rephrase our thoughts, adding to them a reminder to us that we could resolve our differences without making them personal. In the spirit of Noddings (2002) he believed, "We must talk to one another. Sometimes we are successful at persuading others, sometimes they persuade us, and sometimes we must simply agree to go on caring across great ideological differences" (p. 23). While "agreeing to go on" he encouraged us to be kind in our assessments and flexible in our positions. Under his guidance the place where our meetings found equilibrium was a place of care. And there, in that space of care and community, we inevitably came to rest. We each knew that we had been heard, and ultimately that was always more important than winning.

Equally strong was Jeff's ability to engage in motivational displacement. The number of times Jeff put aside what would be better for him as either a faculty member or chair was extraordinary. For example, he was the chair whose office door was always open. He spent an extraordinary number of hours on campus, and within that time he made sure to conjure, create, and somehow find bottomless time for any and every faculty member, staff member, or student. When he was interrupted by any of us, he never showed it, he would smile, stop what he was working on, invite whoever stood before him to pull up a chair, and suddenly appear to have nothing else in the world to do but to attend to the person in front of him. It did not matter whether our concerns were large or small, or if we were just stopping by to say hello. We were always greeted with warmth, curiosity, and an unambiguous welcome as if our visit had simply made his day. The fact that this temporal, professional, and emotional generosity came at a great price was never visible. Once the unexpected guest had left, he would be left with less time for his previous work and he would diligently set to it, the door still ajar. To Jeff, caring was not an interruption, it was simply one strand of a day's work.

2.2 *Logos, Ethos, Pathos, and Care*

Jeff made it difficult – if not impossible – to not feel cared for. Rhetorically speaking, Jeff engaged *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* appeals in the caring situation to make the person feel cared for. These three aspects of rhetoric coined by Aristotle appeal to credibility (i.e., *ethos*), logic (i.e., *logos*), and emotion (*pathos*). About *ethos*, Jeff's credibility was beyond reproach – a topic we will return to later. His scholarship, teaching, and service credentials were never in doubt. About *logos*, Jeff did not decide without communicating the reasons for that decision, and why it was in the best interest of the organization. Third, and most important in our view, was the warm and loving spirit that emanated from Jeff. For example, when the authors of this chapter first met Jeff, (independently) we were nervous, new, not yet out of graduate school, and nascent academicians. As background, the interview process (grueling for even the most seasoned professionals) is a mysterious journey, there is little to prepare a traveler for who and what may lie behind door number one, and there are no guides. And then there was Jeff, who upon meeting us, greeted us, (respectively) with the kind of warmth that is normally reserved for family members. He made us feel that his thrill at meeting us was immeasurable, that we were exactly who he had been waiting for, and that shaking hands with us was a rare joy. The spirit of love and warmth that emanated from him not only put us immediately at ease, but it also turned the power hierarchy upside down as the department chair (potentially our future boss) treated us like celebrities. That level of warmth never stopped. Jeff made everyone feel important, he gave us the space to matter, and within that space, he modeled how we could truly matter.

3 **Organizational Excellence**

Like care, we do not consider excellence to be a set of decontextualized principles that one can simply apply. Rather, what excellence means in complex organizations is necessarily contextual. In other words, the quality of being outstanding (i.e., excellent) may differ depending on the organization and milieu in which the organization is situated. For example, excellence in a for-profit corporate organization may consist of making the most money, whereas excellence in a non-profit institution of higher education may consist of providing students with an optimal educational experience.

However, even within institutions of higher education, excellence may possess varied shades of meaning – both in how excellence is conceptualized and operationalized. Many of these distinguishing features are most evident

in accreditation and the foci of these accrediting bodies. Thus, organizational frameworks of excellence generally establish broad criteria of excellence, rather than prescriptive actions for excellence. For example, The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) framework has been used by a variety of higher-education organizations and provides a “broad and coherent set of assumptions about what is required for a good organization and its management,” (Brusoni et al., 2014, p. 9). These revolve around the key facets of leadership, policy and strategy, people management, partnerships and resources, and process management.

In the United States and the United Kingdom, the emphasis – at least around accreditation – has focused a great deal on continuous improvement in recent decades. For instance, Brent Ruben (2007) proposed the notion of continuous improvement in his *Excellence in Higher Education Guide*. External criticisms of higher-education organizations have long decried the slow march toward change and improvement (Spellings, 2006). Ruben contrasted the protracted discussions that typically occur within institutions of higher education and the slow rate of change with those more typical of corporations that rely on top-down decision-making without much organizational deliberation. He concluded:

Thus, the challenge is to adopt approaches that encourage interaction and consultation but also ensure that the commitment to timely decision-making and change is not simply rhetorical. For our own sake, and to effectively address what is a frequent concern among our critics, greater attention to analysis that results in plans and improvements is important. (Ruben, 2007, p. 4)

There are aspects, particularly to the latter type of model, that align closely with what we believe Jeff was able to accomplish around excellence in processes and decision-making. This is not surprising as his main scholarly contribution was framed by a naturalistic decision-making model, he called *personal practical theories*. He returns to this idea many times as he refines and crafts its’ nuances (cf. Cornett, 1995; Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwilliger, 1990; Cornett & Johnson, 2015). Thus, for Jeff, excellence in these organizational change and decision-making processes went together with his insistence on understanding how individuals made decisions based on their own beliefs. In other words, excellence in organizational change was tied directly to the people involved in making that change – a topic we will return to in more detail in the next section.

4 Mapping Out the Relationship between Care and Excellence

Given the necessity of including care in the discussion vis-à-vis excellence of organizations, we attempt here to posit the beginnings of a roadmap toward helping those in higher education conceptualize and operationalize care and excellence. Before we embark on this endeavor, we want to plot out what may be possible and what might be useful. It is not our intention to fully develop a framework here, but rather to develop a pan-ontological and pan-epistemic space for further exploration.

To create this space, we want to lay bare potential assumptions that might guide the development of different frameworks. Here we briefly describe two approaches to setting this space. One is in the *Cartesian-split mechanistic tradition* (CSMT) and the other is in the *relational tradition* (RT). Broadly, CSMT relies on two processes – generalization through induction and deduction through falsification (Overton, 2014). RT, on the other hand, relies on “processes explained as the result of self-organizing processes with emergent properties that have complex, dynamic interaction with environmental influences” (Molenaar, 2014, p. 3). More specifically, these two approaches differ in how the nature of development, the exclusivity of categories, types of causality, and data analytic approaches are treated. A breakdown of these major differences is displayed in Table 2.1. See Overton (2014) for a more complete description of these differences.

4.1 Exploring Care and Excellent in the CSMT Framework

One potential direction to exploring care and excellence is through the CSMT approach. Developmentally speaking, the assumptions here are that we hold care and excellence as two distinct constructs. Further, we would assume that excellence is a downstream endogenous variable that is caused by changes in the upstream exogenous variable of care. We could isolate the variance of care across individuals or organizations as well as the variance in excellence and fully determine how care affects excellence regardless of knowing other aspects of those individuals or organizations. Figure 2.1 displays this CSMT model of the relationship between care and excellence.

This approach has been used to look at numerous constructs that are care and excellent adjacent. By adjacent, we mean constructs that may have conceptual similarities to care or excellence. For example, with children, there have been numerous studies that have examined the effects of pro-social behavior (i.e., a care-adjacent variable) on academic achievement (i.e., an excellence-adjacent variable, e.g., Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Similarly, with

TABLE 2.1 Primary differences in the Cartesian-split mechanistic and relational traditions

Aspect	Cartesian-split mechanistic	Relational
Nature of development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on interindividual differences (i.e., between people) - Influenced by outside causes - Is additive and linear - Can be explained in context free (i.e., “pristine”) environments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on intraindividual differences (i.e., within people) - Individual as active agent of change - Is nonlinear and stage-like - Is completely contextualized and situated where time and place matter
Categorization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Models are made up of constituent parts that are exclusive to each other - These parts can be combined using additive evaluative processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constructs are composed of differentiated polarities - Relations between constructs are interdependent
Causality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Antecedents cause consequences - System is fully determined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multiple types of causality possible including efficient, material, final, functional, and formal - Bidirectional and circular causality possible
Data analytic approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation of variance - Reliance on null hypothesis testing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Synthesis of parts into a whole - Probabilistic approaches

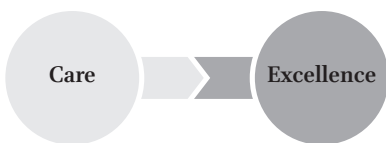


FIGURE 2.1 Modeling care and excellence in a CSMT framework

adult populations, there is evidence to suggest that more collaborative activity leads to better work-related outcomes including in institutions of higher education (e.g., Lee & Bozeman, 2005). These findings suggest that it is likely that such an approach may yield data that concludes that greater organizational care leads to greater organizational excellence. However, it would certainly be useful to have more direct evidence for this contention.

4.2 *Exploring Care and Excellence in an RT Framework*

While the CSMT approach is more dominant in educational and organizational psychology research, we believe that the RT Framework is more likely to offer relevant insights into the relations between care and excellence and how the knowledge generated from RT-based frameworks may create findings that have a greater practical impact. For one, we believe the fully determined, unidirectional model in CSMT does not adequately account for the cyclical relations between the two constructs. Second, this fully determined model in CSMT would not account for the complex, dynamic nature of care and excellence in organizations.

So, what would such a model look like? We present here a simpler model with the hope that this model could be expanded in future iterations. To give life to this model we utilize two images. First, Figure 2.2 illustrates how RT allows for circular causality – a component that we believe is critical to understanding how these two constructs are related. Just as organizations that exhibit more caring should become more excellent (as discussed in the CSMT model), as those organizations become more excellent, they should change the capacity and nature of care being exhibited. Further, these reciprocal relations can only be examined considering the cultural context in which care and excellence are being considered.

However, not only do we propose that there are quantifiable reciprocal relations here, but also that as organizations develop, the quality and ontological makeup of these two constructs can be changed. To explain this, we turn to M.C. Esher's iconic drawing in which hands draw hands, as a good analogy of how this might look. When care and excellence are allowed equal weight, space, and importance, they can work together, becoming with/for the other (each fleshing out the other). Not only do they co-create a shared ontology, each forming the other, but they go beyond this to engage in a space where co-construction is a given. Excellence is Care a la Care is Excellence and – like Esher's hands and our model in Figure 2.2 – each pulls the other into being. To interact with Jeff was to be gently pulled into remembering that we are all instrumental to each other's futures, through the actions he reminded us that we become together.

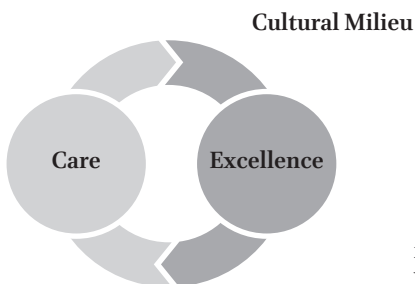


FIGURE 2.2
Modeling care and excellence in an RT framework

Jeff's enactments of care were complex and layered. His care for each of us as individuals was intertwined with his care for the communities in which we practiced, our impact on these communities, and their impact on us. Here again, the spiral of growth was one of the reciprocal relations. Jeff's circle of care and excellence rose beyond normal institutional structures and boundaries and connected with a deep care for all life, and all interactions. His personal life, his relationships with his family, former colleagues, current students, and anyone who has crossed his path were interwoven in his interactions with faculty. We were all deeply, and without reservation allowed "in" and in each story that he told, his personal and professional insights were woven together. Through Jeff's guidance, we were invited to understand that to practice excellence, we had to respond to what Joe Kincheloe (in a related line of reasoning) described as an ontological imperative to connect "the social web of human life, and the epistemological web of knowledge production" (2003, p. 48). For Jeff, these multiple layers of connections were imperative to the ethic and enactment of care.

4.3 *An Example of Care and Excellence Interconnectivity*

As young scholars, each of us entered academic life new to the South, new to our careers, and new to the intricacies and nuances of living and working as professors. Jeff understood that we needed to be nurtured in ways that would engage us in a lifelong journey. He used his expertise to guide us in our craft, teaching us to be active participants, engaged in creating a faculty department that was more than a collection of individuals focused on collective "mission" goals, and more than a unit of individuals with loosely related research interests. He met with each of us to help us understand who we could become – and did this by providing deeply personal support.

Ultimately attentive to Simone Weil's timeless question, "What are you going through?" (Weil, 2021, p. 69), Jeff, through his modeling, reminded us to reach out when colleagues or students might be or feel that they were in harm's way, in both personal and/or professional arenas. To return to Escher's image, he pulled us off the page and reminded us that we could exist fully and true to ourselves as multidimensional, multifaceted beings even in the often deeply formal (emotionally flat) space of the ivory tower. We entered academic life a place where care and emotions were not peripheral to professionalism, but where they lived and breathed. Through Jeff's sharing we knew of each other's lives, and through his modeling a constant spirit of care we were encouraged to always be fully human and fully compassionate. At department meetings, we argued over the intricacies of wording and confronted our ideological and conceptual differences, while we also made jokes, laughed, and gently pushed each other to go further.

In Escher's iconic image of hands drawing hands, a pencil draws hands and is also not only drawn by them, but pushed out of the two-dimensional plane

to hover above the page. To engage with this image is to be pulled into an endless loop of creation and co-creation, it is also to engage with the unexpected. Like Escher, Jeff challenged us to engage with the unexpected by inviting us into the responsibility of having a hand in the structures that created us and pushing us to consider the possibility that something more human and more humane is possible in academia and beyond it.

At the heart of the relational model of care and excellence – that we lived under Jeff’s guidance – was the idea that recognizing the full humanity of the other, in any interaction was intrinsic to any and every notion of success (or excellence). He reminded us that whatever goal we might, strive for, the true mission for all of us was to never forget our interconnectedness and to be always willing to create a space that could be, first and foremost, deeply human, and humane.

Theoretically – and practically from the examples we provided – the caring situation defines and shapes what excellent outcomes should be. By engaging in Nodding’s two processes of engagement and motivational displacement described earlier, organizations and individuals within organizations may need to continually realign their conceptions of excellence. On the other hand striving towards excellence can change what caring situations might look like and how decisions made based on the journey towards excellence may change the caring situation. Of course, these changes are always informed by the broader cultural milieu – that includes the individuals in the organization – that continually shapes and reshapes these reciprocal changes.

5 Where Do We Go from Here?

Our intention here was not to fully flesh out a model or framework, but rather to create the groundwork for others to explore how these two critical aspects of care and excellence could be studied in an academic sense. We hope that these different perspectives will encourage researchers and practitioners to consider the complexity of balancing care and excellence as well as the need to do so more fully. Jeff has left an enduring legacy on the field in numerous ways, and we hope that we will further contribute to that legacy by encouraging others to take up this mantle.

6 Contextualizing Care and Excellence in Higher Education

6.1 *Overview*

The remainder of this volume examines the juxtaposition of care and excellence in a variety of contexts within higher education. This is important – as

we have hopefully laid out previously – in that context matters a great deal when framing care and excellence. To do this, each chapter will take on a contextual aspect that is central to higher education. Although these chapters each shine a light on ways that we can operationalize a spirit of care, they are not intended to be prescriptive. Noddings is clear that although the impulse to care is universal, “insistence on universal models (of care) is a form of cultural arrogance,” (2002, p. 22). Accordingly, each chapter illustrates a different approach to care and excellence. The examples they illustrate and the suggestions they offer are intended to provoke further questioning.

Our chapters (1 and 2) begin with the context of our work and this chapter (2) ends with a love letter.

6.2 *Chapter 3*

A Civics-oriented Perspective on Care and Excellence, begins by examining the epistemic and human cost of a new order of regressive themes dominant in civics education. Richard Chant walks readers through multiple instances of the recent legislation that attempts to constrain civics education as it politically strips, scripts, and controls it. He alerts us to the personal, political, social, and ecological implications of these trends. And then he leads us out of the woods by offering the possibility of a solution in a civics education that is grounded in the principles of empathy and care. Drawing from his earlier work with Jeff, and including the seminal insights of John Dewey, as well as insights on current events and crises, Chant reminds us that democracy not predicated on care is a deeply tenuous one. If we are to emerge from troubled political times intact, we would do well to heed his call for a civics education that centers on rigor, truth, and care.

6.3 *Chapter 4*

In *Servant Leadership as a Model for Care and Excellence in Higher Education Leadership*, Jerry Johnson considers commitments to care and excellence within the conceptual framework of Servant Leadership (SL) to serve the dual purpose of clarifying and operationalizing the SL construct within the context of higher education and of celebrating the professional contributions of Jeff. The chapter is organized into three sections: the first presents a brief background on SL and an overview of the salient research literature; a second section elaborates on the central tenets of SL as described in that literature, positioning care and excellence as operational manifestations of those tenets and higher education leadership commitments and actions as illustrative examples; finally, a third section offers implications and conclusions related to the practice of leadership in higher education.

6.4 *Chapter 5*

Creating Environments for Care and Excellence to Flourish, explains how Jeff's signature pedagogy exemplified what it means to be empathic, healing, honest, and aware of faculty ideas and needs, while involving faculty in decision-making and supporting the growth of both individuals and community. In this chapter, Madalina Tanase and Hope (Bess) Wilson describe how prioritizing student-first approaches and then combining this with servant leadership can result in creating a space in higher education that is deeply caring. They powerfully illustrate how Jeff operationalized caring, through his commitment to the growth of people, building community, behaving with honesty and integrity, and how he combined this with an ability to address the physiological, affective, relational, instructional, and evaluation needs. Ultimately, they argue that these approaches are optimal for creating the conditions that allow everyone to flourish.

6.5 *Chapter 6*

Ensuring Equity in the Care and Excellence Equation, begins with an introduction to a landscape of hierarchies and inequality, as it is experienced broadly and systemically by faculty who are women of color in higher education. It then breaks off into two complimentary narratives, as Dilek Kayaalp and Wanda Lastrapes, each detail the specific kinds of barriers to the equity that they were accustomed to and expecting, and the ways that Jeff deliberately and systematically dismantled these. In each narrative, the authors invite us into a space from which we can witness the inner voice of faculty members who know all too well what it means to be a person of color (POC), and/or non-Christian woman in a space that is typically dominated by white Christian male norms and mores. The authors walk us through Jeff's anti-racist and equity-oriented practices to bring us to an understanding of the impact that knowing him and experiencing his care has had on their teaching.

6.6 *Chapter 7*

Being Good for Something: The Intersection of Care and Critical Theories, examines Jeff's embodiment of the principles of care in leadership and teacher education through the lens of critical theory. Carolyne Ali-Khan and Hope (Bess) Wilson begin with the words of the iconic Southern activist Miles Horton who reminded us that *being good* is not the same as *being good for something*. They use this idea to examine the myriad ways that teachers and teacher educators are encouraged to be *good at* or *good* without also being pushed to think about what *good for*, means from broader social, political, and community perspectives. They then cite examples to illustrate how Jeff was able to embody

both being good and being good for something, noting how care on an interpersonal level and care on a structural level can be closely aligned. Ultimately, they argue that Jeff's singular commitment to creating institutional structures of care, while embodying and practicing multiple levels of care offer a powerful example of how to really be good, in all of its complexity.

6.7 *Chapter 8*

The Philosophical Roots of Care and Excellence in Teacher Education, connects the dots between conceptions of care in higher education, a Deweyan sense of experience and reflective dispositions, and the personal and institutional experiences of a faculty member. This chapter carefully leads us through the components of care (e.g., open-mindedness, responsibility, etc.), with examples of each. In this chapter, Brian P. Zoellner also shares his insights on the importance of teacher theorizing to the ability of teachers to make decisions that – rather than being reactive – reflect a spirit of care and excellence in k-12 classrooms. Ultimately this chapter offers a framework for how to enact care in teaching.

6.8 *Chapter 9*

Understanding “Care and Excellence”: A Long Journey Guided by Some Wonderful Role Models, brings this volume to a close with the wisdom and insights of Jeff himself. In this chapter, he threads together divergent strands that make up the fabric of care as he guides us through the importance of personal stories as they relate to theoretical groundings, and the impact of all of this in the lived world of leadership in higher education. He begins by explaining how the notion of care and excellence as a practical and theoretical construct evolved throughout his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Jeff then guides us through this journey, and along the way, he brings in the voices of Nel Noddings (the renowned and seminal care theorist) and the way that she has impacted his vision, as well as the insights and wisdom of his family, friends, teachers, wife, and church. As he weaves these together, we can see each of the strands that comprise the thick and rich cloak of care that Jeff wove into his own life, his teaching, his interactions, and his leadership – examples of which we have seen throughout the rest of this volume. This chapter then shifts to provide examples of his continuing journey into care theory and the events in his academic journey that shaped his understanding. He then guides us through the complexity of the model of care that he theorized, taught, implemented, and lived. The chapter ends with reflections on how this model of care in turn seeped back into his own life.

7 What Care and Excellence Has Meant to Us – Our Love Letter to Jeff

Our chapter would not be complete without explaining the profound effect that Jeff – with his focus on care and excellence – has meant for us both professionally and personally. From our description that follows, it should become evident that we would not be the scholars and humans that we have become without him. Whether he wants to admit this or not!

We end this chapter with a short letter highlighting a few of the things we learned from Jeffrey Cornett. We hope that as they continue to give us pause, they may in turn resonate with readers.

Dear Jeff,

You taught us to always have warmth in our voices, care in our demeanors, and a greeting in our smiles. *We behaved better than we might have, simply trying to live up to you.* You taught us to sing, both with our hearts and literally with our voices. We sang your tribute-made-up songs at department meetings and we laughed as we did so. *That laughter reverberates still inside us, it changed the shape of our hearts.* You taught us that “accessibility” is not a corporate buzzword, it is not simply an open door, it is instead, an openness to all that our fellow human beings bring, in every interaction. You taught us that intellectual generosity can be intrinsic to the fabric of academia. *From you, we learned to be kinder.* You taught us to pause and seek advice. We knew your advice would be kind, we knew it would be wise, and we knew our obligation was to try to do the same for those who might seek our advice. You taught us to not forget that we exist in concentric circles of being, and our lives and loves are not incidental to who we are and what we can offer to the world, even in institutional space. *We learned from you that no interaction is discrete.* You taught us that humility and laughter can soften failure, you shared steps and missteps and in that, you made our stumbling safe. You taught us that rigor in teacher education is the rigor of acting with a desire to truly make the world better, and you taught us that this is hard, but nothing else should ever really matter. You showed us that beneath the mechanics of care are the mechanics of love, and you taught us that love can be intrinsically woven through all human interaction. Perhaps, the greatest gift that any human being can give another, is teaching them to love. *You taught us that a spirit of love can deeply infuse even impersonal institutional spaces.* For all of this, we are eternally grateful.

With much love,
Carolyne and Dan

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