

Article

Faculty-Student Interaction and Well-Being: The Call for Care in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article makes the argument that institutions of higher education are responsible for showing care to faculty and students and must offer support for well-being within the policies and practices of the institution. The experiences of teaching during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic offered lessons that can be gleaned from faculty and student experiences to improve pedagogy and curriculum and increase well-being for all. The author reports on her dissertation study on faculty-student interaction and well-being, investigating the qualities of interactions between faculty and students that influenced their well-being. She collected qualitative data in early 2020, observing classrooms and interviewing faculty and students. The data analysis incorporated the instructional arc to examine intentions and reflections of both faculty and students. The discussion of these findings leads the author to propose a series of actions administrations can take to better support faculty: valuing teaching, compensating and rewarding care work, and seeking faculty feedback on their well-being. Faculty can support students' well-being by infusing caring pedagogy and engaging in curricular and policy reform discussions that value student input. The author concludes with an illustration of the Flow of Care as a motivation for continued attention to how care influences well-being in higher education.

Keywords

Care, higher education, curriculum, well-being, faculty-student interaction, flow of care, Covid-19 pandemic

1 The Call for Care in Higher Education

The call for care in higher education is growing stronger as we recover from the struggle and confusion of Covid-19's almost overnight disruption of educational norms and practices. Regardless of the pandemic, Gen Z demands a more adaptable and humane experience that challenges current structures and systems. Academia has long been a high-pressure, competitive environment, but the pandemic and other socio-political stressors have increased the prevalence of mental health struggles for faculty

and students alike (Barbieri, et al., 2021; Aslanian, et al., 2021; Doherty, 2021). Students are tentative, anxious, and disengaged (Fawcett, 2022; Saul, 2022). Faculty are exhausted and many are on the verge of burn out (*The Chronicle*, 2020). It is time for higher education institutions to respond with practices that show care and elevate well-being.

As we revisit our curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional policies, it is crucial that we keep an eye toward overall well-being of faculty and students on these campuses. Students who are the first of their families to go to college are particularly vulnerable, as are students who are in the lowest income levels. Women and ethnic minorities are disproportionately impacted (Fawcett, 2022; Shalaby, et al., 2020). Institutions have a responsibility to respond to the changing types and levels of support required by faculty and students to succeed within the academic system.

Teachers of all types and at all levels were put under pressure during the pandemic, increasing stress levels, pay disparities, and hours of unpaid labor. Faculty with more care responsibilities within their families and within their institutions bore the brunt of the additional labor and stress brought on by the pandemic response (Doherty, 2021; Shalaby, et al., 2020). As we reflect on what happened and work toward a better future in higher education, we need to be asking questions of students and teachers to understand their experiences both then and now. A rush to “return to normal” without reflection on and evolution of policies and practices would be a travesty. Instead, the goal of this paper is to inquire with you about how we can leverage our experiences since 2020 as an impetus for pedagogical and curricular reform to improve student well-being and more robust institutional support to improve faculty well-being. I invite faculty to consider with me how we can integrate care more mindfully into our classrooms and lobby for caring practices to be more successfully institutionalized. I very briefly describe my 2020 study (Holles, 2021) of student-faculty interaction in order to draw conclusions about what actions institutions and faculty can take now to improve well-being.

In teaching positions where the department or field is marginalized, underpaid, or under-resourced in other ways, the impacts of social pressures are felt more strongly. Silvana Richardson (2016) argues that ELT (English language teaching) instructors have responsibilities to not only have clear objectives in their instruction, but also to know their learners as individuals to be most effective as teachers. Faculty need extra time and support to show care by responding to students as individuals. When this work is not recognized or goes unsupported, faculty begin to burn out. *The Chronicle* (2020) found that 69% of surveyed faculty were “very” or “extremely” stressed in the fall of 2020, up from 32% who said the same at the end of 2019. Sener, et. al. (2020) reports that online teaching also comes with negative impacts to faculty well-being and support, even before the pandemic.

Our students are facing additional pressures right now as well. Their social, familial, and educational lives were strained in myriad ways during the height of the pandemic. Additionally, their learning was interrupted in ways that are going to require mitigation to catch up to teachers’ standards in the next number of years. Helping students navigate a complex world while they take classes from us is no small task, but we cannot pretend that higher education is insulated from the impacts of social issues. The mental health crisis that was spiking before the pandemic should be part of our main concern in all sectors, not just education. There is no time to waste in implementing changes that better support overall well-being in higher education.

I am worried for our students, and I am concerned for myself and fellow faculty if these systemic pressures in higher education do not start to shift. I argue that since people and cultures have shifted in the last few years, we cannot afford to maintain systems that have deleterious impacts on faculty and students. In the space that follows, I briefly summarize some of the findings from my dissertation study on faculty-student interaction and well-being in higher education, conducted in spring 2020 at an engineering university in the United States (Holles 2021). I use these brief findings to make a case for changes to classrooms and institutions and to offer suggestions on pedagogical and curricular reform to better support well-being.

2 Faculty-Student Interaction and Its Impact on Well-being

I designed my study on faculty-student interaction and well-being in 2016, as I grappled with the impacts of severe personal stressors that made it hard for me to teach well. My family was in crisis, and I could not give my all to my students. I felt like I was barely treading water. I also had been a struggling freshman in college after a successful high school career, suffering from depression I did not have language to understand at the time. As an EdD student, I reflected on what got me through those times, what people and actions supported me versus which ones made it harder. Since I knew my own experience was only one story, I was curious to see what others had experienced as students and faculty during times of both eustress and distress. I wanted to understand how faculty and students were influencing each other's sense of well-being on my campus.

2.1 Literature review in brief

In the literature, other researchers have studied the interplay of faculty and students in the classroom. Some use the term 'faculty-student interaction' or 'faculty-student relationship'. Some others use 'teacher-student interaction' or 'relationship'. In "Faculty-Student Interaction and Impact on Well-Being in Higher Education," Holles (2021) presented a complete bibliography and literature review on faculty-student relationships and well-being and care in higher education. A summary of the important research and findings are summarized here for context. Researchers have studied faculty-student interaction largely to better understand the positive impact these relationships have on academic success attributes for students. Kim & Sax (2014) focused on self-concept, Micari & Pazos (2012) studied self-confidence, Kim (2010) looked at students' aspirations to achieve academically, and Zumbrunn, et al., (2014) investigated belonging, engagement, and motivation: all were benefited from quality interaction with professors. In terms of faculty well-being, Cenkseven & Sari (2009) showed that quality of life for teachers is enhanced by recognition from colleagues, administrators, and students. In addition, they said teachers want autonomy over classrooms and curricula, and "good teaching is charged with positive emotion" (p. 1231). Cenkseven & Sari (2009) also argued that when faculty lack support from colleagues and administrators, and when stressful life events occur, subjective well-being is impacted and teaching suffers. However, less is known about the impact of faculty-student interaction on student well-being, and I have not seen studies connecting interaction to the interplay of faculty and student well-being. My study (Holles, 2021) built upon this foundation by investigating the non-academic impacts of faculty-student interaction.

The concept of care ethics is not new, but my study applied the concept of care ethics to faculty-student interaction in engineering education. My design and analysis drew on care ethics from Gilligan's (1982) ethic of caring for oneself and society to Tronto's (1994) model of caring relations and Knoblach's (2004) distinction between instrumental care and relational care. I was inspired by examples of institution-wide efforts in improving well-being and mental health for faculty and students from researchers in Canada and New Zealand (Murphy, 2015; Simon Fraser University, 2015; Foster, et al., 2014). Researchers have shown that caring is vital to higher education in both qualitative and quantitative studies. Fitzmaurice (2008), Lincoln (2000), Murray (2006), O'Brien (2010), and Walker, et al. (2006) show that caring is important to faculty. Bandura & Lyons (2012), Lee & Ravizza (2008), and Rossiter (1999) show that caring is valued by students. Better understanding faculty-student interaction will influence the ways in which caring practices can be implemented to enhance well-being.

2.2 Methodology

I employed educational criticism and action research to frame my study so I could use my institutional knowledge as connoisseurship and then implement change in accordance with the findings. Eisner (1994) argues that teachers and researchers should inquire about both "how beliefs about what is valued

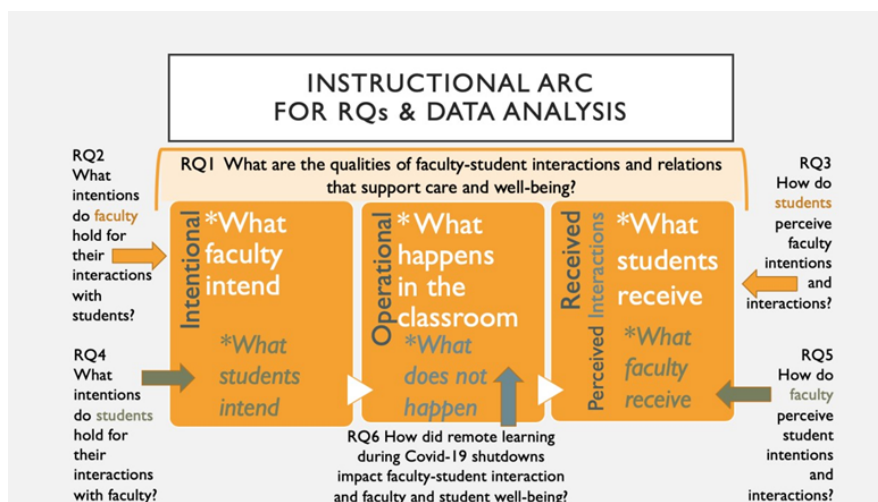
influence what is taught” and “the way in which schools actually function” (pp. 55-56). Eisner (1992) also offers a framework called the ecology of schooling that focused my research questions on these dimensions: pedagogical, curricular, structural, evaluative and intentional realms of schooling. Figure 1 below shows the research questions for the study, mapped onto the instructional arc framework Urmacher et al (2017) derived from Eisner’s work. The authors argue that the instructional arc helps researchers understand curriculum more completely because it considers both inputs (intentional curriculum) and outputs (received curriculum) for classroom interaction.

- Question 1 was the guiding inquiry for the study to determine best practices for supporting faculty and student well-being: *What are the qualities of faculty-student interactions and relations that support care and well-being?*
- Questions 2-3 inquired about the intentions of faculty and how students perceived faculty intentions: *What intentions do faculty hold for their interaction with students? How do students perceive faculty intentions and interactions?*
- Questions 4-5 focused on students’ intentions for interacting with their professors and how professors perceived those student intentions: *What intentions do students hold for their interactions with faculty? How do faculty perceive student intentions and interactions?*
- Question 6 was added during data collection to account for the changes in interaction created by the pandemic and online instruction: *How did remote (online) learning during Covid-19 shutdowns impact faculty-student interaction and faculty and student well-being?*

The goal of the study was to understand how intentions are interpreted between faculty and students. I studied this by asking students and faculty how they planned to interact with each other, observing their interactions during the semester, and asking them to reflect on what did and did not transpire in their interactions. I was interested in learning about the ways faculty and students may misinterpret the intentions of the other, and I also wanted to highlight the ways in which their interactions are supportive or unsupportive to well-being.

Figure 1

Instructional Arc for Research Questions and Data Analysis



I knew that a qualitative analysis would be the best way to begin to understand the intentions and perceptions of teachers and students in regard to well-being. I teach in the humanities at an engineering school, so I recruited faculty from the STEM departments so I could learn from classrooms that cover different content and operate differently from my own. I also studied my own teaching and students by including myself as a participant researcher. Therefore, the study had a total of five faculty participants: a

chemist, a physicist, a mathematician, a chemical engineer, and me, a humanities professor. Each faculty member completed multiple interviews and agreed to class observations and tracking their interactions with students. From each professor's classes, I recruited student participants to complete a questionnaire, participate in focus groups, or both. There were 16 students who participated in focus groups and there were 73 responses to the questionnaire, which included open-ended questions, such as "explain a time when a teacher showed you care" and "describe a situation when a teacher was unsupportive of you." The questionnaire also included a few Likert-scale responses on how students rank their professors overall and how welcome they feel as a member of their department. Since this was a qualitative study, no quantitative data analysis was conducted. I will share highlights of student and faculty stories and experiences from the qualitative data by emphasizing the analysis and application of my findings. This was a complex study with many types of qualitative data, so please refer to Holles (2021) for more detail on how participants responded and how I analyzed the data.

I asked participants to talk about times when they had been experiencing high levels of well-being and to tell stories about times when they had struggled in school. Faculty articulated intentions for teaching and interacting with students at the beginning of the semester and reflected on what happened at the end of the semester. Students described their intentions as students in the first focus groups and assessed the outcomes of the semester in the last. Both faculty and students were asked about their perception of faculty-student interaction that semester, giving specific examples of what went well and what did not.

Data collection started as planned with beginning of the semester interviews, observations, and focus groups. However, around mid-semester when Covid-19 shut down schools, I retooled my study design to include an additional question on the impact of online teaching and learning on faculty-student interaction. I adjusted to observing online classes and conducting the remainder of the interviews and focus groups via Zoom. It became interesting to layer the pandemic impacts onto the analysis of faculty-student interaction and well-being because everyone was experiencing extreme stressors at the same time. Typically, in any given class or academic program, there are a small proportion of staff and students who are experiencing significant struggles in their personal lives. However, as Covid-19 became a pandemic, the world was united in that experience of learning about and protecting ourselves from a dangerous disease. To be sure, the pandemic also exacerbated distinctions and inequities between the rich and the poor, but all teachers and students were suddenly navigating new interactions and expectations.

3 Data Analysis and Major Findings

Data from the questionnaires and focus groups with students and from the interviews with faculty were analyzed with N-Vivo software and iterative coding processes. I incorporated annotation techniques from Urhmacher, et al (2017), who suggest looking for broad themes and patterns as well as seeking divergent perspectives in the data to construct "anticipatory frameworks" for making sense of the data (p. 55). For each research question, I discovered themes and divergent views within the responses of faculty and student participants. In particular, my first research question asked about the "qualities of faculty-student interaction and relations that support care and well-being." By analyzing students' stories about professors who had shown them care, I was able to distill some steps we can take to improve.

In addition, because the data were collected during the semester when Covid-19 broke out, in my analysis, I looked for lessons about how we succeeded or failed to transition to online teaching and interacting from behind a screen. Fundamentally, though, I was most interested in the ways in which faculty or students felt unsupported within the institution. I wanted to learn about the particular behaviors, types of interaction and types of stressors that contributed to any negative impacts on well-being we experienced, both for faculty and for students. The negative experiences participants shared can help researchers form foundations for the kinds of solutions we need: emulating caring teachers' practices and both listening to and learning from students' experiences.

3.1 Faculty showing care through intention

In the first interview with faculty, I asked them to talk about their interactions with professors when they were college students themselves. I wanted to get a sense of their experience as a student to see how that might relate to their own teaching practices. All participants described examples of professors who had been supportive when they needed support and others who had been unsupportive, or even cruel. As participants articulated their intentions for teaching and interacting with students in the upcoming semester, they all intended to create classroom environments that are supportive to students in similar ways to how they had been supported as students. It makes sense that the positive experiences they had as students would translate into goals to replicate those types of experiences for their students.

I asked faculty participants to think about what kind of a classroom they wanted to run and how they intended to interact with and treat their students. These intentions are different from learning objectives about content and achievement in that they are focused on instructor behaviors and choices. Table 1 summarizes the intentions faculty set at the beginning of the year for their classrooms, along with details about the intentions that were achieved and unrealized, based on my observations, faculty reflections, and student responses. These qualitative data showed that faculty were successful in achieving at least some of their goals for interacting with students, especially in the beginning of the semester before lockdown began. Even throughout the challenges of teaching online, faculty prioritized their values and intentions and were successful in offering support in the best way they knew how, modifying their pedagogy and curriculum to meet the challenges of online teaching. However, there were also intentions that went unrealized for each instructor, many of these impacted by the pandemic's shifts of responsibilities and modes of interaction. For example, I failed to notice that students were struggling or more stressed because I could not verbally communicate with them or notice their behavior in class. I did not realize until after the semester was over that there had been students who I could have been more supportive of, had I known their circumstances during the pandemic.

Table 1

Faculty Intentions Observed and Unrealized

Faculty	Intentions	Achieved intentions	Unrealized intentions
Cortney (humanities)	Thoughtful lessons	Careful course planning	Change in interactions
	Timely feedback	One-on-one feedback	Email unresponsiveness
	Support for whole student	Accommodating due dates & expectations	Missing stressed students
Danielle (physics)	Support for whole student	Academic content and email responses	Lost touch with students in pandemic
	Answering questions live "Balanced challenges"	Classroom & help hours Perseverance through problem sets	Lack of group work Pandemic teamwork more challenging
Shawna (thermodynamics)	Smooth class structure	Clear agenda	Less class time
	Independent mastery	Students focused/engaged	Students isolated
	Knowing names	Using names	Lack of contact
Tom (mathematics)	Live feedback & interaction	Responsive to questions	Black-box students
	Providing tools	Assessed with clickers	Unsure who gets it
	Inspiring depth of thought	Active learning in groups	Harder to gauge thinking
Tonya (chemistry)	Connecting with students	One-on-one interactions	Futile communications
	Making sure they get it	Catering to several levels	Lacking live feedback

3.2 Caring faculty support well-being

Students in my study revealed that they feel cared for when faculty have clearly stated intentions, good teaching practices, and a positive outlook on student success. One student indicated that it is most supportive when faculty are “listening and being in tune with what I’m working through,” which speaks to the necessity of faculty seeking to understand students’ unique experiences or struggles (Holles, 2021, p. 145). Whether or not students expect to form a relationship with their professors outside of class, the demeanor and tone of professors has a strong impact on students’ perceptions of them and their teaching effectiveness. Students notice right away when a professor has a caring approach, and they appreciate professors’ confidence in their success. When professors take time to talk privately with a student about personal matters or cater their instruction to specific student questions, students perceive these caring actions very positively. One student I call Isobel in the study reported that a professor reassured her after a failed exam that she could still succeed in the course, offering her specific ways to improve and giving her “a big, warm hug” as Isobel left the meeting (Holles, 2021, p. 168). The student gained confidence and felt supported by this professor’s actions. See Holles (2021) for other examples.

It is important to note here that not all students need or want the same kinds of behaviors from their professors. Some students appreciate faculty who sit with them to work through a complex problem or research question, and others want to receive some guidance and then work through the problem on their own. Some students want to get to know professors on a more personal or human level, but other students find that level of interaction uncomfortable. However, it was also indicated by student participants that faculty are widely expected to be friendly, available, and trustworthy in their interactions with students, so there was consensus for a foundation of caring faculty behaviors.

3.3 Uncaring faculty and unsupportive actions diminish well-being

When directly asked about the faculty members in the study, students reported that they are caring teachers with dedication to student learning. All five faculty participants had above average teaching evaluation scores for that semester and are generally regarded as engaged, caring teachers by their students and colleagues. However, student participants, especially upper classmen who had more experience with a variety of professors and graduate students, told stories of dismissive or rude behavior, oppressive workloads, last-minute assignments, and poor teaching quality, all of which were unsupportive of their well-being as students. One student reported that a professor’s patronizing attitude was really discouraging. When the students asked questions in class, the professor told them the answers were obvious: “It’s right there. It’s right there. Just look it up” (Holles, 2021, p. 172).

Students characterized unsupportive faculty as those who talk down to them and fail to clearly articulate expectations or answer questions. Students report struggling when faculty demand that students be available at all times and create last-minute deadlines and additional assignments. Especially when faculty dismiss student circumstances and are too rigid with their course policies, students’ well-being suffers from interactions with uncaring faculty. Students reported that their well-being is also negatively impacted by unsupportive faculty actions. When faculty are struggling with their own deadlines and pressures, this is often communicated indirectly to students as a lack of availability to be present as their instructor. Students expect to be able to turn to their professors when they are struggling with learning, but sometimes student questions on content are met with dismissal or even public shaming about what the student does not know or understand.

Even during the pandemic when some standards had to be relaxed, student participants reported that some faculty doubled down on assignments, tests, and expectations, making them longer and more complex, out of a fear of losing academic integrity in their classes. Even if this fear was well-founded,

students wanted to be part of those conversations. Faculty did not know how to trust the students in this new environment and that lack of trust made students feel diminished, damaging relationships between faculty and students and impacting their ability to learn.

3.4 Faculty need more support for well-being

Through the interviews with faculty, I delineated that faculty are strongly impacted by four types of influences on their well-being: institutional, temporal, interpersonal, and personal factors. Faculty reported that they feel unsupported most often when they feel overwhelmed by the amount of responsibilities they have relative to the time available in any given week. The balance of teaching, research, and service is variable among professors. One faculty participant said, “the stressors at work, I feel like they are getting worse and worse every semester and that I am dealing worse with them” (Holles, 2021, p. 158). If faculty feel like they do not have enough time to do all aspects of their jobs well, this creates additional stress on faculty and students. Increased demands on faculty time during the pandemic to differentiate instruction for students of different circumstances may be here to stay as we return to face-to-face classrooms, but continue to offer more hybrid options. Additionally, faculty crave interaction and time to build relationships with students, and often mention this as the most rewarding aspect of teaching in higher education. However, professors often have little to no time to connect individually with their students. When faculty do engage with students, this time spent is not well-calculated into their job performance evaluations and compensation (Walker, et al., 2006).

Aside from temporal factors, faculty report high levels of well-being when their colleagues and administrators notice and value all the different types of work they do in commensurate ways. However, when there is tension within a department or between levels of the hierarchy in an institution, faculty can feel unsupported and even pressured to take on additional responsibilities. Especially when personal challenges with health, relationships, and finances occur for faculty, they need to know they have support of their colleagues and administrators in order to continue to do their jobs well. Part of the negative impact of the Covid-19 online teaching shift was that there were no breaks for faculty to catch up and implement these new practices with forethought. There was little to no time for reflection. All the work was being done in the moment with no foreseeable endpoint, requiring longer hours, additional training, and more attention to student needs, while some faculty felt their personal and professional needs were ignored or deprioritized.

3.5 Further study and action on well-being and care

This study hardly scratched the surface at my own STEM-focused institution, and there is much more to learn from other institutions, disciplines, and levels of teaching. The impacts of the pandemic have not run their course as of this writing, and there are myriad other pressures on students and faculty. However, more attention is being paid to well-being in schools around the world. Researchers and administrators are beginning to recognize that “emotional well-being must be supported among teachers and students, especially during online teaching periods, wherein communication channels are fewer compared to face-to-face teaching” (Sener, et al, 2020, p. 357). Regardless of teaching method, instructors can take simple and immediate action toward better supporting their students’ well-being. There is a broad interest in battling faculty burn-out in academia, with webinars and workshops springing up to help support faculty development. Small coalitions of faculty can begin to make movement in their institutions on developing more supportive policies for themselves as well. As we learn more about well-being in academia in different contexts, purposeful paths of action can be customized for particular groups or institutions.

4 Advocating for Action Steps

In light of my research, I am advocating that institutions must find ways to carve out time and space for care practices that support the well-being of both students and faculty on college campuses. What specific actions can we begin to take and what conversations can we begin to have to center well-being in decision-making in higher education? When we put well-being at the center of our focus, implementing practices that elevate care in higher education will follow. I suggest briefly below some of the areas in which we can advocate for the needs of faculty and students to be better met.

4.1 Governance and voice

The most important aspect of integrating care in higher education is to raise the voices of faculty and students who are feeling unsupported in the current systems. Faculty have a responsibility to articulate their needs from administration through the platforms in their institutions, such as faculty senates, unions, ombuds offices, professional organizations and other forms of shared governance. Governance forums can also be avenues for raising concerns about unmet student needs. Clearly understanding the scope of faculty and student experiences, the academic and life challenges they face, can only be done by going to the source. Directly asking students and faculty how they could function better within the institution should be a regular practice. Then, these concerns can be addressed and measured over time to determine progress. We know that students of the pandemic generation have fallen behind on gaining basic skills and establishing study habits, at least in the United States, so colleges must expend “extra efforts to bridge that gap” (Fawcett, 2022). My study found that students and faculty are not monoliths when it comes to care needs, so faculty and institutions need to be adaptable and responsive in a variety of ways.

4.2 Valuing teaching and professional development

There are several ways that institutions can demonstrate a higher value for teaching to support faculty well-being. Unlike elementary and secondary educators in the United States, college educators do not receive standard training across institutions or disciplines. Some college faculty have received no formal training in teaching, despite the imperative to teach in the profession. Prioritizing training and professional development for college instructors can help instill institutional values for well-being and create community across campuses.

The value of teaching should also be apparent in the hiring and promotion practices of higher education institutions. Adjunct labor comprises a startling proportion of the faculty at many colleges and poses significant challenges to well-being for both faculty and students. If a part-time faculty member is overworked and underpaid on a temporary contract, their students suffer. Adjuncts often lack just compensation and are rarely offered benefits or job security, which discourages them from investing time in the students and mission of the institution. Full-time faculty can also feel under-valued in higher education, depending on the number of classes and students they are assigned, the amount of service work required of them, and their treatment by colleagues and administrators. Faculty who feel marginalized in any way suffer from lower morale and well-being which has a negative institutional impact. Therefore, institutions are compelled to value teaching more explicitly in their priorities and expenditures.

Since care work is so important to faculty-student interaction and student well-being, faculty would benefit from boundaries on their time, specifically support in allocating the resource of their labor more equitably. We need to find ways to make care work more visible, meaning that care efforts are recorded and compensated, acknowledged as part of the promotion and tenure processes. Institutions need to assure that faculty have time to complete teaching, research, and service responsibilities without reaching

burnout. Part of making this an equitable practice would be to offer compensation for faculty who are investing time in more care work than their colleagues. Often, student evaluations are the only measure of a teacher's effectiveness, but observations by colleagues and frequent reflection on teaching challenges and successes can better show the nuances of teaching quality by swapping quantitative data with qualitative experiences. Faculty who devote more time and energy to developing curricula and interacting with students should be rewarded and teachers who demean students or employ inequitable practices should be called out, and perhaps disciplined or reassigned. All of these factors can be prioritized within promotion and tenure protocols to enhance the value of teaching within the institution.

4.3 Infusing caring pedagogy

Smaller classes that require teachers to give more individual feedback also encourage more faculty-student interaction, but large classes can also implement caring pedagogies. Specifically for ELT, Andrew (2014) cites Ooiwa-Yoshizawa's concept of 'grass roots' critical pedagogy to articulate examples of goals and practices that foster "agency, community, and hope" in ELT classrooms (p. 5). These practices also require a centering of student voices and experiences as well as frequent, meaningful interaction between teachers and students. By integrating critical pedagogy, ELT professionals can create more inclusive and culturally responsive curricula while also improving student well-being.

Caring pedagogy is also a feminist pedagogy. Shrewsbury (1997) defines feminist pedagogy as one that is continually reflective, focused on interrelationship and individual experiences, valuing differences, democratic processes, and shared power. She argues that feminist pedagogy strives to "enhance the integrity and wholeness of the person and the person's connections with others" but that it "ultimately seeks a transformation of the academy" (p. 164). I concur that fostering relationships and individual thriving should be a goal of our teaching practices. Indeed, some of the structures of academia need to be updated to account for differences in how we live in the 21st century, as opposed to the 17th. More recently, Koseoglu (2020) argues that feminist pedagogy is synonymous with student support because it calls for an acceptance of and engagement with the student as a whole person. She also notes that openness and transparency is required in our pedagogy, so students understand faculty intentions and approaches. In practice, feminist pedagogy can be implemented in several ways, from simple to complex: learning and using student names, creating a welcoming classroom environment, and sharing vulnerable or personal stories, for example. Feminist pedagogy can also seek input from students on curriculum development and teaching styles, which helps create community and trust between faculty and students in a classroom. Koseoglu makes sure to note that feminist pedagogy "does not mean that feminist educators should work like counselors or undertake the role of professional services" (p. 282). However, it is imperative that faculty are available to students for individual questions and create time and space for them to connect and receive support.

Finally, caring pedagogy calls for close attention to the language we use with students because tone and messaging directly impact student well-being and how they perceive faculty support. Jack & Sathy (2021) argue that "far too many faculty members still think a challenging course should be like an obstacle race: You, as the instructor, set up the tasks and each student has to finish them (or not) to a certain standard and within a set time. If only a few students can do it, that means the course is rigorous." I agree with the authors that this notion is outdated and unnecessarily restrictive to student learning. The backlash against the concept of rigor (Jack & Sathy, 2021) is a small part of the movement to change how we define and speak about educational norms. This does not mean we have to diminish standards and grading criteria, but we can change how we conceive of and talk about them. There is no reason that rigorous curricula must be punitive: for example, grading on a curve is expecting or requiring a percentage of students to fail. Students soundly reject the old adage that "putting them through that rigor is doing them good" (Saul, 2022). The general guidance is that professors adopt an approach of holding

standards high while learning more about how to support students in reaching these standards. Rethinking language in syllabi that sets hard boundaries or shuts down communication is crucial. Discussing policies with students to start the course can help students advocate for what they need from a particular instructor and feel agency in their education by being included in the conversation (Supiano, 2021). Finally, faculty who want to show students care should reflect on grading practices and the language they use to describe them to students. Implementing cycles of iteration to revise thinking as the course progresses initiates a growth mindset in students. Faculty can also ask students to log progress toward their goals, create assignments that allow for exploration, and assess work with student input. Deborah Blum's (2020) "ungrading" movement asks faculty to consider moving to more holistic and qualitative feedback on student progress rather than numerical representations of discrete assignments. She argues that students should have agency over their body of work, setting individual goals and reflecting on their progress. Even the idea of moving from letter or number grades to pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory could be a meaningful shift that brings the focus back to learning for all students and takes pressure off students to compete for the top marks in the class. Most faculty do not have leverage to completely uproot grading systems, but all professors can begin to interrogate the foundations for their particular grading practices and philosophies.

4.4 Evolving caring curricula

Beyond individual teaching practices that support care, institutions of higher education should work to embed care within their curricula. In looking at a particular program or institution, all aspects of the curriculum should be considered, including the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is that which goes unspoken or undefined but that is part of what participants are learning and perceiving from the school system. For example, a weed-out mentality, the idea that some students are not equipped to succeed, still persists in many corners of academia and this only exacerbates stressors and is antithetical to learning. After a late-career professor got fired from NYU for being overly rigorous and demeaning to students, Saul (2022) argues the incident "seems to illustrate a sea change in teaching, from an era when professors set the bar and expected the class to meet it, to the current, more supportive, student-centered approach." If we are not explicitly acting on well-being efforts and making time for faculty-student interaction, well-being and interaction become part of the null curriculum, that which is not taught. Furthermore, we are embedded in racist, colonial institutions teaching students who come from a variety of backgrounds, so if we do not directly address those contexts, they become part of the null curriculum. Creating caring curricula requires us to consider the hidden and null curricula as we make choices about what to teach to better support student well-being.

5 Concluding Thoughts: Bolstering the Flow of Care

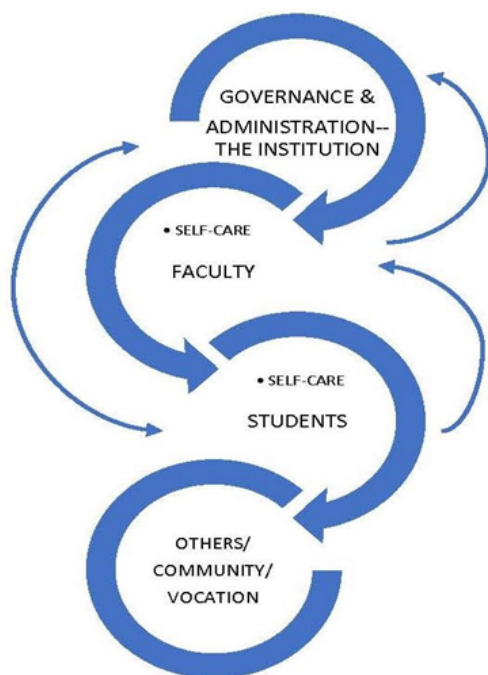
As I completed the analysis of my participants' responses, I created the Flow of Care model to visualize the system by which care flows through an institution as I see it (See Figure 2). This model represents the hierarchy of the institution as well as the directional responsibility to show care and provide support for the layer below. The larger arrows show the flow of care "downstream" which is the main focus of my argument, that administration has a responsibility to show care to faculty and students, and that faculty have a responsibility to show care to students. Individual students have responsibilities to show care to their families, communities, and vocations. I also include smaller arrows to show that care can also flow "upstream," but perhaps to a lesser degree and not so much as a responsibility.

I argue that when faculty do not receive enough care from the administration, they do not have the capacity to practice self-care and therefore have very little bandwidth to follow through with their

responsibilities to show students care. In other words, if the institution is not supporting faculty, there is a backlog in the flow of care and students also suffer. Any approach to improving well-being in higher education must therefore consider the interconnection of these levels of the system. Students need caring support from faculty and faculty need institutional support in order to provide it to them.

Figure 2

The Flow of Care Model



Fundamentally, institutions of higher education have a responsibility to consider the conditions they are creating for their faculty and students. Author bell hooks (1994) argues that “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). Note that she says care is where learning *begins*, not something to be tacked on haphazardly to established curricula. We can work towards integrating care into higher education at all levels of the model as we begin to better understand influences on well-being.

For my part, I am continuing to learn about and evolve my own teaching practice and interaction with students. I am advocating for policies that support the well-being of my colleagues and me at my institution. I am collaborating with two colleagues to offer ‘Teaching with Heart’ workshops for STEM faculty, and continuing to ask questions about faculty and student experiences of well-being in higher education. I invite your questions, comments, and ideas for collaboration as we continue to investigate and integrate care in higher education.

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