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LEGAL ISSUES

A Brief Guide to Academic Freedom and Free Speech

Eric Lyerly

Academic freedom and free speech have long been some of higher education's most cherished constitutional protections. As marketplaces of ideas, colleges and universities have a fundamental responsibility to foster an environment where diverse viewpoints can be expressed and challenged.

Faculty leaders play an important role in promoting an atmosphere of free speech in their departments. Many faculty may not fully understand the extent of free speech protections for students and faculty, especially given the myriad situations that implicate speech concerns (including classroom instruction and discussion, scholarship, and campus protests, to name a few).

This article serves as a guide for faculty leaders, outlining the legal nuances of free speech in academia and offering practical strategies for upholding the right to academic freedom and expressive activity in their departments.

Faculty academic freedom rights

American courts have consistently recognized that colleges and universities enjoy a high degree of institutional autonomy to advance the mission of higher learning. Postsecondary institutions (and their faculty members) have a unique right, known as academic freedom, to determine who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.

Justice Felix Frankfurter's concurring opinion in the US Supreme Court case of *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (1957) provides a formal definition of academic freedom:

> It is the business of a university to provide that atmosphere which is most conducive to speculation, experiment and creation. It is an atmosphere in which there prevail "the four essential freedoms" of a university—to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study. (p. 263)

Academic freedom is an extension of constitutional free speech protections and guards faculty's right to instruct, research, and debate. It provides faculty with wide latitude to express ideas—including controversial ones—that promote intellectual inquiry without fear of censorship or sanctions. Likewise, faculty are entitled to freedom in their research and publications.

A lesser-known application of academic freedom is intramural speech. Although

PAGE 4 ➡

IN THIS ISSUE

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Developing Departmental Work Culture with Remote Faculty

Jill Brue

With the expansion of online programs in higher education, department faculty who work remotely can feel disconnected from their institution and from each other. While online learning brings flexibility to both faculty and students, it can also breed isolation. There is abundant literature on how faculty can create learning communities for students in distance learning, but less guidance is available on developing a vibrant, collegial culture among remote faculty.

Walden University has developed professional learning communities to help meet the needs of their online faculty (Bedford & Rossow, 2017). While these communities focus on faculty development and solutions to problems, there is also opportunity for collaboration and support. At Walden, faculty groups are limited to 15 participants, and these groups engage for a limited time around a specific topic both asynchronously and synchronously. This approach seems to have benefits for participating faculty, particularly in terms of knowledge gains and connection to others. But there are more specific opportunities on a department level to build community amongst online faculty.

The department chair sets the tone for departmental work culture, and there are several important qualities that a leader models that influence the way a faculty team works together. This article considers three key qualities for university department leadership with online faculty: communication, collegiality, and character.

Communication

Communication is always a critical skill for leaders, but particularly with online, remote faculty, communication skills can make all the difference. When leaders present expectations clearly and consistently as well as support faculty goals, they can decrease anxiety and increase faculty engagement (Robison & Gray, 2017). Communication can happen synchronously, as in virtual department meetings, and asynchronously, through emails and texts. Written communication can easily be misconstrued, so department leaders must be mindful of their messages.

In residential settings, faculty can gravitate to others who share their interests and develop relationships informally through regular contact. But in online communities, institutions and leaders must create opportunities for faculty connection. Consistent, virtual meetings with online faculty are important to culture development and community building. Generally, those in academia would vote for fewer meetings, but for online faculty, the opportunity to connect with others is vital.

While attending to department business is important, the virtual faculty meeting should also provide opportunities for more informal conversation. In the meeting agenda, set aside time for shout-outs to acknowledge faculty contributions and achievements as well as student accomplishments. Rotate faculty to start off the meeting with a thought for the day or something up-

PAGE 3 ➡

CULTURE FROM PAGE 2

lifting to share. Another way to connect is to prompt faculty beforehand with a "water-cooler topic" of the day—for example, something interesting they read in the past week, their research interests, or what their family will be doing for the upcoming holiday. Participation in these conversations is voluntary, but I find that faculty enjoy sharing about themselves. Even an occasional show-and-tell session, where faculty can bring one slide to share something about themselves virtually, is fun. Prompts for show and tell can include sharing pictures of their favorite local coffee shop, places where they like to work and read, or their family or home. While I value meeting efficiency and still keep an eye on our time, these conversations are important to collegiality among faculty, and that collegiality contributes to the department culture.

A weekly email to all faculty and consistent personal check-ins with adjunct faculty are important communication tools. Remote faculty need to know that they are seen and heard, and reaching out consistently helps communicate value and appreciation as well as clear expectations.

Collegiality

Collaboration can be more challenging for remote faculty, and the department chair sets the tone for encouraging input and engagement from faculty. The department chair invites faculty perspectives and listens well. When delegating responsibilities, it is important to communicate expectations as well as support.

Communicating a vision for the department and encouraging faculty investment in the vision is not easy. As faculty feel that their voices are heard, that they have something to contribute, that their participation matters, and that they are appreciated, they are more likely to invest themselves in the process. Promoting such self-investment remotely requires intentionality.

Creating opportunities for faculty to successfully work together sets them up for positive track records, particularly when more challenging or divisive issues surface. When faculty work together to resolve small problems, they are essentially rehearsing for the bigger concerns that come along. Remote faculty can partner together for research projects and presentations that help them build relationships. The department chair can model these partnerships by mentoring new faculty, including faculty on research projects, and promoting collaboration on department initiatives.

Character

The character the department chair displays influences faculty culture. Department chairs that are ethical, reliable, kind, and trustworthy make excellent leaders. Many years ago, as a new PhD student, I observed the department chair of my program cleaning classrooms late one evening. I asked why he was emptying the trash and sweeping the classroom. He mentioned that the custodian had already worked a long day and our class was running late, so he sent the custodian home and finished the jobs himself. This made a significant impression on me. He represented servant leadership in that moment, and as I continued in the program, I could see how that kind of leadership trickled down to faculty and students. An interesting study on faculty chair servant leadership found that this character trait promoted faculty effectiveness and flourishing, particularly in online environments (Neel et al., 2022).

How does the online department chair model servant leadership? They can offer to substitute teach for a faculty member who has a class conflict, keep an "open Zoom" policy and invite faculty to reach out any time to schedule a quick Zoom call to confer, assist faculty with documentation and paperwork, and ask the question "How can I support you?" Servant leadership can be contagious. As the department chair models service, faculty begin to model service to one another.

Intentional leadership plays a significant role in the development of online faculty work culture. The department chair juggles many responsibilities, but working to establish community and collegiality with online faculty is one of the most important. While the department chair cannot solely create a positive, collegial culture, their leadership sets the tone for the communication, collegiality, and character of others.

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Neel, M. K., Mueller, R., & Hammond, H. G. (2022). An examination of servant leader faculty chairs empowering faculty during a crisis. *Journal of Instructional Research, 11*, 5–14. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1363116.pdf

Robison, S., & Gray, C. R. (2017). Agents of transformational change: Coaching skills for academic leaders. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 28*(4), 5–28. https://celt.miamioh.edu/ojs/index.php/JECT/article/view/336

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FREE SPEECH FROM PAGE 1

a less settled area of the law, intramural speech protects faculty from censorship or discipline when discussing matters of departmental or institutional policy. This protection extends free speech rights to faculty meetings, committee deliberations, and more.

Importantly, academic freedom does not necessarily shield faculty from discipline for conduct or speech that violates institutional policies or codes of conduct. Additionally, free speech protections in this area are also limited (as we'll see next section).

Faculty leaders are among the key gatekeepers of academic freedom in their departments. By ensuring that faculty understand this right, faculty leaders can foster an atmosphere of inquiry and scholarship. By not prematurely disciplining faculty for expressing controversial ideas or subject matter, they can also keep the spirit of academic freedom alive and well in their departments.

Limits on academic freedom and faculty free speech

Faculty have murkier protections when speaking as citizens (rather than in their official roles as professors, instructors, researchers, etc.). Generally, for free speech protections to apply, faculty must be speaking as private citizens on matters of public concern. Matters of public concern encompass any issue that affects the community at large, including political, social, and other matters of collective importance.

Social media is where free speech issues most commonly arise for faculty. To be sure, it can be difficult to know how far free speech protections cut when a professor posts a controversial statement on a social media platform. Are they speaking as a private citizen or in their official role? Is it a matter of public concern or private concern? The answer to these questions is always highly fact specific and dependent on the nature of posts. Yet it highlights the potential landmines for faculty on social media.

Faculty leaders need to be aware of the challenges and opportunities that technology presents and provide guidance to faculty on responsible online communication. When faculty members engage in any kind of public discourse as private citizens, they should strive for accuracy, exercise restraint, and respect differing viewpoints. It's also crucial to differentiate their personal opinions from the official stance of their institution.

Student free speech—Balancing rights and responsibilities

Students generally possess the right to express their viewpoints, even controversial or unpopular ones, during class discussions, assignments, and presentations. These rights extend to various forms of expression—including written work, verbal contributions, and artistic endeavors—as long as they don't disrupt the learning environment or infringe upon the rights of others.

While students enjoy the right to free expression on campus, this right is not without boundaries. Higher education institutions frequently implement free speech policies and student conduct codes that delineate permissible forms of expression and protest while also prohibiting disruptive behaviors. These policies offer a structure for disciplinary measures when classroom speech or other actions compromise the educational environment.

It's important, however, to recognize that student free speech in classrooms is not limitless. Institutions may implement reasonable restrictions, such as by prohibiting hate speech that creates a hostile environment or speech that poses a direct threat to safety. Faculty also have the authority to maintain order and ensure productive learning by managing classroom discussions and assignments.

Faculty leaders should encourage colleagues to strike a proper balance between protecting student expression and maintaining a conducive learning environment.

Understanding faculty rights during protests

Protest activity on campus has hit extremely high levels in the past few years, and it has frequently involved faculty and graduate assistants. The First Amendment protects faculty's rights to protest peacefully on campus.

But colleges and universities are permitted to use reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions to regulate campus demonstrations and prevent disruption to the academic environment. These restrictions enable administrators to determine *when*, *where*, and *by what means* protests may take place on college or university property. This could include limiting the spaces and times of day at which protests can occur, among other things.

Faculty leaders should recognize that faculty and graduate students have the right to protest. Still, they should remind colleagues to abide by faculty codes of conduct and the institution's time, place, and manner restrictions for such protests. Otherwise, faculty and graduate assistances may risk exposure to disciplinary action from their department or institution.

Classroom management and the heckler's veto

In the past few years, institutions have commonly seen students (sometimes joined by faculty) shouting down unpopular speakers on campus. Often such speakers come to campus at the invitation of a student organization. Alternatively, they may be participating in an institutional or departmental event. Occasionally, such disruptions have even surfaced in the classroom, with students attempting to take over or interrupt class.

Protesters who shut down speak-

PAGE 5 ➡

FREE SPEECH FROM PAGE 4

ers generally see their conduct as free speech expression. Many institutions of higher education have implemented internal policies safeguarding free speech. These regulations are designed to block students and faculty from preventing speakers from articulating controversial viewpoints (see, e.g., the University of Cincinnati's Campus Free Speech Policy). Moreover, institutions often incorporate provisions into their student and faculty conduct codes to restrict such individuals from substantially disrupting events through violence or other means (see FIRE's Model Code of Student Conduct).

Although students and faculty may have a right to protest a controversial speaker, that right isn't unlimited. By authorizing a speaking event, a college or university provides the speaker with a *designated forum* where the speaker can engage in protected expression. Students cannot cause substantial disruption to an event or impede others from exercising their free speech rights.

When faculty find their classrooms disrupted by protesting students, they typically have the right to seek disciplinary action for such students. Instructors have the right to manage their classrooms as part of their academic freedom. Student disruption of academic instruction is generally not protected by the First Amendment.

Faculty leaders can shine a light into a tense area of free speech by helping faculty understand their rights to oppose controversial speakers on campus and manage their classrooms in the event of student-driven class disruptions.

The bottom line

Faculty members have a critical role in fostering a campus environment that respects free expression and academic freedom. This can be challenging, especially when they're confronted with differing interpretations of these principles.

It's essential to remind colleagues that universities have a duty to uphold the First Amendment rights of all individuals on campus. This includes protecting the rights of students and faculty to express their views, even when those views are unpopular or controversial.

But the exercise of free speech comes with responsibilities. Faculty should guide students to understand that their right to express themselves is not absolute and must be balanced with the rights of others. Disruptive behavior that infringes on the learning environment or prevents others from exercising their expressive rights is not protected.

Encourage your colleagues to facilitate open dialogue and critical thinking in their classrooms. Emphasize that respectful discourse, active listening, and thoughtful consideration of diverse perspectives are essential components of a thriving academic community. By fostering an understanding of these nuanced free speech issues, faculty can help cultivate a campus climate where everyone feels safe and empowered to participate in the exchange of ideas.

Understanding Course Evaluations: Resources for Faculty and Chairs

Maryellen Weimer

Despite a great deal of research on course evaluations, institutional policies and practices are not always well informed by that research. Faculty are often not as informed as they should be either. Anecdotal evidence, myth and folklore tend to prevail. It's good to encourage faculty to learn more about how feedback from students can become a valuable source of instructional information, and that's where this article can help.

To conclude our examination of those conversations academic leaders have with faculty about end-of-course ratings, here's a collection of resources to check out and recommend to faculty. All of them are broadly relevant, even though some are published in discipline-based journals.

Using ratings results to improve

Faculty aren't always clear as to what they should do about rating results. Are they a mandate for change? Are they confusing and contradictory? Do they make sense? Can they be used to identify what needs to improve? Do they point in the direction of certain kinds of change? These two articles lay out how the results should be looked at and what can be concluded from them.

Boysen, G. A. (2016). Using student evaluations to improve teaching: Evidence-based recommendations. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 2*(4), 273–284.

- Offers a clear, succinct description of how faculty need to analyze student evaluation results if they intend to make decisions about what to change based on the feedback. The advice offered is helpful; it's well-written and well-documented.

Golding, C., & Adam, L. (2016). Evaluate to improve: Useful approaches to student evaluation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 41*(1), 1–14.

- Conducted focus groups with teachers who used student evaluations to improve and found, among other things, they viewed the data as formative and focused improvement efforts on those things that increased student learning.

Misunderstanding ratings and their results

Here are three studies that address some pervasive but erroneous beliefs about ratings. First, that meaningful conclusions about instructional quality can be drawn from small differences in rating results, and second, that the way to win at the ratings game is with easy courses and lots of high grades.

Boysen, G. A., Kelly, T. J., Paesly, H. N., & Casner, R. W. (2014). The (mis) interpretation of teaching evaluations by college faculty and administrators. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 39*(6), 641–656.

- Three studies that looked at how faculty and administrators interpreted small means (differences small enough to be within the margin of error). It's an interesting study design and offers compelling evidence.

Centra, J. (2003). Will teachers receive higher evaluation by giving higher grades and less course work? *Research in Higher Education, 44*(5), 495–514.

- An analysis involving 50,000 individual courses did not find correlations between high ratings and higher grades and less course work.

Marsh, H. W., & Roche, L. A. (2000). Effects of grading lenience and low workload on students' evaluations of teaching: Popular myth, bias, validity or innocent bystander. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92*(1), 202–228.

- Easy graders and easy courses don't result in high course evaluations. It's a study with a huge cohort.

Dealing with the negative

Whether it's negative student comments or an over-reaction to what are or are perceived to be low ratings, these two articles offer helpful and constructive perspectives.

Hodges, L. C., & Stanton, K. (2007). Translating comments on student evaluations into the language of learning. *Innovative Higher Education, 31*, 279–286.

- Shows how student complaints about quantitative courses, writing-intensive courses, and student-active formats can offer important insights into how students understand learning.

PAGE 7 ➡

EVALUATIONS FROM PAGE 6

Explores options for responding to the complaints.

Gallagher, T. J. (2000, April). Embracing student evaluations of teaching: A case study. *Teaching Sociology, 28*, 140–146.

- Recounts how a new teacher responded to a case of not-very-good student ratings.

Feedback beyond end-of-course assessments

Summative, end-of-course ratings should not be the only source of feedback on the teaching. Faculty should be encouraged to regularly collect formative feedback, the kind of diagnostic descriptive details that focus on instructional policies, practices and behaviors. They should also be encouraged to involve students in their attempts to make the course a positive and productive learning experience. Several of these articles describe and assess the various kinds of feedback needed to understand the impact of instruction on learning. Several others describe innovative feedback mechanisms.

Brickman, P., Gormally, C., & Martella, A. M. (2016). Making the grade: Using instructional feedback and evaluation to inspire evidence-based teaching. *Cell Biology Education, 15*(1), 1–14.

- Forty-one percent of 343 biology faculty reported that they were not satisfied with current end-of-course evaluation feedback; another 46 percent said they were only satisfied "in some ways." The "findings reveal a large, unmet desire for greater guidance and assessment data to inform pedagogical decision making."

Gormally, C., Evans, M., & Brickman, P. (2014). Feedback about teaching in higher ed: Neglected opportunities to promote change. *Cell Biology Education, 13*(2), 187–199.

- Summarizes a set of best practices for providing instructional feedback; a very practical and helpful analysis.

Hoon, A., Oliver, E., Szpakowska, K., & Newton, P. (2015). Use of the Stop, Start, Continue method is associated with the production of constructive qualitative feedback by students in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40*(5), 755–767.

- Students list instructional policies, practices, or behaviors they'd like the instructor to stop, start, or continue. Using this feedback mechanism improved the quality of student feedback.

Veeck, A., O'Reilly, K., MacMillan, A., & Yu, H. (2016). The use of collaborative midterm student evaluations to provide actionable results. *Journal of Marketing Education, 38*(3), 157–169.

- Working in teams, students comment on the course using an online collaborative document. Students took the process seriously, provided better feedback that faculty felt more motivated to act on.

Summaries of student ratings research

Fortunately, the voluminous research on ratings has been organized, integrated, and written about accessibly. These two books from the 1990s are classics and research done since their publication is not at odds with the findings they report and the recommendations they make. Most faculty aren't going to have time or the inclination to read a book on instructional evaluation. Fortunately, there are articles that offer succinct summaries. The one from *College Teaching* is a personal favorite.

Braskamp, L., & Ory, J. (1994). *Assessing faculty work: Enhancing individual and institutional performance*. Jossey-Bass.

- Both authors did research on student evaluations; Braskamp was also a dean at the University of Illinois Chicago. The book is well-organized and readable.

Centra, J. (1993). *Reflective faculty evaluation: Enhancing teaching and determining faculty effectiveness*. Jossey-Bass.

- Written by one of the premier student ratings researchers. An excellent summary with implications fully explored.

Hobson, S. M. and Talbot, D. M. (2001). Understanding student evaluations: What all faculty should know. *College Teaching, 40*(1), 26–30.

- If a book is too much, here's a five-page, well-organized, clearly written summary of the research on ratings. It offers individual faculty recommendations for dealing with rating results.

A version of this article appeared in *Academic Leader* on March 1, 2019.

Building a Comprehensive Faculty Mentoring Program: A Case Study

Oliver Dreon and Leslie Gates

Our efforts to mentor tenure-track faculty began in conversations about faculty success on campus. In 2018, Ollie Dreon was serving in his fifth year as the director of the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE) at Millersville University. The CAE serves as a professional development hub on campus and works to advance student-centered instructional practices across campus. In his role as director, Ollie also facilitated a weeklong orientation for new faculty. While Ollie was working in the CAE, Leslie Gates was serving on the university promotion and tenure committee. These roles provided us with two different viewpoints of our colleagues' careers. Ollie met faculty as they arrived on campus and sought to establish themselves and their work. Leslie reviewed faculty members' work in their applications for tenure and promotion at each rank. We both recognized that our colleagues were getting very different levels of support depending on the departments and colleges in which they worked. At the time, the institution did not have an intentional or comprehensive mentoring program to support faculty as they navigated the stages of their careers. While some faculty received informal mentorship from departmental colleagues, others received none. We felt that this inconsistency may be creating inequitable experiences for our colleagues and that a more comprehensive faculty mentoring program could address these issues campus wide.

Although we saw the need for a formal faculty mentoring initiative on campus, the arrival of Dr. Ieva Zake, the new dean of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, jump-started the work. At her previous institution, Dr. Zake had helped to lead a faculty mentoring program and asked about the mentoring initiatives in place at Millersville. We had little to report. While we knew about the informal practices that some departments had adopted, we didn't know how widespread this practice was. In 2018, we surveyed departments and found that roughly 50 percent of new faculty were paired with mentors. While this identified the extent of the problem, we also recognized that a handful of people would not be able to solve it. We needed to find a team.

The CAE had a regular practice of offering semester-long book studies for faculty and staff called Campus Learning Communities (CLC). In fall 2018, Ollie facilitated a CLC around the book *Faculty Success through Mentoring* (Bland et al., 2009). In retrospect, the CLC served two important functions: it helped us identify interested colleagues who could help our mentoring efforts and provided a common vocabulary and vision for mentoring from which we worked. Ten faculty members participated in the CLC and discussed the evidentiary base for faculty mentoring. Research shows that mentoring processes can improve job and career satisfaction (Ambrose et al., 2005), research productivity (Bland et al., 2005; Paul et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2002), teaching effectiveness (Goodwin et al., 1998), and socialization to the campus community (Corcoran & Clark, 1984; Ritchie & Genoni, 2002). While the benefits of faculty mentoring became clearer to the CLC members, the formation of a comprehensive faculty mentoring program would require more time and effort.

Seven faculty members from the CLC and Dr. Zake decided to form an ad hoc committee to envision what increasing the amount and quality of faculty mentoring on campus might look like. We adopted the mentoring definition presented in *Faculty Success through Mentoring* to guide and situate our efforts: mentoring is a collaborative learning relationship that develops over time and passes through specific phases designed to help mentees acquire the key competencies and constructive work relationships to lead a successful and satisfying career (Bland et al., 2009). Adopting this definition provided us with a common vision. We also identified our need for additional information before deciding our next steps.

We surveyed department chairs about their practices for mentoring new faculty. The data not only further confirmed the lack of consistent mentoring across campus but also identified other areas of need. For example, those faculty who were serving as mentors did not have a clear set of expectations for their role. Additionally, departments did not provide training or guidance for mentors. This information provided the starting point for our mentoring efforts.

Beginning in fall 2019, we communicated with deans and department chairs to ensure that all new first-year faculty were paired with in-department mentors. We also offered second-year faculty the opportunity for mentoring. Thirteen second-year faculty members sought additional mentoring. That fall, our group also offered a workshop to train faculty serving as mentors to first- and second-year faculty.

In our experience, faculty who vol-

PAGE 9 ➡

CASE STUDY FROM PAGE 8

unteer to serve as mentors are typically generous and well-intentioned. Like any relationship, however, the mentor-mentee one can be hard to navigate. An unclear purpose, different expectations, and unequal power dynamics can make establishing and maintaining the relationship challenging. Because we view mentoring as a collaborative learning relationship, we wanted to find additional ways to support these relationships as they develop over time and pass through specific phases.

One of our strategies to support mentors and mentees was to offer programming with the needs of mentors and mentees in mind. We began offering sessions for pre-tenure faculty through the CAE. The first year we offered 10 sessions, which ranged in topic from becoming a more effective teacher to feeling more connected at Millersville University. The sessions involved 21 guest presenters who represented 15 different departments across campus. These sessions often took the form of group mentoring sessions due to their highly interactive nature and because one or both of us facilitated these sessions, which provided some consistency and relationship building across sessions. By the end of the 2019–20 academic year, we had offered more programming than ever to support faculty mentoring on campus and have continued most of this work in the subsequent 18 months. We also learned that programming to support faculty mentors and mentees is crucial—but not sufficient—to create a culture of mentoring on campus. To do this, we felt we needed to formalize our roles as mentoring leaders and to create a more formal mentoring committee.

In fall 2020, we were named as fellows for faculty mentoring. By this point, Leslie's term on the promotion and tenure committee and Ollie's tenure as the director of the CAE had ended. Through our new roles as fellows for faculty mentoring, we've worked to create both the processes and practices to support mentoring as well as to foster a campus-wide appreciation for faculty mentoring. We have also formed a campus-wide faculty mentoring committee to increase buy-in and involve others who saw mentoring as an important part of their service or scholarly work on campus. Recently, the committee has focused on establishing a culture of mentoring and increasing the quality of mentoring on campus. The committee has also been evaluating data from previous years, considering our work in relationship to the International Mentoring Association's standards, and establishing a faculty mentoring award.

We realized early on that our goal was not to establish a new program on campus but rather to make faculty mentoring part of campus culture. While we still have plenty of work to do, a few lessons we have learned might be helpful for others seeking to support a culture of faculty mentoring on their campuses. We are faculty leaders who had to *find and involve the right people to support and accomplish the work.* None of the faculty mentoring efforts on our campus are mandatory or a result of administrative decree. Over one-third of the full-time faculty on campus have been involved with our efforts to date, and this is the result of a continually expanding network of colleagues who recognize the value of the work and choose to engage. The expanding network is the result of *intentional and strategic invitations for colleagues to join us in the work*. Additional faculty involvement has allowed us to accomplish more, establish buy-in, and continue to shift the culture by demonstrating the value of the work. Having more colleagues invested and engaged in the work increases the likelihood the work will continue beyond our appointed terms as fellows for faculty mentoring. Deciding each next step was *informed and directed by data we collected regularly* from mentors, mentees, department chairs, and members of the faculty mentoring committee. Gathering this data also demonstrates our interest in the participants' ideas and experiences and our commitment to improving the quality of the work we do.

Our mentoring efforts began in conversation and continue to develop that way. What has changed is the number of people involved in the conversation and the data and experiences that inform the discussion. We are fueled by these and other indicators that the culture on campus has begun to shift. We are encouraged by the first-year faculty who view the unprecedented support they receive on campus as normal. Their experience is instrumental to shifting the culture on campus for future generations of faculty at Millersville.

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PAGE 11 ➡

Meeting Grief with Compassion

Rebecca Pope-Ruark

Content warning: This article contains mentions of bereavement experiences, including loss of a parent and a child.

One morning in mid-February last year, I was working at home and about to join a committee meeting virtually when I got the call no one ever wants to get but some version of which we will all experience: it was my sister-in-law telling me that my mother had unexpectedly passed away. She had had health problems, but it was still a major shock, especially considering she had just been seen by three different doctors in the days prior and had a treatment plan ready to start. I count myself lucky that I was at home and not in the office and that my husband works from home and was there as well. A friend came over immediately, got us moving to make the 12-hour drive home, even called my supervisor to let her know I would be out for the foreseeable future.

Things I did not know at the time: my institution's bereavement leave policy (up to five accrued sick days may be used), how long I would need to process this loss, what accommodations I might need in the coming months, and who to ask about what to do next.

"Death is a natural occurrence that happens every day," higher education and grief researcher Chinasa Elue at Kennesaw State University reminds us. "But there's just not enough conversation on how to support colleagues who are grieving. There's just nothing really out there." Elue lost her mother to cancer in 2019, which led to her interest in researching grief experiences of faculty and students in higher ed. "I know it sounds very academic to want to research the thing you going through, but it turned into a research situation where I wanted to know how we can humanize grief in higher ed—how can we create spaces where leaders are more aware and adopt an ethic of care when it comes to seeing colleagues and students who are experiencing loss? And how do we cultivate a space that really provides an opportunity for them to be human and to experience all the emotions and be able to show up even when they aren't okay?"

Similarly, industrial and organizational psychologist Stephanie Gilbert at Cape Breton University used her personal experience of losing a child at full term, to shift her research agenda as well: "Most of the work I am doing is really looking at the idea that if we work full time, or even part time, our work experience has the potential to affect our overall quality of life. In this grief work, I'm recognizing that there are times in our life when having a positive work experience and having support at work might matter so much more—times when we're vulnerable or going through loss or some other significant or stressful life event." But she also notes, "In general, we're really grief illiterate in our society. We don't talk about grief."

I spoke with Elue and Gilbert to find out what higher ed leaders need to know about the grief process to best support colleagues who are grieving in the workplace. Here we look at what we can expect from those who are grieving, including ourselves; in my November article, we'll explore specific strategies leaders can employ to support bereaved colleagues.

Many readers will be familiar with Elizabeth Kubler Ross's stages of grief model, but Gilbert reminds us that grief isn't linear: "[Kubler Ross] was an amazing researcher, but she was actually studying patients in palliative care that were anticipating their own deaths. That's how those stages were developed. Later on, they became applied to bereavement grief, but we know that those stages may not always be representative of bereavement grief, and we certainly don't progress through these stages in a linear way. So, what we know instead is that everybody seems to have quite a unique and individual trajectory of their grief and that we might grieve in very different ways and for different types of losses."

When I asked what we can expect from a typical grief experience, Gilbert shared a list of characteristics to consider: "In most cases, there's likely to be an acute period of grief, probably up to six months after your loss, where your daily activities are impaired by your grief. Common grief symptoms are things like brain fog, really having difficulty with cognitive function or making decisions, taking in and processing new information. All these things that we do in academia are trickier, and maybe we're impaired in our ability to do those things when we're grieving. But we might also have physical expressions of grief. We know that our immune systems are compromised when we're grieving, and we're more likely to get sick. And some of us might be more likely to express grief that way than others. Some are more doers in our grief, and others are much more emotional in our grief. So what to expect is to expect change and constantly changing needs, changing emotions, those waves of grief to come over the grieving person at sometimes unexpected times."

Gilbert also shared that while grieving, we tend to oscillate between a grief orientation, where we're actively grieving, and a recovery orientation, where our brain just can't be grieving 100 per-

PAGE 11 ➞

GRIEF FROM PAGE 10

cent of the time. As we walk though our grief over time, we spend more and more time in that recovery zone, moving toward a more so-called normal.

Gilbert and Elue both mention that there is no national or mandated bereavement policy, so every organization has its own policies for taking time after a loss—but they also note that this time is rarely enough. Elue notes that "at most, you maybe get three to five days, and then you're expected to hop back into work. And for a lot of us, that's not even enough time to bury someone, let alone begin to make sense of the aftermath of the loss itself." Gilbert found in her research that "many people we talked to took no time off, and certainly no formal time off was taken by any of these faculty members that we talked to. It's like we have a loss and we go into survival mode and we say, 'Okay, what, what needs to get done?' But it's very difficult to even determine, 'Okay, of all these balls I've got in the air, which ones could drop right now? Which could I pass onto somebody else?' And now at such a reduced capacity to function, you are still handling what is a very stressful job under normal circumstances."

In Gilbert's work, she found that in the right supportive conditions, returning to work quickly was a benefit for some people: "I went into this work really thinking that anybody that's grieving is going to have a difficult time going back to work. But there are people for whom work was a massive benefit to them in their grief. I think these are people who like their jobs and generally have a supportive and healthy work environment. Going back to work for them felt like a great, healthy way to detach from their grief for a period of time and then, at the end of the day, go home to their grieving family and deal with that grief again. And during the day, have an opportunity to derive support from colleagues to focus their energy on a productive goal and just have like a little bit of recovery. So for some people, I think if our workplaces are healthy and we like our jobs, or we find them to be fulfilling and meaningful, work can be really beneficial. Everybody will be different in that capacity. Some people will want to go back to the classroom, and if you do, that's okay."

At the same time, Elue and I discussed the fact that it's not uncommon for academics, especially teaching faculty, to return to work immediately because the culture of taking time, of colleagues offering to take classes or help with research students for an extended period, might not be strong at an institution. "It's common for academics to jump back into work quickly, almost like a form of distraction in some ways, but then the deep work that's required to navigate grief is often left undone because we're piling all these things onto our calendar to almost not attend to the pain that's there. We're so prone to overworking all the time, and that in and of itself can be our chosen mechanism to help us not deal with the pain. It anesthetizes us to an extent. But the thing is, at the end of the day when you close your laptop and you have to close the journal and walk away from it, it's still there. It's waiting to meet you at the door." Gilbert agreed that culture makes a huge difference, saying, "Just because a policy might exist doesn't mean that there is a culture that people will take advantage of it."

Gilbert found in her studies that "almost everybody looks back and wishes they'd taken more time off." Agreeing with Elue, she notes, "There is a cost associated with pushing through, and while it might feel easier at the time because it's so difficult to think of supports or leave options or 'How could I get away from my work?' They pushed through, they got it done. Very few people took extended leave. But we did have people though who took no time off and then needed to later take time off because they hadn't coped and they hadn't been able to process their grief."

Both Elue and Gilbert stress that compassion is the most important thing to consider when working with a colleague or direct report who is grieving—compassion meaning not only seeing someone else's pain but also wanting to help alleviate it. Elue says, "We have to approach colleagues who are reemerging back into the workplace with care. We can't expect them to come back and be at tip-top, optimal shape when they are trying to make sense of this new world. Don't think it's going to take a semester. Don't think it's going to be the academic year. Give them some time. Others forget, and they need things done, and they're expecting the grieving person to move at the same pace as before their loss. But we're not the same people when we come back to the workplace after we experienced a loss like that. It's debilitating. Recognize that comprehensive support is needed."

Listen to the entire interview with Stephanie Gilbert on Rebecca Pope-Ruark's podcast, *the agile academic*, on Apple, Google, and Spotify.

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CASE STUDY FROM PAGE 9

Wilson, P. P., Pereira, A., & Valentine, D. (2002). Perceptions of new social work faculty about mentoring experiences. *Journal of Social Work Education, 38*(2), 317–333. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2002.10779100

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