Alone, Together

Dear Faithful Colleagues,

It's tough out there. It's hard outside the college “bubble,” and it's equally rough inside it. I try to remind myself that the conditions our students experience are often hard. While traditional measures of progress might lead one to believe life becomes easier for each subsequent generation, I worry this isn't the case at all.

My guess is we're all weary from hearing the daunting statistics about just how hard it is out there—things like: the American College Health Association survey of 28,000 students on 51 college campuses that indicates 60 percent of students felt “very lonely” in the past year and a whopping 30 percent felt that way in the previous two weeks; the Pew Research Center's finding that college students spend over seven hours a day looking at a screen, and that one fourth of teenagers report being online constantly; or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's warning that American suicides are up 30 percent since 1999, and that 54 percent of those were completed by people with no known mental health conditions.

There is enough here to send educators into a fixed state of despair.

I recently heard a metaphor about a driver who hit an icy patch and slid off the road toward a large tree. In total panic, the driver’s focus was on the tree, in order to do everything possible to miss it. This intuitive decision sealed her fate. What the driver needed to do in order to avert the impending accident was to focus on the road, to look squarely in the direction she wished to go.

In Peter Block's book Community: The Structure of Belonging, he advises us to shift the conversations away from the problems of community by focusing on the possibilities. Though it seems as counterintuitive as looking away from the tree we are barreling toward, when times seem rough, conditions are ripe for colleges and universities to step in and do what we do best: shift culture, bolster hope, and design experiences—both curricular and co-curricular—that turn humans toward one another. This is our time to remake our culture, to design infrastructures that engage students in relationship building, in finding well-being, and in building a reservoir of empathetic concern for others. We can do this—it's time to steer ourselves back on course.

A recent effort on my own campus caught my attention as an example of a small move that begins to make a collective cultural impact. Recognizing there is a lack of doctors who can diagnose and provide support for kids with autism in rural southwestern Virginia, a group of faculty, staff, and students developed a plan to launch a mobile autism unit. Now with grants and the assistance of donors, they've purchased a 2004 Winnebago RV and have hit the road to serve families who need support the most. The renovated RV has a living room to visit and talk with those they encounter. This effort has led to belonging—the opposite of isolation—for all involved, most of all our students.

Perhaps the simple principles of design thinking (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test) can offer us a place to begin. Instead of bemoaning the deficits we might perceive among the current generation of students, let's empathize with what they're facing. Let's get specific about the problems we need to solve—first
and foremost that too many of our students are lonely and isolated in a sea of faces that surround them. Let’s ideate a host of potential solutions; prototype new courses, experiences, and interventions; and test and measure the impact of what we try. And, if efforts fail, we’ll dust off ourselves and go at it again. Our students are counting on it.

With hope,

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