

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

After the Great Pivot Should Come the Great Pause

We've had two years of disruption. What we need now is time to rethink our approach to higher education on every level.

By *Cate Denial*, *Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh*, and *Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt*

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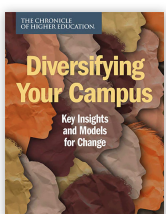
MARTIN LEÓN BARRETTO FOR THE CHRONICLE

This semester, as the Omicron wave crashed across the country, campus administrators once more asked faculty and staff members to shift our teaching practices at a moment's notice. Yet again we resorted to “lifeboat learning” — teaching all or some students remotely and adapting to rapidly changing circumstances.

After almost two years of educators repeatedly responding to the pandemic with creativity, inventiveness, and dogged determination, one thing is clear: This is unsustainable.

Higher education has expended vast reserves of energy on planning for the pandemic to end. Despite the fact that it hasn't, many institutions have nevertheless assured their campuses that an end to Covid is imminent and have strived to go “back to normal” as soon as possible. This has flown in the face of the evidence of our minds, eyes, and bodies. Faculty and staff members are exhausted. We have tried to think our way past the cognitive load of living through this moment and instead have grasped the limits of what willpower can do.

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Enough. The pandemic is not a blip, nor should we treat it as such. We are living through an era that demands we rethink our approach to higher education on every

level, creating a more humane and flexible system in its place.

The promise of higher education lies in crafting a space in which all of us — administrators, faculty and staff members, and students — nurture and encourage thinking and growth. Yet we have run so frenetically toward the perceived end of the pandemic that few people have had the chance to think and assess the seismic shifts taking place and the rifts and inequities the pandemic has laid bare.

Some will say that we don't have time to stop and think — that the relentless requirements of enrollment, tuition, retention, and graduation metrics make carving out such time impossible. But *not* carving out that time is equally unsustainable. Without time to breathe, assess, and chart a new path, higher education risks collapse in many places, hollowed out from within by the [disillusionment](#), [burnout](#), and [departure](#) of dedicated faculty and staff professionals.

In what follows, we offer a series of suggestions for how to collectively create the time and space we need to re-envision the invitation and promise of higher education. Between the three of us, we work at a community college, a private liberal-arts college, and a regional public university. We've crafted these ideas so they can be adapted to the specific situations facing different types of institutions. Our experiences of higher education are varied, but we share a vision for a more generative professional life.

Pause in your classroom. If we're going to seriously rethink our teaching, learning, and curricula, we are going to need to hear from the beneficiaries of our efforts: students. We need to capture what they are thinking about the content we share, but also the means by which we share it.

Which teaching practices — especially from the past two years — help them and

which don't? Collecting this information can be as simple as taking five minutes at the beginning or end of class to ask students to free-write critically about a particular teaching technique, about a milestone assignment, or about an entire semester.

Pausing class to ask "What learning strategy worked best for you today?" will allow us all a moment to breathe, will generate useful information for instructors at all levels, and will encourage students to assess their own approach to learning.

Pause in your department. Everyone has been so busy pivoting for two years — learning how to make the most of technology and teaching innovations that a great many faculty members were wary of, pre-Covid — we haven't had time to stop and think about what it all means and where we go next.

Start small. Instead of two-hour workshops, offer faculty and staff development in a series of [five- to 15-minute sessions](#). Take a biweekly pause to check in with one another as a department, deal with a single issue, and generate food for thought beyond the confines of that meeting.

But it doesn't end there. Across academe we need opportunities for sustained reflection. That could come in many forms:

- Give faculty members release time from teaching to read, debate, and strategize about the academic enterprise.
- Offer sabbaticals and leaves focused not just on research but on teaching, service, outreach, and planning.
- Ease the regular service workload expected of faculty and staff members to allow them time for this reflection and study of their institution's and profession's future.
- Create working groups for staff members who work in similar areas (such as

advising), providing them with an opportunity to reflect, share ideas, and design initiatives that might cut across individual units.

We need time to read. The cognitive load of the pandemic, with its attendant stresses in our work and nonwork lives, has made the simple act of reading a considerable challenge for many faculty and staff members. Being able to make reading a priority — to immerse ourselves in the latest works in our scholarly and professional fields — would have a profound effect on our ability to rejuvenate our research and development agendas.

We need retreats, and it is vital that they pull together everyone who contributes to the educational mission of each institution. Not only would such retreats create problem-solving spaces, they would send the clear message that everyone's input is valued in charting a path through this era of change.

These retreats could be as simple as a shared day of reflection for the entire campus. That means paying hourly workers and adjunct faculty members to attend. It means taking child care and elder care into account. It means closing our offices for the day — and not expecting everyone to participate on a weekend.

Of course creating this time and space for reflection requires freeing up people's time. The solution to faculty and staff burnout is not to add "institutional self-analysis" to their already long list of duties. Departments and other campus offices need to make room in people's schedules for this "Great Pause" and strip away other work projects that, however worthy, may not be a critical part of their department's mission. The solution to faculty and staff burnout is not "do this, too," but rather, "let's make some tough but deliberate decisions about how we can create opportunities for this reflection."

Pause as an institution. We need to rethink our destinations. Instead of pushing so

hard to “get things back to normal,” we need to acknowledge how the last two years have changed us and make the goal a transformed higher education. Employing some of the strategies proposed here that are centered on what academe does best — reading, thinking, writing, debate — would certainly provide the rest and rejuvenation that we all crave.

And with that rest will come the necessary new energy to answer broad and expansive questions rather than ones that are last minute and constrained:

- What have we learned in the past two years that will not only help us meet the continuing demands of the pandemic, but that will sustain us in our work and lives going forward?
- What does the invitation to join in the work of higher education really mean?
- What is the promise of higher education for everyone who participates?

Giving all of us a chance to weigh in will result in a system in which we are better prepared to trust, respect, and value one another. Once we have afforded each other the opportunities outlined here, we will better understand each other’s needs and goals. We will be better equipped to do the work that awaits us — not when things get “back to normal,” but immediately, coming together to define the next chapter of higher education.

All of these ideas require support from the highest levels of every institution. Departments and offices need to be empowered to take some of the steps we propose. Administrators need to make choices about how to allot their own time and energies and move away from simply pushing more work down to faculty and staff members in the form of new imperatives. Administrators must model that time and space are not just necessary but vital to the enterprise of education, and that deep thinking is critical to our ability to adapt.

The Great Pause is not an end to things, but rather a beginning. Higher ed is known for endless discussion — but let's commit time and resources to actual action on the other side of this timeout. Let's make part of our conversations about how to actually spark lasting change, and then commit the time, energy, and resources to make it happen.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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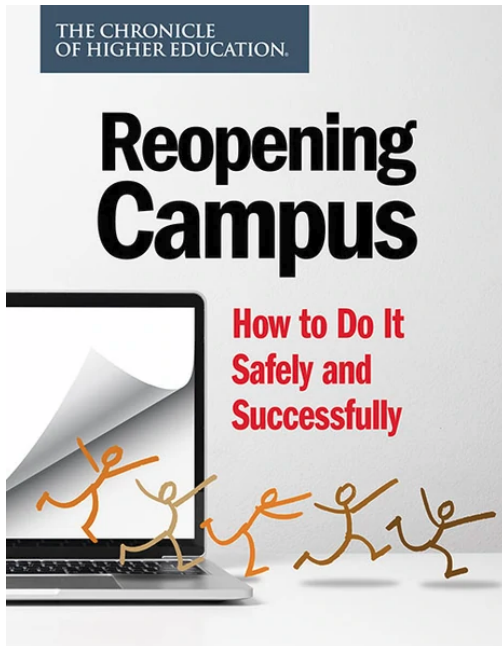
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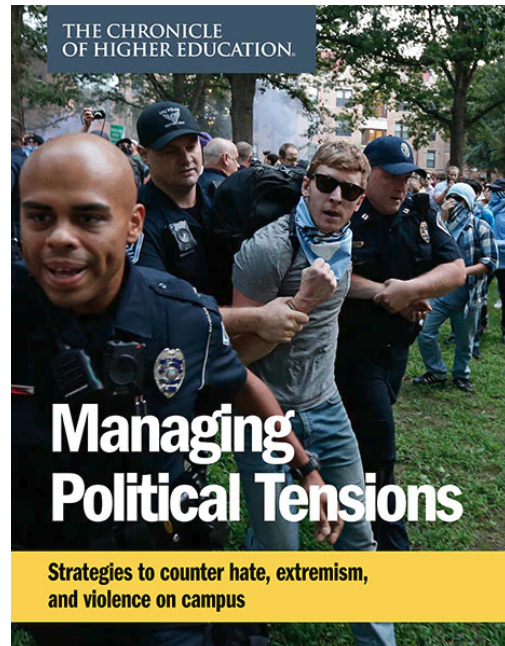
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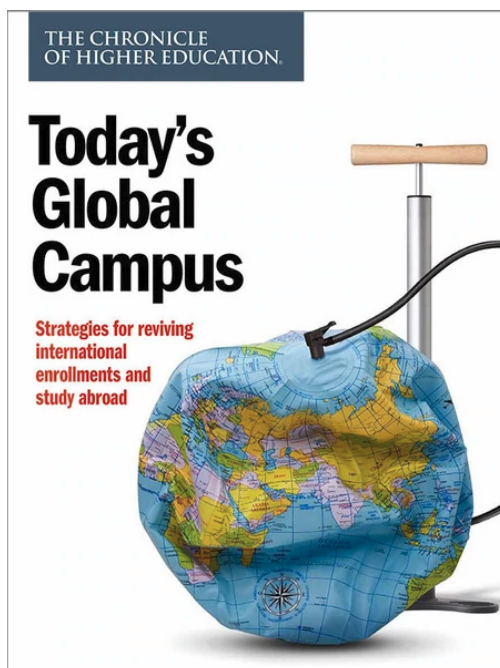
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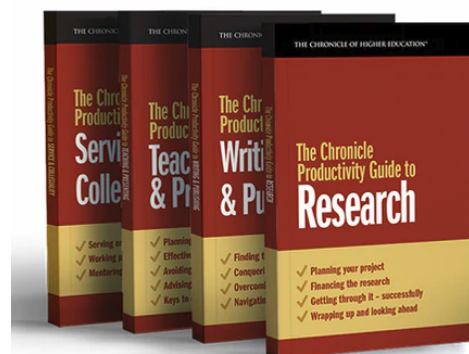
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