

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Kevin R. McClure and Alisa Hicklin Fryar*

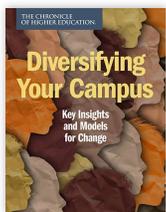
JANUARY 19, 2022

As many observers [have pointed out](#), the “Great Resignation” doesn’t perfectly capture what’s happening in the U.S. labor market. Data suggest many people, especially those with jobs in fields like hospitality, aren’t quitting the work force but rather jumping to better opportunities.

In much the same way, the Great Resignation doesn't perfectly capture what's happening on college campuses. Faculty members, as unhappy as many of them are, are largely staying put. What has changed is how they approach their jobs.

Certainly some academics will leave, including those retiring earlier than planned (either by choice or with the strong encouragement of their institutions) and contingent faculty members — for whom a difficult job has become even less tenable. Graduate students, too, might take an early exit and choose not to pursue academic jobs because of what they have experienced and what they have seen their faculty mentors endure.

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And of course some faculty members, in pursuing new opportunities, will move to new institutions or even translate their expertise into jobs in the private sector or consulting. As several people told us in response to a [discussion](#) we had on Twitter about how the Great Resignation is playing out on college campuses, resignations *are* happening, and we shouldn't ignore that.

Nevertheless, most faculty members aren't making big job moves. For them, the Great Resignation looks different. We would describe it as disengagement. They are withdrawing from certain aspects of the job or, on a more emotional level, from the institution itself. Faculty members are not walking away in droves, but they are waving goodbye to norms and systems that prevailed in the past. They are still teaching their courses, supporting students, and trying to keep up with basic tasks. But connections

to the institution have been frayed. The work is getting done, but there isn't much spark to it.

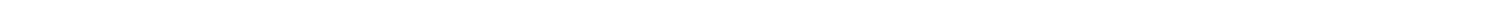
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In response to our Twitter thread, people said they were doing what they must, but nothing extra. They said they used to be a “rah-rah team player,” but not anymore. They used to feel strong ties to their institution, but they have since felt so undervalued that they're cutting back. One response that especially stood out to us: “Faculty might not be quitting, but they've left the building — sometimes departure is a state of mind.”

It's important to note that disengagement doesn't suggest laziness or that faculty members are necessarily shirking their core responsibilities. We know — on a deep, personal level — that many faculty members are working very hard. Doing the bare minimum in a global pandemic is sometimes a herculean effort. In some ways, disengaging is a perfectly rational response if your employer signals through their words and actions that your engagement isn't welcome. Many faculty members are being asked to do their jobs in a way that puts their safety at risk, and when they raise concerns, they are ignored and invalidated. It's hard to bounce back from that.

As we think about the causes of disengagement, there's no denying that institutional management of the pandemic and poor communication are front and center. People responded to our thread with unmistakable fury and a palpable sense of betrayal over how decisions were made and how [faculty and staff members have been treated as a result of those decisions](#). And we've been involved in enough university governance over the years to understand that there's always some slow-simmering conflict between the faculty and administration. It's

inevitable and probably healthy in small doses. But the anger and subsequent turning away from institutions we've observed? This feels more like a rolling boil.







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That said, many people also readily acknowledged that there were problems prior to the pandemic and confounding factors at play. States have cut funding to public higher education, while salaries for faculty and staff members have stagnated. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts have often failed to meaningfully improve the lived experiences and career opportunities of scholars of color. Legislatures have targeted higher education as a front line in the culture wars, turning governing boards into political spoils and legitimate scholarship into punishable crimes. And so we don't lay the blame entirely at the feet of college leaders, whose [morale also matters](#) as they navigate incredibly difficult conditions.

But research in human-resource management tells us that people need to feel safe, valued, and confident that they have the resources needed to do their jobs. And while those needs have always existed, the pandemic has brought new light to the extent to

which our employers have failed to deliver. In many ways institutions have neglected to create conditions for people to flourish.

We also don't discount the possibility that all of us are just sick and tired of, well, everything. After years of pandemic living and working, we may be desperate for change — something new, something fresh. Disengagement is perhaps the pinnacle of feeling stuck in a bad rerun.

On the one hand, disengaging might be what the faculty need right now as a self-preservation strategy. Moreover, we must recognize that work in which many faculty members have traditionally been asked to engage was frequently excessive and undercompensated. Women, people of color, and contingent faculty members have all had their labor exploited, and we can't argue with anyone in these groups who are re-evaluating what they are willing to give. What looks like disengagement might simply amount to doing our best in the face of constant disruptions or renegotiating the norms, if not the terms, of employment.

But what's good for us individually may not be good for the collective. After all, we still very much need faculty serving on hiring committees, approving curricula, designing new programs, and reviewing tenure criteria — to name just a few of the processes that depend on them. Now more than ever, we need faculty leaders willing to use tenure protections to ask hard questions and push back against bad policies, which makes this kind of mass malaise dangerous to shared governance. It's not ideal if pulling away means more work falling on the plates of people who don't feel they have the luxury of withdrawing.

There could also be organizational ramifications if a significant share of employees disengage. There could be less creativity, less risk-taking. Faculty members may feel disinclined to pursue big and bold projects; they may look askance at leadership roles. Students could certainly feel the effects, especially as they have come to rely on faculty members for emotional support to continue their studies. All these lofty — and

important — goals that institutions have around retention, completion, and sponsored research could suffer.

At the same time, the achievement of those institutional goals may have all along been premised on bad employment practices and exploited labor. And so faculty members refusing, as their power allows, to go the extra mile may be an important wake-up call for institutions. It may compel college leaders to reconsider whether their aspirations are feasible without first critically assessing workloads and making necessary investments.

Given that the causes of disengagement run deep, there are no quick fixes. Some faculty members may never see their institutions in the same light. And some faculty will, understandably, not look to college leaders for solutions and instead will pursue other routes to improving the academic workplace, such as collective organizing. Still, the feedback we received suggests that there are some options college leaders could consider to reduce the effects of disengagement.

For starters, we should acknowledge that there's a real problem here, then dedicate resources to understanding it. We have no idea how widespread disengagement is, and there's value in institutions getting a handle on how their employees are feeling. We think of this as an exercise in bearing witness to what we've experienced so we can learn and heal from it. This is especially important, given that [campuses can have short memories](#), welcoming new batches of students each year.

The good news is that colleges are full of very smart people who know how to conduct research. College leaders could buy out the time of some faculty members or offer team-based grants to study the issue and present findings to campus. If college leaders go down this path, it's vital that they act on the recommendations, even if it's just a pilot program. There is nothing worse for faculty morale than organizing a task force whose work gets ignored.

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Ultimately, re-engaging faculty will require rebuilding relationships, and the foundation of that project is trust. Making a concerted effort to invest in shared-governance structures and processes can go a long way toward repairing broken relationships between the faculty and administration. And when the next crisis pops up, that investment can really pay off.

Our big fear is that college leaders won't do anything. We get the sense that some leaders think that if we can just get on the "other side" of the pandemic, things will magically improve. Like we'll flip the switch back on and the faculty will reanimate. Going silent on this issue right now severely underestimates its magnitude.

The pandemic will eventually transition into something else, but its effects will linger. For how long and with what consequences depends on what college leaders decide to do right now.

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

OPINION

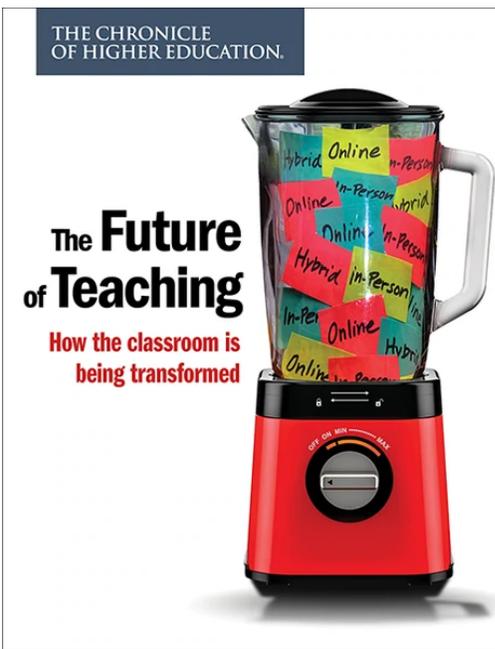
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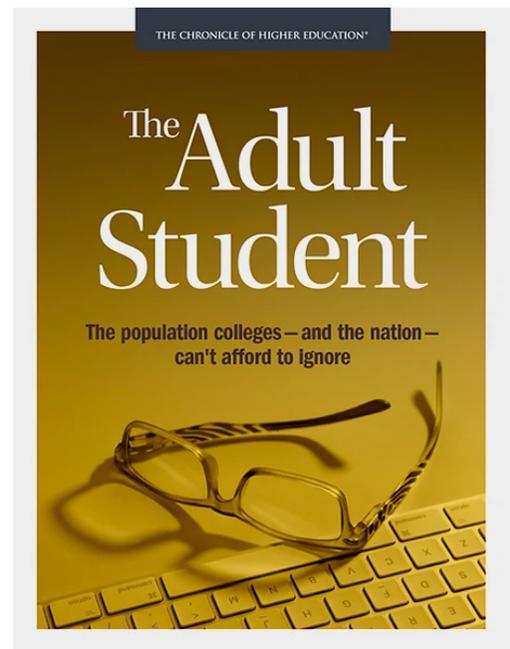
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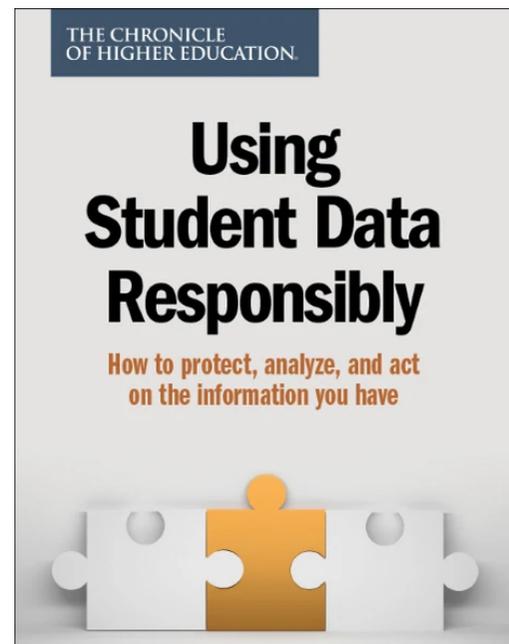
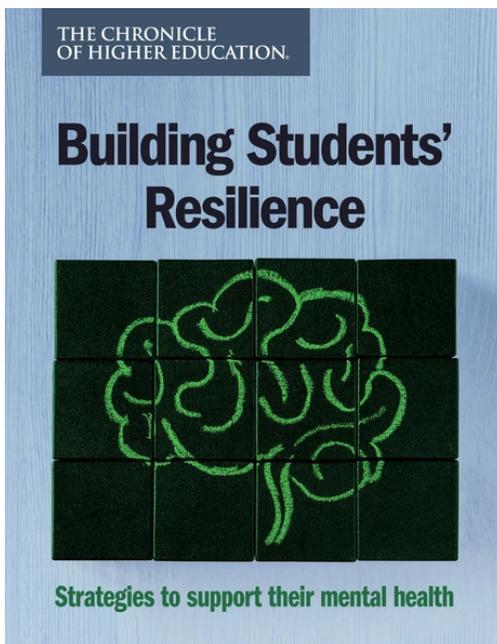
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