Transcription for INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

Ep.77: Turnover, Burnout and Demoralization in Higher Ed

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(AUDIO PLAYS)

DOUG LETTERMAN:
The great resignation, the big quit, whatever you call it. College and universities, like many other employers, are seeing workers walk out the door in droves. Hello and welcome to the Key Insight Higher Ed News or Analysis Podcast. I'm Doug Letterman, Editor, and Co-founder of Inside Higher Ed, and your host. I'm so glad you're listening. Employers of all kinds are struggling to hold onto their employees in the wake of the pandemic. And amid a white-hot job market, data recently released by the University of North Carolina system, for instance, shows that faculty and staff turnover in the first half of this academic year was about 40% higher than the average of the last four years. Are colleges and universities just dealing with the same issues that other industries are facing? Are the unique problems in Higher Ed the campus leaders need to acknowledge. To explore these questions, I'm talking this week with Kevin McClure, Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, who's been writing about these issues.

And this summer will begin a three-year research project examining working conditions at public institutions in his state. In our conversation, he explores some of the reasons for the turnover, assesses the impact of the pandemic, and explains the difference between burnout and demoralization, both of which are probably playing a role. McClure also offers some advice on what college and university leaders can and should be doing to understand and address the issues on their own campuses. Before we hear from him, here's a word from the sponsor of this week's episode.

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DOUG LETTERMAN:
Now, on to my discussion with Kevin McClure. Kevin, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Your formal areas of research include a wide range of issues related to higher education, finance, and governance, and you've developed a particular interest recently in regional public colleges and universities. How did you come to be spending time and intellectual energy on this issue of the Higher Ed workplace and issues around burnout? I'm guessing there's a story there.

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Had you asked me in February 2020 if these were the things that I would be talking about now, I would have said no. As you said, I generally focus on issues of management, leadership, and finance. I have largely focused on regional public universities and recently started a research center focused on regional colleges, the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges. Some of these issues were certainly on my radar, but it's not something that I was devoting a ton of time to in terms of my thinking and writing. So, here's what happened. It was, you know, March of 2020, at that point, honestly, I was working really, really hard. I had two young children and was exhausted. And then, we went into quarantine. And some

other folks that are listening may recall that period of time. We were still fairly optimistic about this being a short-term kind of thing. We go into lockdown and then maybe after that we can kind of get back to something that was closer to normal. So, without any inkling that this was gonna become a multi-year experience, I just basically pushed ahead with the same stuff that I had always planned on doing.

And so, I didn't adjust my goals and adjust my workload at all. My wife and I basically would split the workdays, so I would work in the afternoon, she would work in the mornings, but I was more or less trying to fit in a normal kind of 50-hour workweek into 20 hours. And so, we were working weekends and working at night just trying to get everything done. And so, we get to May of 2020 and there is nothing left in the tank. And it wasn't just that I was exhausted, but there was also kind of a certain level of detachment and even some cynicism connected to the job that I had just never really experienced before. And so, I had started to see some folks at that point even having some early conversations around burnout, and what does burnout mean and what does it look like? And so, as I was reading through that, it was kind of like a checklist where I was like, OK, this is what's going on, Like, I have kind of hit burnout. And I'm grateful that in my position, I had the summer months where things start to dial back a little bit, and I had the opportunity to reflect and as a researcher, start reading and learning a little bit about what burnout means.

Around that same period of time, I was doing some public writing and put together a column that was really aimed as an audience at college leaders and said, Listen, this is what I experienced. I've been talking to other people in Higher Ed and people are telling me the same thing, that this was not kind of a unique experience, and you might need to get ready this fall for how folks are gonna be feeling coming back to campus. Because I think the conditions here are really ripe for this to be a big problem. And then, from there, it was just kind of a matter of continuing to pay attention and listen to what folks across Higher Ed were saying and had the opportunity to do a lot of interviews as connected to some of the pieces that I was writing. And so, I've probably talked to in the neighborhood of maybe 45 or so people across Higher Ed about what their experiences have been at work and interacting with leadership and what they'd like to see different moving forward. And so, unexpectedly, it has been a rare opportunity to draw on some of what I had done in the past connected to finance and management, but apply it to what for me has become a very personal but also a really significant set of questions around the academic workplace and what we do moving forward.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
At this point, would you consider it to be a true research area for you, or is it mostly for your public writing? Guessing you had a pretty full research agenda already. So, I'm curious how you see this fitting in.

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Largely up until this point, I haven't really considered it to be research, it has been kind of a project of inquiry. And to some extent, like I said, just a project of self-reflection, I have a character trait or flaw depending on how you look at it, when I see something that bothers me, I can't let it go. And so, some of this was just kind of this persistent feeling that something was off in Higher Ed and how people were experiencing Higher Ed. And I just felt like there was something that we needed to talk about. Moving forward, it will become a more intentional part of some of the research that I'm doing. Because this summer I'll start a three-year position where I am afforded some funding and some support to do a next

month's study that will include surveys and focus group interviews with people across higher education in North Carolina, which is where I'm located. And the funding for this project is specific to the state of North Carolina, but that will be a fully designed research project that will inform what I'm hoping and envisioning will be a book project focused on improving the academic workplace.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
It seems like this became an area of inquiry for you, primarily because of the pandemic. But say, three years from now, knock wood. Well, it won't go away. Probably won't be driving our agendas in nearly the same way. Presumably, you believe there are much larger academic workplace issues that have been exacerbated may be speeded up by the pandemic that wanted attention. How do you consider the impact of the pandemic here? And why are these issues going to remain important?

KEVIN MCCLURE:
For me, it was the pandemic that brought many of these issues to light. But if you talk to some other folks across higher ed, as I have been speaking about and writing about these things, there is a certain sentiment around, well, yeah, welcome to the party, friend. I mean, I admittedly in an incredibly privileged position as a tenured faculty member, you know, I'm a white man, and by virtue of that fact, have experienced higher education in the higher ed workplace in a way that's kind of specific to my position now.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
Whereas anybody who's been paying attention to adjuncts for a long time or to minoritized people who have certain pressures that maybe their white colleagues don't, et cetera, you're hearing their pain?

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Yeah, well, you know, I certainly had awareness of some of those issues, but, yeah, it took me having just a different personal experience with my own work and my relationship to work before I started asking a different set, a more poignant set of questions. So, I think the where it landed with this is many of the root causes of some of the problems that I've been writing out connected to burnout or demoralization, or disengagement predate the pandemic. So, these are issues that had been around for a long period of time. And as you said, the pandemic probably revealed them in a different way. What that suggests to me is that they aren't going to go away if we arrive at a place where we are post-pandemic or enter into a new phase of life. And so, unless something happens here in the next couple of years where we figure out how to address these problems, I suspect that they're going to be with us for some period of time. And so, because of that, I think that they merit our attention. Now, having said that, there are some things that have very much changed that, in my view, make paying attention to these problems even more important, especially if you are a leader of a college or university.

One of the ways in which the pandemic has really made paying attention to these issues even more important is that we're in the middle of an incredibly dynamic labor market. There are lots of companies and organizations that are looking for talent, and there are people in higher education who have had an incredibly difficult experience over the last couple of years that are looking at those opportunities in a different way. Even though it's the case that I think these are problems that have existed for a long time will likely continue into the future. Not paying attention to them now could have even more dire consequences for institutions than it did previously. I'm looking at my own institution where we have had an incredible number of searches going on, an incredible number of people that are in interim roles. I'm hearing stories of searches where the pools of candidates are just not very deep searches that are

not successful. Ultimately, we're not able to identify a person who wants to take the offer and a number of other signposts along the way that says to me, we just cannot afford to set aside some of these workplace issues and expect that we're gonna be able to meet the goals that we have set for ourselves in higher education.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
What got me wanting to do this interview was some slides that you shared from a meeting that I think I believe just took place at the UNC System Board of Governors, and some data around faculty and staff departures and turnover. Tell us a little bit about what those data said briefly and what they flagged for you, and sort of the issues that they reinforced or the concerns they reinforced for you.

KEVIN MCCLURE:
One of the good things, I suppose, about being out there very publicly, writing about these issues, talking about these issues that people send me things all the time. And s, I was just sitting there doing my work one day, and our Provost actually sent those slides over to me and said, Hey, you might wanna check out some of this turnover data that they're presenting to the Board of Governors. And to the credit of the UNC system, we have as a system have always collected turnover data, and they make regular presentations connected to turnover. They do an annual engagement survey. And so, you know, we have a system office that is, at least in some measure, paying attention to some of these issues and certainly some of the metrics connected to retention. And so, for many, many years, the presentation has often been along the lines of we're doing pretty well. Our turnover is about what we would expect it to be based on kind of the national benchmark that they use. There are certain years in certain institutions where it might be a little bit higher or a little bit lower than that average.

But generally, they frame this as the system does a pretty good job of retaining faculty and staff. What was interesting is that this year the presentation had a new set of slides that was basically showing data for the last part of 2021. I don't think yet we have the data for 2022 for the first couple of months of it, but it basically showed a spike in turnover and a significant spike. I think I calculated that in, you know, so far based on the data that they have within a six-month period, they would have the same number of turnovers that we would expect to see over the course of an entire year.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
It looked like it was about between a third and almost 50% higher month to month than the normal average for the previous few years.

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Yeah. And you know what? I'll tell you why this data stood out to me. There are a couple of things that stood out to me. One is that there are a number of people who have been rightly pointing out that it may not really be the case that in higher education or in other industries, we really see, like a tsunami of people that are leaving. So, the great resignation may not really play out quite that way in higher education. And when I have floated that idea on social media, people push back sometimes and say, listen, I'm seeing people leaving all the time. You know, I've got friends, I've got family that are leaving Higher Ed, there's something going on here. And this is one of those moments where I was seeing data that really suggested to me that while it's certainly the case that it may not be this huge wave of departures, there are people leaving. And we are going to feel and are feeling the consequences of that very fact.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
To what extent do you think what's going on in higher ed is different from what we're seeing elsewhere in the economy and the job market? If the situation is worse in higher ed or isn't worse, it's just bad, are there particular things that would make it so? This might be a good time to acknowledge that there may be important distinctions to make for different groups, faculty, as opposed to staff say. Where is higher education special for better or worse on this set of issues?

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Yeah, that's a great question. I don't know that I've got a definitive answer. I've got some hunches around some unique features of higher education that I think could play into this conversation and potentially results in some different outcomes. One, I think we've had for a long period of time some issues connected to inadequate pay within higher education, particularly if you think about the levels of education that are often expected of people stepping into many jobs within higher education, and the fact that you know, salaries have often not been able to keep up with the cost of living increases in communities where you've got a college or university and the cost of living has generally been going up. So, I think that's one feature of this. The second feature of that is that these are institutions or organizations that ostensibly or at least, you know, maybe on paper are dedicated to human growth and learning and equity. And as a consequence of that, you may have a set of workers or employers or employees who expect from these organizations something different than what they have experienced throughout the pandemic.

And as a consequence of that, that may just have kind of a heightened sense of dissatisfaction. You know, there's no denying the fact that you've got an incredibly educated group of people who have a great deal of professional autonomy in many cases, some of whom have an inordinate amount of freedom to explore and research and critique their own employers. And so, that brings in an additional layer of complexity to this. And then, the last thing I'll mention is that you've got an incredible number of institutions, especially some of the public universities, that have certain vestiges of kind of a state agency model in terms of how they are organized and how they are operated. And what that means is that despite all of this conversation around higher education being corporatized, we've got a set of HR practices and hiring practices that are Byzantine. They reflect a state-based bureaucracy more so than they do kind of a nimble, knowledge-based organization. And it creates a whole bunch of problems, frankly, where it's just not keeping up with the pace of change that I think we are seeing and other knowledge organizations that are really dedicated to the idea of talent development and retention.

Whether or not that makes higher education entirely unique or set apart from other places in terms of how they're experiencing this, I'm not sure. But all I know is that I see a number of features within higher education that I can point to as being part of the problem. And as a consequence of being able to identify those problems fairly confidently, it also means that I know where to start when we start thinking about solutions.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
A lot to dig into there. A couple of things that jump out at me. So, obviously, on the pay and compensation front, I think it's, you know, reasonably well established that higher education institutions like a lot of nonprofits, pay less compared to companies, et cetera, on the assumption that there's a mission that maybe warms the soul if not fills the wallet, and certainly, for some additional benefits, that may accrue tuition benefits for children, things like that. And I think there's been a sort of an assumption

that colleges could get by paying somewhat less. Because those other things and some flex and some maybe not working till midnight and some other things. And this is where this staff and faculty stuff comes in on the faculty side. Those traditions started at a time when many, if not most, faculty members were tenured or on the tenure track, and maybe had the promise of quasi-permanent employment status. It's obviously not true for the vast majority of faculty members anymore.

So, I guess is part of the problem that some of the non-compensation reasons people might have thought of higher education as a good place to work are less evident now than they used to be.

KEVIN MCCLURE:
Absolutely. 100%. First of all, on the job security front, obviously, we've got a shrinking pool of people who get to enjoy that benefit, at least from the perspective of being a tenured faculty member. On the staff side of things, similar to other education fields, I think that there's been kind of an increasing tendency towards, you know, more managerial authority, more managements kind of being the locus of power. And so, therefore professionals are not experiencing as much autonomy, and instead encountering a lot more around kind of accountability and surveillance, in some cases around their productivity and performance, like health care benefits, summer benefits, some of that just doesn't have the same luster that it once had. And there is a certain level of denial on the part of institutions around this. And I do wanna make one thing very, very clear. I still think that working in higher education is like, a phenomenal career, and I invest a significant amount of time preparing future higher education professionals because I believe that you can still have such a wonderful and fulfilling, rewarding career working in higher education.

But we cannot rest on this notion of job benefits that is decades old. We've got to update some of our assumptions and again, do a much better job of thinking about the people that we bring in as talent, and how are you going to develop and keep that talent. Because as I said, folks are waking up to a new reality where maybe they once thought that what they can do isn't transferable. And they're learning that it certainly is. And there are places that may be higher ed once thought it had an advantage over in terms of flexibility and benefits. And that advantage doesn't exist anymore.

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DOUG LETTERMAN:
You're listening to a conversation with Kevin McClure, Associate Director of Higher Education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, and a founder and director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges. Here's more of our interview. I think there's been an assumption that the mission that the institution has, and the fact is jobs are in purpose of a mission was gonna overcome maybe some other limitations. And I guess I'm curious, do you think that institutions have been overpromising the extent to which or exaggerating the extent to which they are mission-driven? And is the larger questioning in the public of the value of a degree and of higher education's contributions to driving socioeconomic and other equity in the country, being challenged more as starting to erode people's own sense of mission in their jobs? Or is that am I overreading there?

KEVIN MCCLURE:
I do think that there is some sense that there is the espoused values of our institutions and then the enacted values, and that there isn't perfect alignment between those two. And increasingly, folks are coming into higher education and they wanna see the recedes. They wanna see what are the policies and the practices and the actions that support this value that you have stated is central to the mission of who you are as an institution. And I think a number of our institutions are falling short when it comes to really being able to provide evidence of, for example, a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. This has played out in multiple different ways during the pandemic. And I think what it has suggested to some folks is that there is a real values conflict that I'm experiencing right now between my personal values, my values as a professional, and what I see are the values that seem to be guiding the institution. And that right there is kind of the heart of demoralization. Demoralization sometimes gets maybe framed as people just being that their spirits are just low, and we can pick them back up with something just to kind of re-energize folks.

And what I try to underscore instead is that people, and this is borrowing from Barbara San Torres work in K-12 education. But the demoralization is really about people not being able to enact the values that brought them to the work. So, as an example, if you say I'm coming to this work with a strong ethic of care, that I want to care for students, I wanna care for my colleagues, and I expect the same from my employer. But I'm seeing decisions in response to the pandemic that placed me in harm's way or do not necessarily reveal or show that there's a true ethic of care when it comes to our custodial staff. It raises that question of, what is this place all about? What truly are the values guiding this institution? Yes, it's certainly the case that there are things happening in society that have dialed up our expectations of institutions. It could be the case that we're asking too much, but at the same rate, I think the moment right now is calling for certain types of leaders that are able to step up and kind of respond to those expectations, in a way that signals to people that are very much motivated by the mission, that you can still do the work that brought you here.

Any time we see an example of a leader who does that, who pushes forward courageously in a very mission-driven, values-based kind of way, they become like instantly sensations in the higher ed world. And it's so strange to me that there aren't more people who see examples of that and say, Oh, there is a real appetite for that type of person that's willing to kind of lean into a very strong values-based type of leadership. Man, it can be frustrating when you feel like there's that potential for your organization or your leadership to demonstrate that, and you feel like it's just not there.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
That last point you made was where I wanted to go next to the distinction between burnout, which is what a lot of people have attributed much of the malaise and turnover to, and demoralization. You already touched on it a bit, but to me the reason it's so important is if you write off all the turnover to burnout, you can probably more directly tie it to the pandemic and the stuff you talked about at the beginning about how it was kicking your butt, which a lot of us have been feeling. Whereas if it's something more akin to demoralization, it may be more systemic and you might need to address it in a different way. Can you expand on that at all?

KEVIN MCCLURE:
One of the really interesting things about higher education, of course, is we've got tons of different types of institutions. We've got tons of different types of people working in higher ed. I mean, these are

practically small cities in terms of the number of functional areas and positions that you can find at a college or university. And so, what we can expect from that, of course, is that people are gonna have really, really different workplace experiences, again, by virtue of, you know, where they sit, the type of institution, or even the state in which they are located. And the reason why I bring that up is that you've got a lot of people in higher ed who are doing fine, they are happily working, and they love their work. They are in it, they are engaged. And so, at the same time that we are talking about some of these issues, I recognize the fact that there are folks that are doing well, and in some cases even thriving. But, you know, you've got another set of people and what they are experiencing can vary.

You do have people that are burned out, they are depleted. They just don't feel like they've got much of anything left to give, but are still trying to push ahead. Nonetheless, this is a big issue right now as we are in April, because we are nearing the end here for many people on kind of a traditional semester calendar, and we're just running low on gas. You've got the demoralization piece around kind of values, conflict, and wondering if this is the right place for you to continue working. You've got disengagement, so people just kind of pulling back cognitively or emotionally, or physically from the work. Some of those are connected to one another, and you can kind of have multiple simultaneously. The manifestations of them can look a little bit different. And so, I guess, one big takeaway from this is that for me at least is not to walk into this with the assumption that there's just kind of one thing going on here, that there is an epidemic of X happening in higher education, but instead that we've got lots of different things going on.

And we've got to put some time in, frankly, to your earlier question, around collecting some data around this and putting some real thought and energy into understanding the workplace experiences of folks in higher ed, which as I have been in this space and thinking about it and talking to people I've come to realize is it just has not gotten the level of attention that it should. And one of the drums that I repeatedly beat is that we spend so much time thinking about student learning outcomes and student graduation rates, and we somehow don't necessarily step back and connect that to working conditions at colleges and universities. What I'd love to see is, is basically continued conversations on this. I hope that this isn't just a blip, and then we just kind of push ahead back to the way things were. I hope that this conversation continues, and by virtue of this being a continuous conversation, we appreciate the complexity of it and bring nuance to our study of it.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
You've been good at acknowledging what we don't know, but based on what we do know so far, or at least what we suspect, what are some thoughts on what institutions leaders can and should be doing? Understanding the problem at their own institution is probably one of the first things. But what are some practices or some things you want leaders of units or organizations to be thinking about trying to start addressing the problem?

KEVIN MCCLURE:
You hit my very first one right on the head in the sense of I repeatedly talk about the need for institutions to be collecting their own data around what their employees experienced during the pandemic, how they are feeling now, and what they want moving forward. As I've been talking about this with lots of people across, I'm just not convinced that those efforts are happening. It's very, very difficult at the institution level for us to come up with kind of localized solutions. If we are really not collecting the type of data that helps us understand what's going on, you know, we could have a

significant number of folks at our institutions that are incredibly dialed into the work and find it meaningful and want to continue doing it. But the real issue is that they may not feel a sense of belonging at that place. There may be real issues around inclusion. And so, you then want to make sure that whatever solution you're coming up with is targeting the right problems. I think, data collection broadly is an issue that I have been trying to point out.

A couple of other things that I have been sharing, and one is I take inspiration from one of my colleagues, Margaret Sallee, who has talked a lot about ideal worker norms and ways in which we structure jobs and job expectations within higher education and other professional spaces, as well. As if folks are constantly available, 100% loyal to the institution, do not have caregiver responsibilities, have bodies that allow them to kind of show up at the workplace unaffected every single day. And that ideal, that mythical person just does not exist. Or if they do exist, and that's the person that's constantly getting rewarded and promoted, you kind of set a standard for other people that I think can send the wrong message, trying to do some analysis, some internal analysis and reflection around in what ways are we comparing people against this ideal that can be dangerous. We've got real workload issues and workload equity issues. And again, I would like to see institutions being much more intentional about trying to measure workload, understand those inequities in workload, and ideally start addressing some of those problems.

Because you've got some folks that are incredibly taxed. And oftentimes they tend to be people who are willing to put in the time to mentor people, and willing to serve on behalf of the institution. And so, disproportionately, some of those burdens are falling on women and people of color. And so, some of these issues connected to burnout, and people being stretched too thin, are landing on folks that are already marginalized within the academy. Here's the thing. We've got lots of really messy, complex problems in higher ed. A lot of these are things that we can fix, and there is a sense that we can't do these things because they are hard or they are expensive, or we shouldn't do them because these are problems that exist everywhere. Why, you know, why is it up to us to figure these things out? I think the reality is, is that many of them are not that complicated. There are a number of them that do not have to be that costly. We've got a lot of in-house expertise that we can tap with the right will to tackle some of these.

We can move the ball down the field. We can make progress that can make a difference in the lives of people. I really think that some of the most successful organizations in higher education over the course of the next ten years are the ones that are gonna take workplace conditions and culture seriously and start doing that right now.

DOUG LETTERMAN:
That was Kevin McClure, Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, sharing his thoughts about the reasons behind the turnover issues many colleges are dealing with. This conversation overlaps a little bit with an episode we did a couple of months ago about the future of remote and flexible work in higher education, which is probably another element of the turnover problem for colleges and universities. To me, Kevin's last point about the need to pay closer attention to the state of the workplace in higher education is maybe the most important takeaway. A lot of colleges and universities have taken for granted that people will see innate value in working in higher education, because they support the mission, and some employees probably will. But as he also pointed out, it's not always the case that institutions are operating by the values that brought the employees

there in the first place. These are vexing issues, and job one for most colleges right now, as is true for most employers, is probably just getting the jobs filled.

But he's hoping that they find time to explore and try to address the underlying issues as well. That's all for today's episode. Thanks again to Kevin McClure, to Kaplan for sponsoring this episode, and to you for joining us. We'll be back with another episode of The Key next week. I'm Doug Letterman. And until then, stay well, and stay safe.