

Transcription for



THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 52: PREPARING FOR A FALL OF CARING FOR STUDENTS

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EP. 52: PREPARING FOR A FALL OF CARING FOR STUDENTS

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[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: In mid-March 2020, days after the coronavirus pandemic caused most college campuses to shut down, Mays Imad, professor of pathophysiology and biomedical ethics, and coordinator of the Teaching & Learning Center at Pima Community College, wrote an essay for Higher Ed called "Hope Matters." The piece offered 10 strategies for faculty and staff members to support students and help them to continue to learn during a time of great uncertainty. Over the last 15 months, Imad's essay has been viewed more than 800,000 times, more than double that of any other piece of content on our site during that time. Her blend of deeply personal storytelling and intensely practical advice for a faculty body struggling with their own difficulties and deeply concerned about their students clearly struck a chord.

We're collectively in a different place right now, with many college planning to return mostly, if not fully, to their physical campuses this fall. And many college leaders regularly working the word normal into their rhetoric to describe the coming semester. But most of us are a long way from normal, and in today's episode of The Key, Mays Imad looks both backwards at what college students and their instructors experienced in the last 15 months and forward at how colleges and professors can continue to engage in what she calls the pedagogy of healing in the months ahead.

MAYS IMAD: It's been my observation that empathy has been really on the rise, and not just in higher ed, but we got to see the suffering of others, we got to see how devastating poverty is. So with our students, it's both ways. Definitely, we got to see how much they try. I mean, the odds of them getting through school, really high. And yet they keep showing up and they keep trying, and they keep getting excited about learning.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before we hear from Mays Imad, here's a quick word from Blackboard, which is sponsoring this and the next two episodes of The Key.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Mays, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

MAYS IMAD: Thank you for having me.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're talking to you today primarily about how faculty members can help students navigate and learn successfully this fall, given the trauma and uncertainty that they've endured what will be by then the last 18 months. Before we get to that, can you tell us a little bit about how a neuroscientist who studied fruit flies to understand how the synapse works ended focusing on what you call pedagogy of healing?

MAYS IMAD: Thank you for the question. You know, when I reflect back on my journey, I immigrated with my family from Baghdad, Iraq, in 1993. And it wasn't an easy journey. And it was a heartbreaking journey to leave at a young age your family, your home. I miss the walls in my house. I still think of them. So there is an exile component that you kind of have to live with and deal with. And then you... I came to a country where I didn't know the language. I didn't know people, and there was a lot of otherings that I experienced, personally, but also my family in the community. And that's wounding at a really deeper human level.

So I think I gravitated towards what I call solitary disciplines, unintentionally, I think subconsciously. So I went to philosophy first. Then I went to neuroscience. And I would sit at my rig and do electrophysiology for hours, and I would lose myself with that cell in a petri dish. And then I received a post-doctoral fellow, that's when I moved to the University of Arizona.

And that fellowship had a component where you had to teach. And you team up with a community college, so I was at the University of Arizona, we teamed up with Pima Community College. And what you do, you do observation of a faculty member one semester, then you teach their course the following semester.

So I completed my requirement, and the dean at that time, he said, do you want to teach more? And I had my post-doc, and I said no, I couldn't wait to get back to the bench. He offered me a course on the weekends, and I started teaching on the weekends. He saw something in me with respect to teaching that I had not seen yet. And so I would teach a biology course on Saturday, sometimes Saturday and Sunday. And I began to see myself in my students. A lot of them are first generation, it's a Hispanic-serving institution. I taught in the south side of Tucson. I began to see myself in my students and how earnest they were, and how genuine. And there was this quest to learn and discover. And they would wait after class and speak with me, and they would thank me and ask me how I was. I noticed that I would lose myself in the classroom. To this day, I do.

So without consciously thinking about it, I think I saw that there was an opportunity for healing myself, because the wounds that I spoke about, those are relationships, that trauma or immigration, or... They shatter our assumptions about the benevolence of the world when you are othered, or when you experience othering. And the healing is also in relationships. So over the years, what I have found is healing in the classroom. And I hope that I offer the same for my students.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We ultimately want to focus on what's ahead to help the many instructors and institutions prepare for yet another very different experience of teaching and learning this fall. But I don't think we can talk about what's ahead without talking a little bit about where we've been. So can you give us some context about where students and professors heads are likely to be in this brief period where many of them are recuperating and gearing up for the next semester?

MAYS IMAD: So there is an abrupt component that we experience, the shock, school closed, you can't go to your office, you can't go to the cafeteria, you can't say... And there is something about that abruptness and the harshness of that abruptness that can be traumatic. And then there was the lingering, we don't know, just keeps going and going. We experienced the isolation, the uncertainty, the loss. We are in a society that doesn't really talk about loss and grief and emotions. And those are real. Those are real. When most people when they see on Twitter that somebody lost their dog, they feel, they empathize. They send sympathies.

We are not talking about a pet that is lost, we are talking about hundreds of thousands of human beings that didn't get a proper funeral. We know people. So there is that.

And then after that, the sense of helplessness. You see your students, your colleagues suffer, whether they lost their job, whether they are heartbroken seeing the ongoing racial injustice and oppression. And the only thing you could do is say I'm so sorry, and it feels empty. And then it wounds us.

Specifically for the faculty members, there was that abruptness, then a lot of them worked through spring break and summer. It wasn't a moment to take a pause and to breathe. They were also at the frontline, hearing students' stories, seeing their students just fall apart in some cases. Knowing that we were not necessarily, we were not offering the best education. We couldn't. We were not prepared.

So there is a moral injury that personally, and I think collectively, we experience. And it's on top of what's before, and what's before, and we haven't had a chance to pause and to process. So if we don't process the grief, it stays in the body. It turns into something else, whether it's autoimmune disorders or depression or anger, and it's real. It is something that in higher ed and in our society we have to really look seriously at and have a plan how to address it.

And at the same time I also want to say that we are resilient. The brain, the human body are resilient. And there are things we could do that we know, they're evidence-based, that can help individuals and communities heal.

[WHOOSH SOUND]

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Back in March 2020, you wrote an essay for us that has been read by hundreds of thousands of people, more than any other single piece of content that we've published since then. In that and other essays over the past 15 months, you've talked about what instructors and institutions should be doing to deal with the environment you just described. What has been the focus of your thinking and advice about what those are working with students needed to be doing to help them continue their work, or to give pause, or to do both at the same time?

MAYS IMAD: I am encouraging and inviting our colleagues to do both at the same time. One of the ways we could do both at the same time is this notion of bearing witness to the trauma. So when we bear witness, we are pausing to recognize the truthfulness of something that has happened, or that is happening. We advocate for that truth. We elevate it. We give permission to pause and sit with that truth. So in a way it's permission for ourself to acknowledge the pain, the suffering, the uncertainty, the fear, the trauma. And in doing so, we are sending the message to our students that we care about this and we're going to allocate time for it.

Now, it doesn't have to be an entire class or an entire module. It could be a sentence. It could be just a pause you take in the middle of lecture, and you will breathe and you remind your students this is probably tough. You're probably exhausted, and let's just take a break. Let's take a three-minute break. Bearing witness allows us to also... When we grieve, it's a way to honor something that is special, a life that was lost, a relationship that was, a job that provided you security. So it's honoring something important and meaningful when we are grieving.

And at the same time, it allows us to feel that sense of community. The article you mention, the one I wrote, "Hope Matters," I wrote it. Yeah, I wrote that article thinking of the students who think of school, campus, classroom as a sanctuary, who maybe not have a home, or don't have a safe home, or don't have just another place to turn to. And it's the classrooms or the cafeteria, or the... And lot of our students look at schools that way, the classroom. So the community's really critical.

And then there's this evolution where bearing witness to the trauma, bearing witness to the collective suffering, bearing witness to the importance of pausing, bearing witness to our resilience, our ability to walk through the pain to this other better, more humane, beautiful future. And I also want to be... I am intentional not to romanticize it. This is painful. Teachers, educators, are exhausted. And it's not going to be an easy journey, but it's a journey that we have to take in order to heal.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You spoke about the campus as a sanctuary. Much of that process that we describe

over the past 15 months unfolded with people physically dispersed. How successful to you think we were at creating a new virtual space that provided at least some form of sanctuary?

MAYS IMAD: I would... I know that people did their best. They gave and gave and kept giving, staff, teachers, professors, administrators, people... And we know the limitation of this technology, the limitation of the dimensionality. I hope what was happening also is this message that we will be back together, we will go back together at some point.

And so what I was telling my students, for example, I made no... I did not sugarcoat that I was struggling with Zoom. You know, I told you that I lose myself in the class, so it was very difficult for me to go from that behind this very sterile mode of communication, if you will. So I told the students that. And I said, we're going to make the best of it.

And almost every week, I reminded them that this is temporary. There is an end to it. Sometimes they would ask, well, when? I'd say, well, let's give ourselves two years. It's easier on the brain when you give it some kind of timeline.

So I think, yeah, I don't have the data to tell you how well it went, but I do know from having conversations with my colleagues at my institutions and across the country that people tried, the best was brought up in them, and they wanted to connect. And I would think that the anticipation of going back for many of our students and many of our colleagues is going to also help in this coming back together and being together.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So I actually want to test out a theory on you, because one of the silver linings that I think I've witnessed in this realm is that... And it may be different for you because of the way you described the classroom's function for you personally, but there are certainly plenty of instructors for whom students walk in the door at the top of the hour. They leave at 50 minutes after the hour. They have a perfectly good relationship and then they have office hours, etc. I have this theory that, and I've heard some people talk about it, which is, I didn't make it up myself, but that they got, for a lot of instructors, they got to, and sometimes quite literally see their students' lives in much more fundamental way than they might have in the normal times. They would possibly be staring at their unmade bed, or whatever through Zoom, and that my sense is that it, even if the tools were imperfect, for some number of faculty members, they gained an appreciation of their students as people, possibly more than they had had it before. Because they saw aspects of their students as people that they might not have in normal times. I'm I...

Do you think that has happened, and to me that's a potential silver lining because if that awareness carries forward, there's the possibility that when the tools for involvement and being with students and building relationships expand to the extent we're back in person or whatever, there is the possibility of an intensified commitment on the faculty and staff side to push that. Does that make sense? Do you think that's happened, or...

MAYS IMAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah... I mean, I think of the, and again, I don't have any like hardcore data on statistics, but it's been my observation that empathy has been really on the rise. And not just in higher ed, but we got to see the suffering of others. We got to see how devastating poverty is. So with our students, it's both ways definitely. We got to see how much they try. I mean, the odds of them getting through school, really high. And yet they keep showing up and they keep trying, and they keep getting excited about learning.

I hope they also saw... There are some surveys. One, actually, Inside Higher Ed is putting out, where students were asked, were your professors flexible? And I recall over 50 percent said yes. So I hope the students also got to see the extent to which their professors, the staff members at the institution where they attend would go to help them. So I concur. I think there is a silver lining, and I think it's important to remind people of that, to elevate the goodness of our colleagues and our students that came out.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're speaking with Mays Imad, professor of pathophysiology and biomedical ethics and coordinator of the Teaching & Learning Center at Pima Community College in Arizona.

So let's shift to the moment we're in now, and what might be ahead in these coming months. So obviously a number of campuses, maybe a majority planning to be much more in person and back in the physical classroom. I think it's still going to be something this side of normal, despite everybody's attempts to try and, or all of our, I think, inclination to try and normalize.

So talk, tell us a little bit about what advice you are giving, particularly faculty and staff members, and about how they should be thinking about this moment that's ahead. What are you asking them to remember? What are you asking them to sort of hold on to, versus potentially change about what they've been doing over the past year?

MAYS IMAD: So I would invite my colleagues to pause and to just, I mean, and I do that. I close my eyes and I think, in five years, after my students had taken my class, what do I want them to remember? I know they're not going to remember the acid-base physiology and the cardiovascular physiology. I hope they remember that I saw them. They were not merely a number. I hope they remember the community.

So if that's what I care about most, and I also care about the content, and I care about the structure of the course. Then I'm going to prioritize the way I am going to teach and I'm going to interact with the students. So this pausing enables us to reaffirm what matters to us in education. It also allows, certainly allows me to get out of this state of anxiety, urgency. I have to finish my syllabus, I have to do this, I have to...

So in addition to that, I wonder what would it look like if we were to again take a bird's eye view and look at the objectives, the learning objectives of the course. And then add a human dimension to it. By the end of this course, I want my students to recognize our interdependence, for example. I would also encourage my colleagues to really sit with this notion of what it means to offer a rigorous education, and what it means to assess for learning and improvement, versus weed out. To sit with...

There was an article in Life Science Education, titled The Tyranny of Content. The set was, why is it, despite everything we know about the science of learning, we throw so much content at the students, knowing that it is not possible to retain 50 percent of it. One of the things I did when I began to ask these questions is I went to some of my senior colleagues who are in nursing school. Or actually I spoke with some of my former students who are doing their residencies, and I said, I want to cut some of the content from my pathophysiology class. And I wanted to have a conversation with you to tell me what is the most critical that students need to know?

So I did it in a very much data-evidence base, and I started cutting some of the materials, and it allowed me to focus more on important concepts and mechanisms. It allows me to breathe, it allows the students to breathe. And I want to also make it clear that I'm not saying that there should be no structures, no deadlines. No, we actually need structures when in the middle of chaos, structures, and flexibility, and a roadmap to move ahead. So I would start with those three. Pause, bring a human dimension of the learning objectives, and then interrogate the notion of rigor in assessment.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Obviously, faculty members do not operate a vacuum. And you also coordinate a teaching and learning center, so you straddle that world between what faculty members are inclined on

their own, but also what the institutions need them to do, what they reward them for doing. So I guess I want to give you a chance to talk to the provosts and academic affairs people out there on the administrative side. What are the things that institutions should be doing to enable their faculty members to do what they need to do for students right now?

MAYS IMAD: Yeah, yeah, that's a really important question. Thanks for asking. So I would say listen to your faculty. They are, again, they are in close proximity with the students. They see what is happening, the suffering, the struggles. Listen to them when they try to advocate for the students for better systems.

I would say it's going to be tempting when we go back, so many changes one after the other, I would say try as hard as you can to, for six months, to take six months, and don't enact changes one after the other. It's overwhelming, so have some kind of consistency. It's going to be tempting, but just take six months.

And then really the most important element for me is we have to evaluate and reevaluate what mental health resources we have on campus. It has to be one of the top priorities for faculty and for students. When a person is experiencing a mental health distress or crisis, it is really difficult to get up, look online what numbers to call, which office to go to. So the help has to be regularly accessible. It can't be a one size that fits all, it has to be contextualized. There has to be a cultural humility to the mental health service we offer. And to really work with community practitioners. Those are people that know what they're doing. They know the community. They know the context. They know the field. And to not merely have one or two therapists, and just have everything fall on them, but really put a lot of resources into this. In the long run, it's an investment in the wellbeing of the institution.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Is the biggest risk that we just sort of revert and think that we're done and go back sort of quote 'the old way'?

MAYS IMAD: It would be devastating, because what we saw is the old way didn't work for a lot of people, especially those who are on the margins. And it broke our hearts. We knew, many of us knew it wasn't working, but it stared us in the face and showed us the devastation on people's lives. So it would be devastating to go back to the old ways, and just, you know, sugarcoat it perhaps. And part of our work is going to be to resist going back to those old ways. Ask critical questions, challenge, remind people that this is not sustainable.

We could perhaps get by and get students to graduate, and faculty to, you know, teach and so on. But are we going to be thriving? It's not just about numbers and completion. If we want our students to thrive, we want our colleagues to feel that they are, they matter, they matter to the foundation of the institution. So this notion of an ethics of care, if you will, or kindness, we have to sit with and really ask what does it mean to lead so that once... And to have the moral courage to say no. It didn't work before. Why do we think it's going to work now?

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Mays Imad, professor of pathophysiology and biomedical ethics and coordinator of the Teaching & Learning Center at Pima Community College in Arizona. Thanks to her for her insights and advice, and to Blackboard for its support for this podcast.

Whatever you do, whether you're an instructor gearing up for the fall or a campus administrator trying to plan your institution's full return to campus, or a student trying to prepare to balance study and work, and possibly commuting back to campus into your day, I hope all of you are heeding Mays' words about giving yourselves the time to acknowledge what we've collectively been through. What you all do to help your students pursue their educations is hard work, and you can't do it as effectively as you'd like if you haven't taken care of yourselves.

That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed. And until next week, stay well and stay safe.