

Watercooler Well-Being

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According to a viral Twitter thread written by Professor Cate Denial in December 2021, “everyone in higher ed deserves better than they are getting right now.” Republished in *EdSurge*, Denial captured the complex emotions of many educators, the cultural milieu of the times, and the need for institutions to reimagine education.

We need a metric ton of mental health interventions—many more counselors and therapy groups for students; better support than five EAPs [Employee Assistance Program sessions] for faculty and staff; group supports; dialogue circles; spaces to process what’s happening and what it has cost (Denial, 2021).

Even before March of 2020, the research seemed to hint at a need for intervention. Findings from the Physiological Society claimed that the condition of mental health in academia has become an invisible crisis with significant rates of depression and incidents of professors taking their own lives making the news (Bira et al., 2019). Research from McKinsey & Company indicated that since April of 2021 more than 19 million U.S. workers have quit their jobs, and nearly one-third of educators reported they were “likely” to do so (De Smet et al., 2021). An earlier study, conducted by *Course Hero*, claimed the number of faculty ready to leave current positions because of the impact of COVID-19 could be as high as 40% (Flaherty, 2020). Especially for small academic departments, one or two resignations have a tremendous negative impact. McKinsey’s research summarized, “If the past

18 months have taught us anything, it’s that employees crave investment in the *human* aspects of work” (De Smet et al., 2021).

For all the mental health interventions now being considered, less attention has been paid to a significant source of faculty happiness and department stability—the relationship of colleagues. Educators function best when surrounded by other problem solving, stimulating compatriots who indulge foibles and validate “next great assignments.” Outside relationships in the home, workplace relationships are the next greatest source of our sense of belonging, and according to research from the Center for Talent Innovation, people who feel they belong at work are more productive, engaged, and 3.5 times more likely to contribute their full potential (Twaronite, 2019). Research director for Future Workplace®, Dan Schwabel (2018), claims collegiality is so critical to our longtime happiness that without it, we may not find fulfillment. Additionally, Michael S. Weisbach (2021), in a recent article for *Inside Higher Ed*, articulated how this cooperative attitude can create real tangible reward. He writes, “The value of these noncontractable services provided by collegiality is sufficiently high that organizations reward individuals who provide them. In colleges and universities, if tenure cases are close, collegiality can be the difference between an individual receiving or not receiving tenure” (Weisbach, 2021). It’s all too clear; colleague isolation caused by the pandemic has created a barrier to one of our most significant sources of educator well-being and success.

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Language may be one reason the value of collegueship is overlooked. Oversimplified terms such as *coworkers* cannot convey what it means to have a colleague who covers classes during a family emergency, takes up a collection when a spouse gets diagnosed with cancer, or generously mentors new instructors. This light that a good colleague adds during our darkest moments seems the truest embodiment of the meaning of the word *colleague*: “one sent or chosen to work with another” (Harper, n.d.). Over time educator collaboration may become one of the most meaningful and joyous aspects of our work. Simon Sinek’s

best selling book, *Leaders Eat Last* (2017), explores the facets of workplace belonging and encourages readers to view hiring a teammate like they might the adoption of a child. It is *family* business. He argues, “...the strength and endurance of a company does not come from products or services but from how well their people pull together” (Sinek, 2017, p. 22). As our work continues to evolve, we must remember the importance of collegueship and its pivotal, beneficial role in well-being.

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Authors' Note

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