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# Activating agency in the time of COVID-19

## Cultivating relationships for resilience

**T**rust is hard to come by during a pandemic. In times like these, how do we flatten the hierarchical curve in higher education? Like other colleges across the nation, Western Colorado University grappled with how to prepare for an uncertain fall semester in response to COVID-19. We are a triad of colleagues from a small, state-funded institution on the Western Slope of Colorado with varied institutional roles: an associate vice president for academic affairs, a director of library services and online education, and a program coordinator for first-year seminar (FYS) and the Writing Center. We come to the table with a shared belief that a 21st-century liberal arts education should be rigorous, innovative, and, most importantly, equity-based and accessible to all students.

While these values are common across the landscape of higher education, it was only recently that we realized how our decisions to pursue our collaborative relationships derived from the shared values we intuited early on from one another. This essay takes COVID-19 as a backdrop, but the real story we want to tell is about how individual acts of agency can provide the foundation for choosing relationships that use collective agency. We believe this conversation is particularly important for academic libraries and other units that work across traditional university boundaries. The active pursuit of collaboration and distributed leadership, in our experience, has led to a greater capacity

for agency during this pandemic, enabling us to develop more holistic solutions to programs on our campus and facilitating a broader network of trust.

Our story does not offer anything particularly revolutionary about collaboration or effective communication practices, and the values that ground our working relationship do not represent a prescriptive model for others to emulate. Instead, our story offers a reminder that we all have agency, and agency can be multiplied in the most productive working relationships. We are not dismissing the realities of hierarchical leadership or university structures, but agency can be cultivated in multidirectional lines through strategic alliances.

### **The ties that bind**

In our case, agency began and was increased through the recognition of existing shared values. While building culture and shared values is the subject of numerous books, articles, and dissertations, in our case, recognizing existing values was a type of short-

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cut to building mutual trust. Most prominent among the shared values we identified in each other was the belief that higher education should be accessible to everyone, while recognizing that it is not equitably built for everyone at this time. Building trust required demonstrated commitment to accessibility in higher education—not just hollow proclamations that pay lip service to this value. We saw each other in action through comments in public forums, the service activities we each undertook, systematic empowerment despite job titles, and the nuances of personal interactions. This established and intensified our trust and reinforced our decision to use our agency to collaborate with one another.

One important example comes from adapting our FYS curriculum. While we have been working for over a year to assess and redirect our FYS, in the midst of COVID-19, we developed a proposal to centralize our curriculum to a hybrid format for fall 2020. Although FYS was slated for a modest redirection to launch this fall, the proposed centralized hybrid format presented an extreme cultural shift. A mere six months ago, this suggestion would have been met with skepticism in the administrative chain, not to mention full-blown resistance from faculty, due to the longstanding tradition of faculty having creative control over their course content. We each played a role in developing the proposed curriculum changes, appealing to faculty for their support by recognizing new demands on their labor, and working upwards with administration. This would not have been possible without a genuine commitment to shared leadership that empowered each of us, despite the hierarchical differences in our jobs.

## **Agency**

While COVID-19 has changed the landscape of higher education for almost every university, it has helped us be more cognizant of how we have been making important choices all along. Shared values were a shortcut to trust. Trust helped us to share power, leading to greater efficacy in the services we facilitate and the empowerment we experience as individuals. Because of that formula, our relationships

now model the flexibility required to guide adaptation. The necessity to create a sense of belonging for students, who are negotiating the sequelae of this pandemic, is more urgent in higher education than ever before. In this unprecedented moment, the trust we have in each other has revealed shortcuts for using our agency to better serve our students and colleagues.

We intentionally fostered relationships with one another because of our shared values. Although we rarely pick our colleagues or team members, it is important to recognize there is often some choice within the many different working groups, committees, task forces, and projects upon which we all serve—especially at small universities like ours. Values are not a perfect shortcut to trust, but they do present opportunities to begin building networks with colleagues that lead to greater resilience and agency. We have learned that while we find great strength in our collaboration, we have to build more of these relationships because of the vicissitudes of university life and the ever-changing environment.

Although we have repeatedly made choices to support and work with each other, our alliance is stronger due to practices that share positional power in ways that do not favor team members, but lead to greater agency. At the same time, enabling shortcuts to shared leadership requires a solid foundation in trust and shared values. Ultimately, while it might not always seem like it, we all have some level of agency when it comes to cultivating value-oriented alliances that lead to essential support networks.

Through our agency, we can influence much more than individual relationships and unleash possibilities that extend beyond our institutional positions. At a time when we are all working to manage an ongoing pandemic, it is easy to default to reactionary positions that make us feel powerless. Occasionally, we can all use the simple reminder that we retain agency when it comes to the relationships we nurture, and focusing on those relationships not only helps us through the present, but ensures we are better prepared for challenges yet to come. 🦋