

Back to “Normal”?

by Emily O. Gravett

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During the [CFI’s Faculty Welcome](#)—organized by my fellow assistant director (and political scientist) Andreas Broscheid—I had the chance to sit in on an excellent online roundtable called [“Back to Normal?”](#) Panelists Kerry Crawford (Political Science), Carole Nash (SIS), Juhong Christie Liu (Libraries), and Bob Kolvoord (CISE), along with Andreas!, spoke for 90 minutes about some guiding questions: What does this mean for our work—will we just go back to normal? What considerations will we need to keep in mind? What challenges may we be facing? What do we need to do to support our students? What surprises do we need to be prepared for?

As I sit here, wide awake at 3am, in the makeshift home office I’ve been using since last March, hoping I’ll be able to fall back asleep before I have to drop off my masked and unvaccinated daughter to her public school, I thought a fitting way to begin our Toolbox series this year would be to share out some of the themes that emerged from this discussion about “normal.” (As Andreas says, lol sob.)

One important theme was the **disparities in higher education**, which the pandemic didn’t create, necessarily, but which it did bring to the fore. The pandemic has affected students, as well as faculty, differently, with those from marginalized or underrepresented groups disproportionately affected. Many departments, including my own, for instance, even amended promotion/tenure as well as annual evaluation guidelines in an attempt to address and remedy this problem. And, as Carole noted, these “COVID times” have been occurring in concert with significant social changes and unrest; for instance, how will the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan [affect veterans of the Afghan War](#) in our classes? Carole encouraged participants to review [“Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America’s Students,”](#) a document prepared by the U.S. Department of Education; we might also take a look at Educause’s [2020 Student Technology Report](#) for ways to support the “whole student.” How can we understand disparities? How can we find out what our students need? How can we best support them, holistically? Panelists and participants shared many ideas (such as pre-course surveys, weekly check-ins, meeting with students 1:1, and [mid-semester feedback opportunities](#)) for learning more about our students and the particularities of their identities, experiences, and contexts.

The panelists also spoke about **innovation**. As Bob noted, some of what we've been doing for the last year and a half represents innovation, so how do we capture what worked well for us and our students and carry that forward? But, as he also recognized, faculty had to make a whole series of compromises last year—to stay open, to keep classes running, to help students continue to make progress toward their degrees, to stay employed. So not everything will be worth hanging onto. Participants were encouraged to reflect—admittedly difficult to do, since the pandemic rages on and since we haven't really been able to get any distance from the experience in order to process it—on the promising practices we'd like to keep, instead of simply trying to return to how we've always done things.

In particular, practices around **flexibility and accessibility**, panelists hoped, are here to stay. Using Zoom, for instance, allowed students to participate in our classes in different ways. Kerry (who's been researching and writing about the [pandemic effects on parents](#)), encouraged participants to make syllabi and assignments as agile as possible, since we may need to quarantine, since our students may need to quarantine, since those in our care may need to quarantine. Variants, the unvaccinated, breakthrough cases, waning vaccine efficacy (*pfist shake* at Pfizer)—we aren't in the clear just yet. Christie reminded us to create options for students, to build flexibility into our deadlines, to leverage online content we've created or used in the past. Rethinking syllabus policies on [attendance and groupwork](#), as well as [using inclusive language](#), nurturing [social-emotional learning interactions](#), and [sharing vulnerability](#) can help students build a sense of belonging, which many of our students (think especially first-years and sophomores whose most recent school years have been totally disrupted). As always, principles of [universal design for learning](#) and [inclusive teaching](#) will serve us well at this time.

A final theme, which participants especially appreciated, was an emphasis on **care**—a theme that we have woven throughout CFI programming since last March. Certainly, we can extend compassion, grace, and empathy to our students. Shared in another Faculty Welcome session (Cara Meixner's on "[Integrating Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in the Classroom](#)"), [this document](#) describes ideas for "creating a culture of care" in our classrooms. But what about us? Participants shared a great deal of uncertainty, anxiety, nervousness, stress, even dread about the start of the fall semester. Many of us have been sick ourselves, many of us have young children in school who aren't vaccinated, many of us have taken huge hits to our mental health over the past 18 months, many of us haven't been able to travel internationally to visit with family, many of us are still grieving losses, many of us are scraping the bottom of our "resilience" barrels. What can we do to take care of ourselves? Participants shared strategies such as hiking, gardening, even meditating.

In the end, there was a shared sense, among panelists and participants, that there was no going “back” to normal, despite the title of the session. Bob says that we will simply move on to the “next normal,” and “the next normal after that,” whatever they may be.

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To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu) directly. For additional information about the CFI’s Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit: <https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml>.