



**Working Toward a Culture of Care in the Department:  
A Manifesto**

By Scott Magelssen

I was originally invited by Beth Osborne to share a “manifesto of care” at the special virtual MATC meeting in the spring of 2021. This was around one of the low points of the Covid-19 pandemic. While we weren’t experiencing the kind of fear and panic associated with the first months of the crisis, we’d been in various states of lockdown for nearly a year. Many of us had been teaching remotely that whole time and were feeling exhausted. Covid deaths had been unrelentingly rising for the past 12 months, and, though vaccines were starting to be approved, it would be several more months before we’d know whether we’d reach the kinds of vaccination numbers that would allow a return to the classrooms and performances we’d left in March of the previous year.

The MATC conference in Chicago that previous March was in fact the last time many of us had been in a large gathering. Indeed, I received the news in the hallways in between MATC 2020’s sessions that my own institution, the University of Washington, was canceling its in-person classes effective immediately (one of the first in the nation to do so). Though I didn’t know it at the time, after flying home at the end of that weekend I would hardly see a student or

colleague in person again for another fifteen months. Not long after that, the systemic racism forcefully brought to the world's attention by police violence like the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis supercharged the movement for racial justice, but also served as a major crisis of reckoning in academia: #BlackLivesMatter and the 2020 demonstrations gave voice to how unsupported our Black, Indigenous, and POC students have felt in our programs and sparked painful conversations among faculty and staff about complicity with white supremacy that had been deferred for years.

Meanwhile, the ongoing crisis of jobs and labor in Academia intensified. Our institutions have been moving ever more resolutely toward employment models that privilege filling teaching needs with adjunct or contingent workers. Tenure track lines are disappearing. Newly degreed graduates of our programs are entering a market and competing with a growing number of job candidates for fewer and fewer full-time positions. Those who are precariously employed are subject to long hours of teaching and grading without proper compensation, and often need to cobble together several jobs that, despite adding up to more much more than a full workweek, never amount to what they'd earn in a single traditional full-time position with benefits like health care and child care. With the Covid pandemic came the fear that these hiring practices would drastically worsen, and that the financial emergencies engendered by shutdowns would give administrations carte blanche authority to eliminate even historically safe positions like tenured lines.

The 2021 conference was cancelled, along with so many other gatherings, but the regular spring MATC spot in the calendar was rightly identified by the organization's leadership as an occasion for a virtual gathering—a chance to convene with friends and colleagues, to regroup

and recharge, and to share resources for caring, support, and resilience, that could inspire hope and help keep us going.

As I've adapted the manifesto I shared at that virtual convening for this issue of *Theatre/Practice*, the twin pandemics of the coronavirus and systemic racism have stubbornly persisted. While late spring and early summer brought a guardedly optimistic outlook that we'd soon be able to resume most of our pre-COVID activities, the Delta variant and entrenched vaccine resistance have dashed our hopes that this thing is behind us, and have signaled that we're in for a decidedly longer haul. And the waves of energy dedicated in higher ed to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access initiatives, and to antiracist overhauling of curricula and production seasons have been met in the public arena with threats and fear-mongering, playing upon willful misinterpretations and exaggerations of critical race theory. It's been a rough couple of years with the shut-down of theatres, the switch to remote learning, canceled conferences and research trips, dispiriting and frightening political rhetorics, and the anxiety, pain, and sadness that have become a daily part of our lives.

The impact of Covid-19 on theatre and performance and scholarship about it probably won't even be fully known for several more months or years. Schools and theatres will keep opening back up, and our field—irrevocably changed by the pandemic but also by the urgency of antiracism and calls for racial justice—will eventually thrive again. In the meantime, the kinds of care for which we advocated last March are still vitally necessary. It's important to recognize that we are burned out and roughed-up and Zoom-fatigued, and, moreover, we are “compassion-fatigued,” which is what happens when emotional and physical exhaustion that come with dealing with trauma diminish our capacity to empathize or feel compassion for others. In other words, empathy and compassion feel more draining than rewarding, and our bodies are actually,

in trying to protect themselves from ongoing trauma, steering us away from being caring, as is our usual instinct.<sup>1</sup> Because compassion is not always coming naturally to us these days, we need to work on being *intentional* about it. Here then, is my manifesto for working toward that in the department. When I delivered my manifesto aloud last March, I geared my points toward departmental faculty and leadership, precisely because they occupied the kinds of positions that have the power and visibility to enact change. However, I've since adjusted my framing (prompted by Beth!) with the understanding that creating a culture of care in the department works best when all members are in on the process, and, moreover, that some of the most vulnerable members of our community (those who are at risk, those who are precariously employed) are often impermanently or only tenuously connected to the institution and thus are further outside of the protections offered by departmental or HR structures, unions, memoranda of understanding, and so forth.

### **Working Toward a Culture of Care in the Department**

1. *First*, we must take care of the most vulnerable members of the community before anything else.

Do you need to attend to current and ongoing traumas because of systemic racism? Are there people at-risk in your department? Are there active crises on top of or related to the pandemic? These priorities need your immediate attention or it's hard to do anything else to create communities of care.

*Then:*

2. Recognize and work against our bias toward people who “present” as resilient and doing okay.

What do I mean by this? For one thing, on a basic level, favoring those individuals who do not exhibit signs of mental exhaustion and distress and judging as unfit those who do is a form of ableism. People who we might characterize as low mood (depressed or

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<sup>1</sup> Kira Mauseth, “Behavioral Health Impacts of Covid-19: Trends, Workforce Impacts, & Resources,” presentation, Washington State Department of Health, 2020.

anxious), or people who say out loud that they are overworked or overwhelmed or have limited bandwidth shouldn't be pigeonholed or written off as "not doing well." In many cases they actually could be doing a good job tactically responding to the situation in healthy ways, like processing aloud.

But also, theatre people can be especially adept at *performing* mental health. Just because someone seems like they're fine doesn't mean they are. They could really be struggling.

In short, we should not base our assumptions about how people are doing based on appearances. We should instead make space for checking in with members of the community and partner with them to gauge what all they can have on their plates.<sup>2</sup> The next couple of points are related to this:

### 3. Create space for genuine listening.

A lot of us have already established check-ins with our students at the beginning and end of class or rehearsal (like, "how's your battery level today?"). This is important to do in departmental meetings, too.

Sometimes, it can be enough to carve out dedicated time for venting, with the intention of caring and understanding. In a lot of these cases, the goal is simply to be relational. To build a safe space to be present for one another (see the part about "processing aloud" in point #2). It can do a lot toward building trust and fostering empathy in the department, especially when we don't see each other in person as often. Intentional listening can also help mitigate burnout, fatigue, and isolation.

It's also important to recognize that in some instances, especially in the case of long-unaddressed trauma, injustice, or disparity, it can't stop at listening. These are the occasions to partner together to work out strategies to address the problem and find solutions. Identify resources (EDIA committees, the dean's and ombud's offices, student affairs, protocols for grievance and complaint proceedings, and so forth) and, where those don't exist, bring them into being.

Share the load. Don't let the same few individuals be the go-to people for receiving complaints and concerns. Tag team. Use the buddy-system. Receivers can get burned out, too, if they're not able to set boundaries. This brings me to point #4.

### 4. Respect boundary setting.

Respect when people are firm in setting their own delimitations. Respect when they say "no" to tasks and committee work and normalize this in your department. Setting firm boundaries is a strategy for building and maintaining resilience. It's all-hands-on-deck

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<sup>2</sup> That said, be okay if people don't want to disclose their mental and/or emotional state. Disclosure, for the reasons I refer to above, comes with real and perceived risks. Especially for those who are already in a vulnerable position based on their identity.

these days, but, to mix metaphors, it's vital to give people time to stop and "sharpen their saws."<sup>3</sup>

## 5. Adjust indicators for measuring success.

This is as true for how we measure our own successes as for how we assess our students and colleagues. For example, for much of the past year I have felt like I was absolutely bombing as a teacher. During the shutdown, it could be demoralizing when I saw that I only had a third of my class on a Zoom, and most of them had their cameras off. How the classroom *feels*, however, can distract from the ways in which remote learning has been a lifeline for student learning. In spite of the grim sessions, my TAs and I regularly got feedback from students thanking us for letting them do coursework asynchronously. *Thank you* for letting us do school on our own time, they would write. It's allowing us to actually be successful.

When we are deprived of the usual rewards of teaching, like an enthusiastic and engaged room full of students, the default can be to beat ourselves up as failures. We need to remind ourselves to switch out the yardstick for authentic measures of success that are reasonable in times when pandemic and racism are devouring our students' mental and emotional reserves.

Further, we ought to avoid holding up the simulacrum of the perfect student or perfect in-person learning experience as templates against which to measure pandemic learning, or despair that our students are falling irrevocably behind if we don't hit these marks. "Falling Behind," educator and antiracist grading advocate Cornelius Minor reminds us, "is a social construct."<sup>4</sup>

The same goes for peer review and assessment. We've been in an unprecedented time of challenge. The usual benchmarks for success have been on hiatus: active and engaged classrooms, theatres full of audiences, robust presentation and publication records, and though most of us are back in the classroom now, a lot of what we've gotten used to doing via video conferencing platform is here to stay. Some of the measures we use to

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<sup>3</sup> That is, that while we often tend to feel like we must keep sawing without stopping, pausing regularly to take care of our saws will make the work much more efficient. I really like the metaphor of the need for time to sharpen our saws. Those who know me might guess it's because my Northwoods hometown of Hayward, Wisconsin, was a lumberjack-themed tourist destination and I worked as a waiter at a cook-shanty-themed restaurant. I borrow the metaphor from a *Chronicle of Higher Education* sponsored panel "Supporting Faculty and Staff Mental Health," <https://www.chronicle.com/page/supporting-faculty-and-staff-mental-health> (accessed 22 January, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Minor, quoted in "Turn and Talk: 'Antiracist' Grading Begins with You," interview with Sarah McKibben, *Educational Leadership* 78.1 (September 2020). <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/turn-and-talk-antiracist-grading-starts-with-you>, accessed 18 June 2021.

effectively measure success cannot be replicated on a computer screen. We need to make more realistic assessment rubrics that are broad enough to encompass alternative spaces to our classrooms, libraries, conferences, theatres, and research sites.

## 6. Model failure.

Perfectionism can be debilitating. We all deal with self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy or imposture from time to time. This can be especially true for those in our community who are already vulnerable because of their racial, ethnic or gender ethnic identity, ability, or housing or employment status.

It can be helpful for those of us in leadership or mentorship or peer positions to *model and normalize failure* from time to time. I'll again use myself as an example: There was one day this past winter when I was teaching our large-lecture Introduction to Theatre course and I was *tanking*. I was having a hard time staying on track. I was forgetting playwrights' and characters' names. The explanations for terms and concepts sounded vague and nonsensical when I heard myself giving them aloud. And the topic was Realism—I'd been teaching roughly the same stuff for twenty years! But on this day it was like a bad dream where everything had just spilled out of my head.

It ended up being fine. I'm sure the students could tell I was off, but it wasn't the end of the world. "You know what," I said to my TAs in a debrief afterward, "I was in a particularly tenacious brain fog today. Words weren't coming to me. I was blanking out. Then when I could tell I was flailing, I started panicking, which made things worse. Sometimes we have bad days." I wanted to let them know that it's perfectly human to have an off day from time to time. We should normalize this kind of thing.

I wasn't saying that there aren't consequences when we do have bad days, but that the consequences are *proportionate*. We should de-center the tropes of sudden-death and black spots on our record that keep our perfectionist selves up at night. We should demythologize the idea of successful teacher-scholars as they who have perfect track records. It's okay to have a bad teaching day, to get a proposal rejected, to have a panic attack during a class presentation, to have no one show up to your workshop. It's not the end of the world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In their live recording of the *On TAP* podcast at ATHE in 2018, hosts Pannill Camp, Sarah Bay-Cheng, and Harvey Young, along with guest co-host Kareem Khubchandani, pitched in their segment "Professional Failure" the idea of sharing with students the "Shadow CV" or *Curriculum Mortis*—the record of uncompleted projects, gaps, jobs-not-gotten, etc.—as a healthful way to help students think about their own trajectories as comprising both hits and misses. The idea came from Laina Bay-Cheng, Sarah's partner, who invites senior faculty to do this exercise with her students in the School of Social Work at the University of Buffalo. Being frank about how failure, or simply things not always "panning out" as we'd hoped, is a normal part of our business, can help create more realistic, and more human models to aspire to (*On TAP* podcast, episode 24, August 2018. <https://podtail.com/podcast/on-tap-a-theatre-and-performance-studies-podcast/on-tap-024/>, accessed 18 June 2021).

## 7. Pause assessment calendars.

The surveillance culture of assessment can already be toxic. It certainly doesn't make sense in crisis to hold our grad students and teachers to the exact same assessment measures as usual when our theatres have been dark, our libraries have been closed, and we are all in survival mode. I encourage you to find ways, within what's allowable in your governance documents, to give extensions, to put things on hold, and to breathe some air into the tenure clock. We ought to, where possible, base assessment on organic factors of readiness, vs. on previously assigned clocks or academic calendars. And let's not stop there. It's time we reassessed our draconian assessment schedules, not just in times of crisis, but as a larger, systemic change to reappointment, tenure, and promotion.<sup>6</sup>

We may be on the other side of the worst part of the pandemic, and a lot of the challenges we were facing last March, like remote teaching and closed libraries, may be behind us. Still, we're in this for the foreseeable future. And the crises of racism, toxic work environments, broken or inappropriate assessment calendars, and high levels of mental and emotional distress are neither behind us nor particularly new. Many of the examples fleshing out my main points will soon be quaint and obsolete. Let's work toward a day when that's the case for this whole manifesto.

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<sup>6</sup> This is something I've written about before, in my own articles and in collaboration with Shelby Lunderman. See Scott Magelssen, "Our Academic Discipline is Making Us Sicker" in *Theatre Survey* 57.3 (September, 2016); Scott Magelssen and Shelby Lunderman, "Tactical Slowness: Fomenting a Culture of Mental Health in the Academy" in *Reversing the Cult of Speed in Higher Education: The Slow Movement in the Arts and Humanities*, ed. Jonathan Chambers and Stephanie Gearhart (Routledge, 2018).



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