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WICKED PROBLEMS FORUM: STUDENT PRECARITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

STIMULUS ESSAY

Precarity, citizenship, and the "traditional" student

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Precarity, or the condition of continual wage insecurity, is shaping a generation of U.S. college students that suffer continually under poor material conditions, exploitative work schedules, and institutions that do not recognize their precarity. I ground the latter point—that higher education does not recognize the needs of its student precariat —in the argument that such institutions are oriented toward the specter of the *traditional student*, a concept suffused with citizenship rhetorics. In this paper, I examine the discursive construct of the *traditional student*, and how it deploys rhetorics of citizenship that deepen exclusions and contribute to student precarity in U.S. higher education.

National survey data reveal that college students in the U.S. are experiencing acute precarities on multiple fronts. A startling 60% were food-insecure in 2019, with more students of color, students in 2-year colleges, and LGBTQ+ students reporting food insecurity (AAC&U News, 2019). Over two-thirds of all U.S. students graduate with an average of $30,000 in debt (Dynarski, 2015) at a time when an undergraduate degree has all but become a requirement for an entry-level job. Additionally, a quarter of all university students work full-time to put themselves through college, while 40% work at least 30 h a week (Deruy & National Journal, 2015). Similarly, faculty experience parallel precarities as tenure-track opportunities shrink (Harris, 2019), research expectations balloon (Kafka, 2018), and contingent labor becomes the new majority of faculty labor in the U.S. (Murray, 2019). College students then experience the pressures of faculty contingency secondhand when they are unable to develop relationships or request recommendations from instructors whose labor is stretched across multiple campuses. This carries costs for student learning, which becomes shaped by what McConnell (2019) calls a *pedagogy of the transitory*, which identifies contingency as a communicative phenomenon and a culturally thick experience that shapes the college learning environment (2019). Students and their faculty imbibe what Rifenburg, Johnston, Ng, and Carney (2019) call the *labor casualization* of the expanding neoliberal university, which expects faculty and students to labor beyond the classroom through scholarly and civic engagement, public intellectual work, and unpaid internships, with little thought to material compensation and domestic burdens.

Given these documented precarities, it is important to ask how institutions discursively orient *away* from the student precariat and their needs, which in turn reproduces these cycles of precarity. In this essay, I reflect on the notion of the *student-citizen* to consider

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how these shrinking freedoms and the casualization of labor create precarious student populations. The *student-citizen* echoes the *faculty-citizen* construct: as faculty are increasingly made contingent, the shrinking number of tenured and tenure-line faculty come to occupy the newly elite position of *citizen*. Within this fraught category, too, there is a hierarchy; for instance, at some institutions, tenure-track faculty have to work a number of years before they can be eligible for parental leave. However, these hierarchies are present in the notion of the *student-citizen* as well: students who are older than 25, or enrolled part-time, or work full-time, or live off-campus, and/or have families to support are constructed as noncitizens through the construct of the *nontraditional student*. Here, citizenship is located on the axis of social class that enables students to be *traditional* by living on campus, unencumbered by family and employment, able to afford not just the money but also the time that full-time student status demands. I examine how notions of *citizenship* in creating the *traditional student* makes students increasingly precarious, and explore how institutions can address such precarities.

The traditional student construct

It is worth noting that the term *nontraditional student* in education scholarship is specifically defined as students older than 25 (see Dill & Henley, 1998; Jesnek, 2012). However, the correlation of age with having caregiving responsibilities, living off-campus, and being employed full-time (Grabowski, Rush, Ragen, Fayard, & Watkins-Lewis, 2016) have become additional implied characteristics of being a *nontraditional student.* Understanding the many ways students are perceived as *nontraditional* is an essential intervention into establishing what constitutes a *traditional* student; therefore, leaving those additional characteristics of so-called nontraditional status implied rather than explicit deflects attempts at intervention that seek to expose *which* students institutions orient themselves toward. And while there is little discussion of *traditional* and *nontraditional* students in communication studies, there is significant discussion about citizenship and the centering of whiteness in the discipline, which I offer as approaches for addressing student precarities.

As I mentioned earlier, nearly half of all U.S. college students work either full-time or up to 30 h a week to put themselves through college, but despite these numbers, institutions do not typically perceive students as being full-time employees outside the university. Although some institutions might envision *traditional students* as those whose guardians are able to pay their tuition and board, the reality is that working students are a norm rather than an exception. The specter of the *traditional student* emerges in parallel discourses that place subjects in positions of precarity: corporations that offer low wages and no health benefits to their workers often peddle the narrative that such workers are college students, still on their parents' health insurance, just working for "pocket money." This hurts college students who occupy these low-income positions, as well as individuals working these jobs to support their families with no health benefits (and such individuals, of course, might also be college students).

Institutions' investment in the construct of the *traditional student* triggers a series of precarities for the broad student population. The *traditional student* has parents who are able to pay for college; can (afford to) live on campus; is unencumbered by children, and thus does not require employment to afford tuition. Such *traditional students*, though rarely described explicitly by the institution, become the centering discourse that constructs the *nontraditional* *student* who may be older, or a commuter, or a parent. Therefore, the *traditional student* occupies a particular classed (and raced) position that the institution orients itself toward. This can influence the form of healthcare available to students, which is why modified flu vaccines for pregnant or nursing mothers are rarely available in campus health clinics: when I inquired about the availability of such modified vaccines at my own institution and the nearby University of Texas at Austin, I was told both times that the institution did not stock such vaccines. It can result in the absence of halal and kosher food for religious-minority students who are required to have a meal plan, particularly at small institutions like my own that may not reap the economies of scale of larger institutions (although switching *all* the meat to kosher or halal certified could address the financial burden). And it manifests as fewer parking spots for commuter students, who are considered *nontraditional* because they live and work off-campus, often with their family. In a class about race and communication, my students produced a study of white campus infrastructures that revealed that parking restrictions centered the specter of the *traditional student* who could afford to live on campus. Such students were not relegated to the distant commuter lot, and did not have to rely on the few available accessible parking spots. Commuter students, meanwhile, who live off-campus due to work and family, often face fines if they park in student lots or are penalized for arriving late to class. The very infrastructure and built environment of an institution reflects which students are valued and not, and forces *nontraditional students* to participate in transgressive behavior like arriving late or leaving early.

However, institutional agents might feel vested in actively *resisting* acknowledging that such precarities exist at all. A brief story to illustrate this point: during a search for a new faculty member at my institution, students asked every single candidate how they would be cognizant of students' work-related stress (both academic and employment-based). This question was a key criterion they used to discriminate among the candidates, as we learned from student feedback during the search. However, when I mused about this to a colleague some weeks later, they responded, "I could never imagine asking such an entitled question as an undergraduate—expecting my professors to manage my stress for me." I had shared my observation because I was struck by how uniformly students were concerned about labor and stress, and even felt some pride that these students were savvy enough to exercise agency during the job search. My colleague, however, read it as entitlement—potentially because they were dealing with their own burden of being contingent, which makes it worth noting that precarity begets a scarcity mindset where there is a struggle over resource allocation. As Standing (2011) notes unless "the precariat makes a nuisance of itself, its concerns will be ignored by utilitarian democracies" (2011, p. 166). Evidently, students were motivated to vouch for job candidates based on very different criteria from my colleagues, but their criteria could be dismissed as entitled. This incident was a clear indicator that students were clearly hurting from carrying the *unacknowledged* burden of employment in addition to school: a burden that indicated that they were not valued as *traditional students* of the institutions. In the next section, I explore the parallels between the constructs of *citizenship* and *traditional students* to consider how we might discursively reimagine student populations and precarities.

The path to (student) citizenship

Communication scholars' notions of citizenship through the *traditional student* construct draws from the broader rhetorics of immigration in the U.S. Rhetorical scholars have expressed concern about the "excessive use and reliance upon citizenship in Rhetoric for what it obscures and implies about whose rhetorical practices are worthy of engagement" (Chavez, 2015, p. 164), noting that dominant understandings of citizenship, which include recognition as subject by the state, both limit *and* conceal other understandings of citizenship. Yet, the notion of citizenship, or the figure of the citizen, is ideal in the development of the *traditional student* because "the figure of the citizen seems more intuitive and more agile than … terms like subject or agency" (Rufo & Atchison, 2011, p. 199). This makes the notion of the *traditional student*—imbued with the characteristics of a citizen—particularly difficult to critique. The danger, as Standing (2011) notes, is in the tension between universal rights, which should apply to everyone, and the idea of rights "embodied in citizenship, confined to people with a certain status" (2011, p. 3). The specter of the *traditional student*, thoroughly suffused with the rhetoric of citizenship, creates precarity for *nontraditional students* who are not afforded those citizenship rights.

Given that this essay examines how student precarities circulate rhetorically, it is worth noting that discourse about *traditional students*, citizenship, and even the path-to-tenure mirror existing U.S. discourses of immigration: the notion that there is a path to citizenship that is willfully uncritical of whom it precludes from achieving legal immigration. The immigration process shares homological patterns with the tenure-process and the process of determining *traditional students*: these processes demand whiteness and white-adjacence in the form of abledness (i.e., demonstrable laboring capacity); being unfettered by dependents; and having the wealth to undertake the immigration process (or unpaid internships, in the case of *traditional students)*. As Ahmed (2006) notes, whiteness functions as a "straightening device" that compels "acts of alignment" from subjects (p. 121). Such straightening involves disciplining students into, for example, being nonpregnant or non-nursing bodies in order to be construed as *traditional* through an absence of health care on campus.

When discussions of *nontraditional* students focus on age and caregiving responsibilities and employment, it conceals the characteristics of *traditional students* through a process that "centers whiteness" (see Lipsitz, 2018), where whiteness itself becomes the absent center against which others appear as aberrations (Dyer, 1997). This is evident in the use of standardized tests that disadvantage black and Hispanic students; it is evident in the tendency for institutions to recruit promising students from high school, even though data show that talented black students are far more likely to have dropped out by the time they reach high school than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). It is certainly evident in the assumption that *traditional students* will not work full-time for income while enrolled in college classes, and this assumption particularly undermines students of color given that black and Hispanic families' median income is just a little over half of their white and Asian peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), making it more difficult for black and Hispanic guardians to pay for college tuition. And perhaps more to the point, black and Hispanic men are paid significantly less than their white male counterparts, with black and Hispanic women earning even less (Patten, 2016), with income plummeting further when nonwhite women become mothers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Additionally, black and Hispanic teenagers are twice as likely as their white peers to become parents by the time they are 15–19 years old (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), the age of college-entry for *traditional students*.

These structures and their attending assumptions continue to frame the *traditional student* as white, with its attending social and economic advantages, in what Lipsitz terms "the possessive investment in whiteness" (2018). One material consequence is evident in the fact that Texas's largest university, the University of Texas at Austin, does not have the 25% enrollment of Hispanic and Latino students to make it a Hispanic Serving Institution, even though the Hispanic and Latino population of the state is nearly 40%. These structures also make it difficult to imagine students (and thus the material needs of students) who occupy *intersecting* nontraditional positions, like international students who could *also* be older than 25, or also be caregivers. While U.S. institutions of higher education signal a commitment to international students through offices of international and multicultural learning, these offices continue to reproduce the specter of the *traditional student*—i.e., an international student who is under 25, has no dependents, and so on.

Let us consider for a moment the repercussions of institutions orienting toward *traditional students*. When *traditional students* are framed as those who do not need employment to pay for tuition, and yet the number of students who have to work full-time hours continues to increase, we see a critical mass of employed students becoming *nontraditional* by unspoken institutional standards. These students' unacknowledged burdens then fashion them into individuals who cannot perceive of intellectual growth beyond coursework and employment. I encounter this repeatedly in my classroom: when I ask students to imagine intellectual stimulation beyond coursework and employment, they struggle to do so. Over the years, students have told me they consider the very idea of noninstitutionalized intellectual growth as either "abstract" or "utopic." While admittedly these circumstances could be the result of time-mismanagement, a lack of interest, or any number of factors, it would be ethically remiss not to acknowledge that when labor and work are so intense, individuals are left with little "energy or inclination to participate in more active leisure activities" (Standing, 2011, p. 128). Therefore, it is important to note the institution's role, and fault, in presuming the *traditional student* is unburdened by full-time employment. This creates a precarious student body that not only is overburdened, but has its burdens made invisible.

Another repercussion of the orientation toward *traditional students* is visible in the structure of student wages. Universities typically pay students minimum wage for many campus jobs, including Residence Assistant (RA) work. RAs may be expected to provide informal counseling and mediation for up to 50 assigned students and are expected to be "on call" at night as well. My institution is in Texas, which has one of the lowest minimum wages in the country at $7.25/hour, and even a 50-hour workweek would not yield a livable monthly income at $1,450 before tax. Student wages are set based on institutional perceptions of *who* works as a student and *why*. The perception is that *traditional* students who seek employment do so for pocket money, for leisure and entertainment, rather than tuition and boarding. Such students, then, would not be made precarious by a $7.25 hourly wage—a wage that might not cover a $125 copay in the emergency room, or the cost of a prescription. Given that two-thirds of U.S. adults would need to go into debt to pay for an unexpected $400 expense, or that a quarter of all U.S. adults skipped *necessary* medical care in 2018 due to financial cost (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2019, p. 2), it is not surprising that students subjected to exploitatively low wages make similar decisions about healthcare. The problem, of course, is compounded in the case of students who have aged off their parents' insurance plans at age 26—again, a problem assigned to older, i.e., *nontraditional,* students. Several students and young adults have either died or been hospitalized because they could not fill insulin prescriptions when they aged off their parents' insurance plans (Stanley, 2019). Additionally, as I have mentioned earlier, a significant number of students have to work to pay for tuition and lodging because scholarships and (expected) financial contributions from their guardians do not suffice. Once again, the institution's construction of *traditional* and *nontraditional* students through employment and wages makes financially insecure students more precarious by refusing to acknowledge that insecurity.

Students also continue to experience precarity, exacerbated by the specter of the *traditional student*, when they are expected to undertake vast amounts of unpaid labor beyond the classroom simply to train *for* labor. Students are expected to complete internships—often unpaid or minimally paid—to graduate, or to secure an entry-level job after graduation. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported that 65% of employers expected to recruit graduates with not just work experience, but *relevant* work experience (NACE, 2017). However, such internships—which have become as standard as having a college degree to find an entry-level job—place a particular burden on the massive number of students struggling to pay for tuition (Hora, 2018), experiencing food insecurity, or balancing the responsibilities of caregiving. Unpaid internships, of course, expect to recruit *traditional students* who have the resources to labor unpaid while still being able to afford living expenses. Recognizing this precarity, some institutions have made internship grants available to offset costs, but these grants, of course, are competitive and require the labor of application and the goodwill of recommenders. Furthermore, students and members of the precariat who exist through temporary jobs must spend a lot of time searching for jobs or dealing with state bureaucracy (Standing, 2011, p. 120), which can be both dispiriting and dehumanizing (Standing, 2011, p. 122).

As expectations for students to do unpaid labor intensify; student wages remain low; and training *for* labor continues to put pressure on student time, the labor market increases in flexibility by transferring risk and insecurity onto the (student) worker (Standing, 2011, p. 5). As I discuss in the next section, this displaced risk and insecurity, facilitated by market logics, has consequences for precarious students' participation in civic life. The relentless normalizing of precarity in higher education conditions *nontraditional* students to expect precarity as an inevitability. In the next section, I consider how such normalized precarity shapes student populations.

What precarity produces

So far, I have discussed how the concept of the *traditional student* deploys rhetorics of citizenship and whiteness that increasingly makes learning environments precarious for *nontraditional students*. Let us now consider what sort of student such precarity *produces.* First, it increasingly pushes students toward an acute scarcity mindset, perpetuated by the *traditional* student construct. Students who are employed, caregivers, live off-campus, or take classes part-time are limited in which classes they can take. The increased flexibility of labor that marks the precariat not only results in students working greater hours, and casually aligning biological functions with labor (like eating while typing, or writing emails on the toilet), but also creates an inability to construe time without measuring it in terms of productivity. Standing (2011) notes that such productivity-based time-orientation resulted in the ordering of life into "time blocs" and a "growing disrespect for the 24-hour body clock" (2011, p. 115). Parenti (2003) connects this to the rise of Taylorism, which ushered in an era of worker surveillance to ensure time was accounted for through productivity. Indeed, as labor becomes flexible for the *traditional* student, they can certainly work flexibly and continually, and are thus surveilled through digital measures that allow instructors to see how frequently course resources were accessed, or when documents were last modified. While surveillance itself is not a flawed approach, as Lyon (2007) reminds us the ethical ramifications are not tied to being *watched* but to how that data are *sorted* (pp. 181–182). If data are sorted with the assumption that more time spent working means more effort, *nontraditional students* with additional demands on their time will be placed at a disadvantage. This reinforces the conception of time as a measure of output, and output as a measure of commitment. It makes it difficult to achieve greater rigor on shorter assignments that, by design, do not demand high time input. And, such conceptions of time as resource contributes to grade anxieties, where high grades themselves become perceived as both a measure of output and a scarce resource if students believe faculty are working toward a bell-curve distribution of grades.

This anxiety over time and productivity, produced by precarity, has repercussions for civic disengagement. Such anxiety over productivity is created through "neoliberal rationality," which serves to "extend and disseminate market values to all institutions and social action" (Brown, 2005, p. 40, emphasis in original). Brown critiques this form of rationality, noting that it forces all aspects of human life to orient toward economic rationality and compels individuals to equate morality with "deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences" (p. 40). This forces the individual to become responsible for consequences of their actions no matter how precarious and constrained their own positions are (p. 42). Thus, the *nontraditional* student becomes responsible for the consequences of their precarity, even as they have no agency over the systems producing such precarity.

This displaced responsibility, borne by the precariat, ensures that *nontraditional* students will continue to see their civic participation erode. Brown notes that the consequences of neoliberal conditioning result in a reduction in political citizenship to an "unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency," (p. 43) where citizens ultimately becoming constituted as individual entrepreneurs and consumers rather than a body politic. The passivity and compliance of the precariat ensures that only financially secure and debt-free *traditional* students will remain able to freely participate in civic life.

Additionally, the time squeeze that accompanies neoliberal rationality results in an erosion of learning-through-leisure, which can exacerbate civic disengagement. As Standing (2011) reminds us, when leisure becomes a "jeopardized part of life [it] leads to 'thin democracy' in which people are disengaged from political activity except when motivated for a short while, enraptured by a new charismatic face or energized by a shocking event" (2011, p. 131). This is particularly evident when students cite a lack of time for failing to vote in local elections, or failing to register to vote. Barber (1984) develops the term "thin democracy" in his book *Strong Democracy,* and it refers to a focus on individual rights over democratic governance. However, due to the time squeeze that Standing says characterizes the flexible labor of the precariat, students may not be able to look away from the crushing burden of their daily labor long enough to participate meaningfully in civic society. Therefore, not only can these precarious laboring conditions lead to student disengagement from university governance; they can reframe meaningful civic engagement as work experience, a resume builder, a process of becoming more desirable laborers in an increasingly competitive workforce.

The erosion of student engagement in democratic processes reinforces why it is important to examine student precarity in terms of citizenship. It underpins, through the sorting of students into *traditional* and *nontraditional*, who the institution will be oriented toward and who will be precarious. When students perceive their working conditions as being beyond their control, which is a consequence of casualized labor, it has consequences for students' mental health (Chambel & Curral, 2005). This loss of control and its consequences—made more acute for *nontraditional students*—make it incumbent on institutions to interrogate their orientations. In the next section, I consider some tools rhetorical and critical/cultural studies might offer to identify student precarities and reimagine inclusion.

Reimagining traditional students

The traditional student construct, rooted in citizenship and whiteness-centering discourse, exacerbates student precarity. Given this, it is crucial that institutions examine their documentation methods, grievance pathways, physical infrastructure, and recruitment processes to root out orientation toward traditional students and thus root out whiteness. This involves examining the institution's overall discourse, from marketing language to by-laws and student handbooks, and not determining who it *excludes* but identifying who it is *positioned toward*. For instance, at my own institution, our recruitment officers articulate an investment in "organic diversity," or the belief that if the institution valued and visited all high schools and state counties, racial and economic diversity would automatically follow. However, as discussed earlier, institutions must identify and mentor nonwhite students *before* they reach high school, given that the dropout rates for black and Hispanic students are much higher than those of their white peers. Moving away from the language of "organic diversity" toward "intentional diversity" approaches the reality of structural racism and better equips universities to recruit more inclusively and mindfully.

A next step would be for institutions to actively produce discourse that broadens conceptions of traditional students. This could mean including language explicitly including student-caregivers in university communications; or preparing career services departments to work with individuals who are relatively advanced in their careers or seeking employment that can meet their dependents' needs. It could mean campus health centers affirming commitment toward not just birth control but family planning as well, which would actively signal a reconceptualizing of whether/how traditional students may reproduce. Such discursive interventions, which focus on recreating the traditional student, can help recruit students who may otherwise self-select out of applying to particular universities. If institutions recruit a critical mass of such (formerly) *nontraditional* students, they will be forced to confront new needs and reap the increased benefits that come from diverse student populations.

Additionally, critical/cultural study offers a thorough understanding of communicative methods that reinforce citizenship, which can be brought to bear on interrogating the specter of the traditional student. Rhetorical studies is uniquely positioned to identify tropes of nationalism, citizenship, and immigration in discourse about traditional students, and scholars must draw a line connecting critiques of immigration with critiques of student precarity, and take up discussions of the student precariat in citizenship and anti-immigrant discourse. Making rhetorical overlaps explicit strengthens the case for discursive interventions, and can force confrontation when institutions seek to deny the very existence of student precarity.

However, until radical new perspectives reshape notions of citizenship and traditional students, institutions must also act now. If institutions can identify infrastructural exclusions, they must make infrastructural changes. Institutions make policies and act with the assumption that traditional students have no trouble finding accessible restrooms, or meals that fit their dietary and religious needs, or parking spots, or spaces of worship on campus. Traditional students are able to hurry to class on the other side of campus in 10 minutes—the institutionally sanctioned 10-minute break between classes is sufficient for them. Yet, the *traditional student* continues to be defined by age, even as infrastructural exclusions mark a number of other identity categories as *nontraditional*. Therefore, the knowledge institutions gain about their orientation toward traditional students should be applied to making infrastructural changes, such as accessible restrooms for individuals who need changing tables, more space and support for movement, and gender protections; inclusive parking for commuter students; and the option of childcare or an explicit policy allowing parents to bring children into the classroom. It should manifest as the availability of modified flu vaccines for pregnant women in university health centers; a blanket protection against tardy penalties for students who need more time to travel between classes and to campus; and grants for students in unpaid internships. Until pressures on student time ease, and the casualization of labor is halted, such changes should include compensating students for their participation on faculty searches and student governance.

I wish to reiterate that these solutions—grants, disability protections, and so on—seek to redress consequences, but not necessarily systems. And while these interventions are essential, they must occur along with more radical approaches that reconstruct *traditional students* and *citizenship* more broadly. Critical race theory and radical feminist perspectives offer crucial tools for re-examining traditional students and notions of citizenship: tools that advocate rethinking how subjects are *created*. While legal and policy interventions can help redress the disparate treatment of marginalized individuals in the United States, critical race theory and radical feminism question how embodied subjects are *created* and seek to make their interventions there (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Because they question how subjects are formed, radical approaches can help tackle issues of student precarity with the goal of eventually making policy interventions unnecessary.

Ultimately, examining student precarity perpetuated by the construct of the traditional student is an invitation for institutional agents to redistribute power. And while it may not make all student precarities visible, interrogating the traditional student paradigm is a useful starting point to understanding institutional orientations. Ahmed (2006) offers an elegant description of "orientations," explaining that they cause the world to "[acquire] new shapes … depending on which way we turn," and notes that to be oriented is to "be turned toward certain objects" (p. 1). When institutions turn toward traditional students, they cast them as "anchoring points" (p. 1) for how the institution itself will be shaped. Ahmed notes that orientations are "organized rather than casual" (2006, p. 158) and that disorientations can be useful, and an opportunity for institutions to reach out, or in, for support. If current orientations produce precarities that cause student attrition, diminished health, and curtailed learning, institutions must allow disorientations to decenter *traditional* bodies in the classroom setting.

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CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNICATION, TEACHING, AND LEARNING

When your students are hungry and homeless: the crucial role of faculty

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> My experience with hunger and homelessness did not feel like homelessness at first. I was not in denial about it, I just didn't realize it had or needed a label. When my dad died, I didn't have a place of my own to go. The house was under bankruptcy and the bank would be taking it at some point and placing it on the market. At that point, I was already at NC State for my first year and asked around to see where I could stay during breaks when the dorms closed. I was still on Medicaid for insurance purposes. Before I turned 21, it covered all of my needs and once I turned 21, it only covered family planning.
> In terms of hunger, I found out about Feed the Pack Pantry (NC State campus food pantry serving students, faculty and staff) my sophomore year. I didn't know it existed and then I started to utilize it. I would get canned vegetables and fruit, and some ramen. It honestly helped out when I needed some groceries and didn't have much money. Another thing

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> that helps is food stamps/SNAP benefits, which I still utilize now, as a senior. These things helped, but they did not prevent me from continuing to be food insecure.
> I don't think there have been any faculty who have been of help. I didn't really talk to faculty about my situation, but I didn't feel the need to. I'm not ashamed of it but I just didn't say anything. I did bring it up once during my sophomore year. It was in relation to what we were talking about and my professor asked to talk to me after class to see if there was anything I needed. It was more of a housing insecurity than being homeless. Either way, it was just weird to talk about with a professor. Talking about food insecurity with my professors is difficult.

For the past 20 years working in academia, April and May have always been significant for me (Wright). Each year at that time, I receive "thank you" cards under my office door from students expressing their appreciation for a reference letter I wrote on their behalf and describing how it helped them obtain a job offer or graduate school acceptance. I ceremoniously open them and set them up for display in my office. In May 2017, one card cut through me; the student wrote, "Thank you for helping me find food." This student was just one of over 3,400 students monthly at NC State University who did not have enough food. And national research confirms this is not just a NC State problem (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018). Trying to achieve food and housing security has become a major student stressor (Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, Caldeira, Vincent, & Arria, 2018), exacerbating (and often eclipsing) other goals such as finding a major, identifying a research mentor, doing well in classes, and deciding on a career path. Research indicates that basic needs insecurity is associated with difficulties completing and performing well in courses (Gallegos, Ramsey, & Ong, 2014; Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2015; Martinez, Webb, Frongillo, & Ritchie, 2018; Morris, Smith, Davis, & Null, 2016; Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vazquez, 2014; Silva et al., 2017).

I (Wright) approach this work from having dealt with this issue professionally for years. In the Student Support Services TRiO Programs, I support low-income and first-generation college students who pursue a bachelor's degree and plan for graduate study. My work starts by ensuring students' food and housing security and then progresses to a focus on their academic success and graduate school preparation. I (Haskett) approach this work as a researcher for over 30 years investigating child well-being and family homelessness. After having a student on my research team who faced a period of homelessness, I expanded my research focus to college student housing and food insecurity. I (Anderson) approach this from first-hand experiences as a student who lives with and through food and housing insecurity. We come together in this article to provide a triangulated view of food and housing insecurity at one institution and to share strategies for investigating and addressing these problems. Our goal is to inform and motivate faculty on other campuses to become involved in this timely and critical challenge.

Food and housing insecurity: a research perspective

Establishment of a food pantry on the NC State University campus in 2012 was fueled by individual interactions between staff and students who shared stories of not eating for days at a time or not knowing when they would eat next. Establishing the pantry was the first formal acknowledgment on campus that college students experienced food insecurity. At that time, NC State was fairly unique when we joined the 100-member College University Food Bank Alliance. Now, there are more than 650 members (Goldrick-Rab, Cady, &

Coca, 2018). As the NC State food pantry shelves emptied—over and over again—after only a few weeks of being filled, it became evident that food insecurity was a significant problem. It was also clear that a food pantry was not sufficient to prevent hunger, as others have noted (Goldrick-Rab, Cady, et al., 2018). In 2017, a concerned group of students, faculty, and staff founded a grassroots committee to address student food and housing security on our campus, with the following vision: *All NC State students will have access to sufficient, nutritious, culturally appropriate, and affordable food and safe, stable, affordable housing accessible to the university*. Wright and Haskett serve as cochairs of the committee and Anderson has been involved in several components of the initiative.

The first task of the committee was to measure the extent of student food and housing insecurity, using procedures and survey items recommended by Crutchfield and Maguire (2017). Our survey of a representative sample of NC State students (Haskett, Kotter-Grühn, & Majumder, 2020) revealed that 14% of students experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days and 21% were only marginally food secure based on the USDA definition (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000). Because they didn't have enough money for food, 13.9% cut the size of their meals, 15.4% ate less than they felt they should, 9.9% went hungry, 4.3% lost weight, and 2.5% did not eat for a whole day. In terms of homelessness, findings were shocking. In the prior 12 months, 9.6% of students had experienced some form of homelessness. The most common experience (4.6%) involved temporarily staying with a friend or relative; 2.6% of students slept in an outdoor location such as a bus stop, under a bridge or on the sidewalk; and 5% stayed in campers, motels, other closed areas, or treatment centers. This rate of homelessness is somewhat higher than rates reported by most other 4-year universities (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, et al., 2018). It is noteworthy, as well, that we found nontraditional students, as described by Bahrainwala (2020) were at particularly high risk for food and housing insecurity. That is, students who were older, those who self-identified as Hispanic/Latino, and students who identified outside of the traditional gender binary were over-represented in the group of participants who had experienced food insecurity and/or homelessness.

Following release of these somber results, we engaged in a multimethod research approach to learn more about college student hunger and homelessness among our students. A group of faculty and their students in departments of Nutrition and Psychology are in the process of conducting qualitative research by training paid student research assistants to interview students who experienced hunger and homelessness while attending NC State. Interviews conducted thus far have produced rich narratives about hunger and homelessness and the impact of those challenges on students' lives and education. Students have discussed the potential negative effects of food and housing insecurity; for example, one student stated

> It takes a toll on your physical health, your mental health … everything is impacted. I was tired all the time, I wasn't sleeping well. I didn't have as much energy to get through my busy days. My grades were impacted … I ended up failing a class, which I've never done before. I was a lot more irritable from not eating so I was pushing people away, probably pushing people away that could have been helpful.

Students also talked about ways they have coped with food and housing insecurity. One student reported

> I ran out of meal credits, I think I had like 4 for the next 2 weeks, so I just spent the whole entire day, as much of it as I could, in the dining hall … I literally just stayed most of the day so I could get food as I got hungry.

Another stated, "I have stayed in a library, not the one here. Just because, like, I didn't have anywhere to stay … I generally regard those places as safe, and they are guarded." When asked about strategies the university should pursue to prevent student hunger and homelessness, students had many recommendations, such as " … there should be a room in place where people can just come in and grab a quick snack or granola bar or drink because—again—NC State definitely has the money." Another student stated,

> Some students are too ashamed to show up at a food pantry or ashamed to ask for help so I think to actually help students we have to say "it's ok, you can utilize these resources" kind of, removing the stigma around asking for help.

Although we are continuing to collect interview data and have not begun the formal coding process, students' narratives have already been helpful in shaping our work.

Finally, faculty and graduate students in the Department of Sociology conducted asset mapping workshops. The goal was to determine how to advance from supporting students during financial emergencies to preventing food insecurity and homelessness. Through the process, we learned that there were some helpful resources available for students on campus and in the local community, but there were many gaps in services and the existing resources were isolated and difficult to access. Of note, students identified employment-related issues as a key contributor to student hunger and homelessness (see St. Amour, 2019). In terms of prevention, salient recommendations were (a) increase awareness of available resources and (b) ensure students have access to part-time work on campus, with pay at a living wage. Collectively, research efforts painted a clear picture of food and housing insecurity as a significant problem with serious negative consequences for students' emotional, academic, and social well-being. Potential solutions also emerged in the data and propelled the work forward, as described below.

Addressing food and housing insecurity

Based on our research, members of the campus and local community have made compassionate and informed contributions to decrease the number of NC State students experiencing food and housing insecurity. Most contributions have been initiated by the committee, which points to the importance of an organized effort, even if that effort is not sanctioned by the university. We provide a few examples of policy changes and new initiatives here to promote brainstorming on other campuses. First, administrators in university housing agreed to change policies so that residence halls now remain open over most breaks. Previously, residence halls closed during breaks, placing students who had no other place to stay at risk for homelessness. Additionally, financial support from concerned donors led to the formation of an emergency fund to support students in food/housing crisis and a new meal plan scholarship program. Student government and university dining also partnered to create a meal share program; students can now donate their unused guest meal swipes to students who need meals. Another important move involved professionals in University Extension programs, who began offering assistance to students in completing applications for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (i.e., food stamps). Paralleling these administrative activities, students and staff are working to destigmatize food and housing insecurity through the Beyond the Belltower podcast, created by and for under-resourced students. Podcasts focus on financial, academic, career development, and cultural aspects of supporting success for low-income, first-generation students (https://trio.dasa.ncsu.edu/beyond-the-bell-tower/). Finally, students collaborated with communications staff to implement a media campaign to raise awareness about resources and destigmatize help-seeking.

Unfortunately, new housing resources did not emerge as quickly as did resources for food. That said, in a partnership between student affairs and an academic unit, an internal foundation grant was awarded to committee members to complete a feasibility study of approaches to prevent student homelessness. The feasibility study resulted in a recommendation to build new supportive housing for student populations most at risk for homelessness (e.g., single-parent students, students aged out of the foster care system, and those who meet criteria for homelessness based on the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act) (U.S. Dept of Education, 2016). To move forward on this recommendation, a professor in architecture offered a graduate studio course in which students collaborated with university housing staff to become informed about on-campus housing and then met with a university architect to identify two campus locations where housing could be built. Using national best practices for the design of affordable housing, students proposed innovative designs that take into account the complexities of college student hunger, homelessness, and resources necessary for progress toward degree completion (e.g., on-site healthcare, child care, employment, food pantry). We hope the designs will provide inspiration for new university housing in the near future (Barrie, 2020). A second recommendation was to launch a host home program for students who need free short-term housing. An internal foundation grant was awarded to a committee member to coordinate the planning process to open a host home program in fall 2020. The planning group includes members of the university community as well as the local nonprofit (e.g., housing providers) and business (e.g., banking, real estate) communities.

Food and housing insecurity: what can instructors do?

> Going to class and doing well in my academics is a priority. However, I need money to afford food and housing. It's not a matter of "Oh, I want more money for comfort," this is a need. There have been multiple times where I have tried meeting with a professor but can't because his or her office hours were during my work shift and they have asked me to simply skip work. I cannot do that. It's really hard for me to explain that to a professor, because there's an assumption of I'm being greedy or unconcerned about academics. The truth is if I don't make it to my shift, I won't be able to buy that textbook for class and make credit card bills. I always appreciate professors and TAs who start the semester with saying "I want to see you succeed in this course and if there's going to be something in the way of that, come talk to me."

The student who spoke those words was a first-generation college student who had dealt with both food and housing insecurity. These words provide a starting point for reflection and action by instructors: Tell your students—and show them—that you care about everything, within or outside of class, that could get in the way of their success. The research we conducted at NC State has not only led to administrative changes but also inspired a group of faculty to implement instructional changes to address this issue. Following are some specific actions faculty can take, individually and collectively, to demonstrate that they care about this issue:

- Include a section on your syllabus to provide students with resources and to destigmatize help-seeking, for example: "Any student who faces challenges securing their food or housing or has other adverse financial experiences and believes this may affect their performance in the course is encouraged to notify the professor to discuss needs and potential resources. Alternatively, students can contact the Division of Academic and Student Affairs to learn more about the Pack Essentials program."
- Conduct an analysis of the cost of meeting your course requirements, including the time and finances required to meet the course expectations in order to understand and reduce potential barriers for students with few financial resources. Then, consider revising the course requirements to reduce costs.
- Review course structure, policies, and requirements that may be impacted by a student's access to basic needs (and not their intellect or commitment to succeed in the course) and consider alternatives when appropriate.
- Offer flexible office hours so students who have inflexible employment schedules or parental responsibilities are not disadvantaged.
- Review group and off-campus requirements. Group projects and off-campus assignments require time and funds for transportation, so estimate financial and time cost and inform students on the first day of class and list all costs in the course syllabus. The cost of time may be more devastating to a student than money required. Every hour not able to work is money lost, placing a student closer and closer to being hungry and homeless.
- Allow students to submit electronic copies of assignments rather than hard copies, as copy costs can be substantial.
- Consider using OpenStax, Open Textbook Library, or OpenstaxCNX, to avoid the high costs of textbooks.
- Establish "Grazing Stations" where students can take snacks and drinks when the building is open, creating hunger-free zones across the campus. Also provide snacks in your lab space and in your office.
- Create student research and employment opportunities that pay a living wage and that take into account a student's financial resources, Pell Grant status, economic and first-generation status to increase the diversity of employment opportunities (see the Ted Talk titled "Silver Spoons and Scrapers" [insert link]).
- Know your students and know your campus. Lack of awareness of resources is a common roadblock to faculty members making appropriate and helpful referrals. Seek the opportunity to make nonjudgmental referrals.
- Conduct research, from your disciplinary perspective, on the causes and consequences of college student food and housing insecurity, potential solutions, and effectiveness of approaches to reduce basic needs insecurity.

Conclusions

National studies and research on our own campus confirms that many college students are sacrificing their health and safety to earn a degree. Furthermore, the challenges experienced by under-resourced college students can prevent them from obtaining a quality educational experience, hinder their progress toward graduation, and contribute to drop out. Faculty members, have the capacity move the needle on how their campus community responds to students who do not have access to basic needs. We encourage institutions to bring together a diverse group of compassionate faculty, student support staff, and students with relevant lived experiences to explore and address student hunger and homelessness. Progress on our campus required a coordinated, cross-campus coalition and community members with relevant expertise. These efforts require involvement at all levels. Including two dean-level administrators as advisors to our committee was also valuable; one dean is in an academic unit and the second leads student services. Students are at the center of our planning and they have taken leadership roles since the start of the initiative.

We have made progress in strengthening existing resources and launching new services, but do not have resources or authority to implement systems-level changes necessary to meet our vision. The committee recently submitted a Call to Action to university leadership. The Call included a summary of the knowledge gained in two years of action and research, a review of best practices to address student hunger and homelessness, and recommendations for action. We implored leadership to (a) officially charge and resource the committee to create a bold plan for rapid progress toward desired outcomes and to ensure the plan is implemented and evaluated, (b) include food and housing security among 100% of our students as a goal in the strategic plan currently in development, and (c) bring faculty together in a collaborative research group across disciplines to generate solutions for the pressing educational equity and public health problem of student food insecurity and homelessness. In closing, we hope this paper will encourage faculty to take a leadership role in efforts to support educational equity for all students, including those who are under-resourced and making considerable sacrifices to reach their academic goals. Sharing this article with colleagues, placing a basket of snacks in the office, and inserting campus resources into syllabi are simple but powerful actions that can be taken immediately.

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CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNICATION, TEACHING, AND LEARNING

Addressing student precarities in higher education: our responsibility as teachers and scholars

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The transition from high school to college life presents a number of challenges to young adults, including new living arrangements, new social circles, increased independence, and the pressures of academic responsibilities (Johnston, 2010). As a result, college students face a number of health concerns, including but not limited to sleep deprivation, lack of proper nutrition and exercise, psychological distress, acute illness, and the social

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pressures to engage in substance and alcohol abuse (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). In fact, in the Spring 2019 report of the American College Health Association (ACHA)'s National College Health Assessment, the nearly 68,000 college student respondents reported a variety of health-related issues that have negatively impacted their academic performance in the past 30 days. This includes stress (34%), mental health issues (anxiety, 27.8%; depression, 20.2%), chronic health problems (4.6%) sleep difficulties (22%), and temporary health issues (e.g., pain, 3.7%; common cold, 14.8%). Further, nearly 26% of college students reported that within the past 12 months, they had a personal health issue that was "traumatic or difficult to handle" (ACHA, 2019). This is particularly problematic when considering that exposure to traumatic or difficult events is associated with withdrawing from courses, failing grades, and lower grade point averages, particularly among students from low-income backgrounds (Warnecke & Lewine, 2019). More broadly, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety affect students' ability to perform well in college and reduce the likelihood of graduation (Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein, & Zivin, 2009; Mojtabai et al., 2015).

These problems are exacerbated for subgroups of students, such as those without health insurance, those with significant and mounting debt, and those who are food-insecure. According to the U.S. Census, as of 2017, 14.5% of young adults aged 19–25 were uninsured; the rate of uninsured individuals in the general population is 8.8% (Berchick, Hood, & Barnett, 2018). In fact, due to what Freudenberg, Goldrick-Rab, and Poppendieck (2019) term "the new economics of college" (p. 1652), the rates of food insecurity among the college student population range from 20 to 50%, which is considerably higher than the 12% of the general U.S. population. This rising food insecurity (i.e., limited or uncertain access to adequate food, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture) is related to the increase in students from families below the federal poverty line, the increasing number of students who work full time earning a minimum wage that is not sufficient to cover rising tuition costs, and decreases in funding for higher education programs that support affordable student housing and meal programs (Freudenberg et al., 2019).

In their essay, Bahrainwala notes that colleges and universities cater to what is often named (perhaps problematically) the *traditional* student, the prevalence of which is undoubtedly changing. Data from the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, indicate that 71% of college students have at least one of the following *nontraditional student* characteristics: financially independent from parents, one or more dependents, single caregiver, no traditional high school diploma, delayed college enrollment, enrolled part time, and/or employed full time during the school year (United States Government Accountability Office, GAO, 2018). In fact, the average college student age in 2016 was 26 years old, a quarter of whom work full time (GAO, 2018). The *traditional* college student, who graduates high school and immediately enrolls full time into college, depends on their parents financially, and does not work during the school year is no longer the norm.

In a study of nearly 9,000 students in the California public university system, Martinez, Frongillo, Leung, and Ritchie (2018) found a direct relationship between college students' food insecurity and their grade point average; students' grade point average was also indirectly affected by poor mental health resulting from food insecurity. Further adding to the cyclical nature of this problem, research indicates that students' appraisal of their student loan debt is significantly associated with poorer mental health; and this relationship is worse for black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students than their Asian and white American peers (Tran, Mintert, Llamas, & Lam, 2018). Students who struggle with mental health issues do not perform as well academically (Turner & Berry, 2000), are less likely to participate in class (Carton & Goodboy, 2015), and are at risk for suicidal ideation (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007). In sum, there is a wealth of evidence that suggests that student precarities such as mental health, lack of insurance, food insecurity, and other typically considered *nontraditional* student characteristics are impacting students' ability to succeed in college. This, of course, begs the question, "What can we do about it?" As such, this essay will focus on how we, as scholars of communication and instruction, can address, mitigate, and even illuminate these issues of precarity in our pedagogy, our scholarship, and our professional lives. This argument is centered on three key premises: (1) it is the responsibility of instructors to care about student precarities, (2) as instructional scholars and experts in communication, we are well prepared to mitigate these precarities in our course structure and pedagogy, as well as (3) in the scholarship we produce and prioritize on teaching and learning.

Importance of instructors in addressing student precarities

As teachers, we are often "the front line" when it comes to the issues that our students face (Rudick & Dannels, 2018, p. 407). As representatives of the universities at which we are employed, we see the students (arguably) on the most regular and consistent basis: at minimum, instructors interact with students three hours per week. This does not include the students that come to see us during our office hours, who pass us in the halls, who work on research projects with us, who are our internship advisees, or whom we mentor in the endless ways in which we engage in out-of-class communication with our students.

When it comes to addressing precarities such as issues with mental health, however, instructors have varying levels of comfort with having these conversations with students. In a study by White and LaBelle (2019), instructors were found to have four approaches, or communicative roles, with such conversations: (a) the *empathic listener*, who is comfortable with interpersonal discussions of mental health with students and providing emotional support, (b) the *referral source*, who is comfortable with allowing students to come to them with mental health issues, but is quick to redirect them to professional resources on or off campus, (c) the *first responder*, who sees their role as a faculty member as being a "first alert" to administration or other offices on campus that can help students in distress, and (d) the *bystander*, who is not comfortable with any type of role in students' mental health. Although these four roles were identified in the context of mental health, these findings provide an indication of how faculty may feel about approaching the topic(s) of student precarity in their classrooms.

Importantly, although the instructors felt varying levels of comfort and responsibility to have discussions about mental health with their students, all four of the aforementioned roles shared a common concern about such interactions: being unqualified or underprepared to have these conversations. As White and LaBelle (2019) note, these valid concerns illuminate the need for communication training for university faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and administration in addressing student precarities, as well as for universities to have sufficient and appropriate resources to direct students to. Relatedly, scholars of communication and instruction have an opportunity to share their wealth of knowledge on pedagogical strategies that promote communities of learning through communication training on their own campuses. We turn to a brief overview of such strategies next.

Pedagogy that creates supportive environments

To structure the discussion of pedagogical strategies suggested in the communication and instruction literature, this essay focuses on (a) structural considerations and related (b) teacher behaviors that will create a connected and supportive environment for traditional and nontraditional students alike. As argued by Weber, Martin, and Myers (2011), together with students' characteristics, structural elements and teacher behaviors work to influence students' beliefs about a course, which in turn affect students' learning outcomes.

Structuring the course to create a supportive environment

In White and LaBelle's (2019) study, instructors addressed issues of students' mental health through two structural elements of their course: statements and information about on-campus resources in the course syllabus, and regular check-ins and/or reminders with students regarding mental health management. For instance, at my academic institution, the following optional statement is encouraged to be included in course syllabi:

> Over the course of the semester, you may experience a range of challenges that interfere with your learning, such as problems with friend, family, and or significant other relationships; substance use; concerns about personal adequacy; feeling overwhelmed; or feeling sad or anxious without knowing why. These mental health concerns or stressful events may diminish your academic performance and/or reduce your ability to participate in daily activities. You can learn more about the resources available through Chapman University's Student Psychological Counseling Services here: https://www.chapman.edu/students/health-and-safety/psychological-counseling/

Intended to be included alongside required statements on accommodations for disabilities and harassment and discrimination policies, this statement not only conveys the care and concern of the instructor but also provides an appropriate resource for students who find themselves struggling throughout the semester. Such statements could address other precarities by directing students to information on childcare services or food pantries at the university, if applicable. As others have noted (Goldman, 2018), including such statements in the course syllabus not only establishes a culture of open and supportive communication, but can be used to set boundaries and expectations for appropriate discussions between teachers and students. Together with the use of regular check-ins and updates regarding student services and self-care, these actions help to create a supportive environment in the classroom.

Teaching behaviors that create a supportive environment

In addition to structural elements, the research on communication and instruction suggests a number of effective teaching behaviors that can be used to mitigate issues surrounding student precarities in and outside of the classroom. Although it is not possible to provide an overview of all of these behaviors in this brief essay, a few evidence-based strategies for cultivating supportive and open environments will be highlighted. Namely, research in communication and instruction suggests two avenues for fostering positive communication environments in the classroom: a supportive teacher–student climate and a perception of classroom connectedness among students.

Focused on student perceptions of instructor communication, classroom climate is determined by the social and psychological context in which instructors and students interact in either supportive or defensive ways (Hays, 1970; Rosenfeld & Jarrard, 1985). Teachers' use of behaviors such as self-disclosure (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007), constructive feedback (Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008), and affinity-seeking strategies (Myers, 1995) result in more supportive communication climates. Instructors also play an important role in developing positive and supportive climates in online courses, by being present, available, understanding, and providing clear instructions and expectations in the course (Kaufmann, Sellnow, & Frisby, 2016). Importantly, students who perceive a positive communication climate are more likely to actively participate, interact, and engage in class as well as collaborate and connect with their peers in and outside of class (Myers et al., 2016).

A second aspect of the classroom environment, classroom connectedness, focuses on the ways in which students connect and interact with one another. Classroom connectedness refers to the perception of an open, supportive, and cooperative communication environment among students (Dwyer et al., 2004). Connectedness has been positively related to a variety of student outcomes such as affective learning (Ifert-Johnson, 2009), cognitive learning (Frisby & Martin, 2010), and participation (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Students who feel connected to their peers are also more likely to participate (Frisby & Martin, 2010) and be more involved in the class (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010), and engage with their teachers for participatory reasons (Myers & Claus, 2012). Although student connectedness is a student-centric construct, research has successfully examined the role that teachers play in developing and maintaining perceptions of classroom connectedness. Teacher behaviors that display confirmation (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010) and nonverbal immediacy (Ifert-Johnson, 2009) are positively related to higher perceptions of connectedness.

As instructors, our primary goal is student learning. We need to focus on the fostering environments that support learning, and eliminating barriers that might prohibit them from doing well in the classroom. This type of supportive, open, and connected environment should therefore not lead to a permissive and rule-free classroom. In fact, creating structure and clear boundaries will be important in helping students to thrive. Let's take, for instance, the case of the tardy student as discussed in Bahrainwala's essay. Instructors approach to tardiness should be to lead with empathy and help the student form viable solutions to their problem. Instead of immediately deducting from the students' grade for their tardiness, ask a student who is repeatedly late to class to speak with you and work with the student to find reasonable solutions and consequences to the problem. Instructors are most effective when they are both assertive and responsive, as both communication styles are positively associated with students' affective learning (Allen, Long, O'mara, & Judd, 2008), and motivation (McCroskey, Richmond, & Bennett, 2006) in a course. Further, as Johnson, Claus, Goldman, and Sollitto (2017) note, approaching students who engage in misbehaviors (such as tardiness or handing in late work) is a helpful means to assist at-risk or struggling students to identify resources and strategies to help them succeed.

The demographic of the college classroom is changing, and so too must our approach to both teaching and researching effective instruction. Fortunately, as communication and instruction scholars, we have a canon of effective teaching behaviors that can help us to make these needed adjustments to our pedagogy, our approach to teaching, and our communication in and outside of the classroom. The responsibility we share to our students to practice positive teacher behaviors is mirrored by our responsibility to share our disciplinary knowledge of these effective teaching behaviors with our fellow educators across disciplines. Perhaps the most effective way to do this is through our scholarship, to which I turn next.

Scholarship that illuminates

Despite offering a number of pedagogical strategies and teaching behaviors that can be used to mitigate issues related to student precarity in higher education, the fact is that much of the research in communication and instruction was not conducted with these populations in mind (Rudick & Golsan, 2014; Sprague, 1992). For scholars of communication and instruction, therefore, there is a responsibility to conduct research that will illuminate these issues and develop specific communication strategies for this population to thrive. As communication and instruction scholars, we can and should lead conversations about student precarity. One potential means of doing this is by focusing our efforts on understanding affective learning, or students' feelings, values, and motivations toward course content (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). As argued by Waldeck and LaBelle (2016), communication and instruction scholars should embrace their role as experts on affect in the classroom, embracing the crucial role of communication and relationship building in instruction. By focusing our research on specific, easily implemented pedagogical strategies that can best serve students struggling with precarities, we can contribute to a crucial and necessary reshaping of higher education.

One way in which we can do this is by prioritizing research conducted to understand and facilitate learner-centered teaching (Weimer, 2013). Rather than examining teaching as a one-way transmission of what a teacher knows and believes to a passive classroom of students, learner-centered teaching prioritizes student responsibility for mastery in their own learning experience. To do this, learner-centered teaching redistributes power in the classroom to include students in building a classroom community. This might include offering assignment options and allowing students to select the ones they want to complete, asking students to brainstorm and agree on ground rules for classroom dialogue, or even allowing students to select their own assignment due dates or to generate and collectively agree on course policies for in-class technology use or late work. Other suggestions include surveying students on their primary interests within the content area of the course in order to determine how much time the class will spend on various topics, and inviting students to bring relevant materials they encounter outside of class to enhance in-class discussion (Weimer). In addition to giving students a sense of shared ownership and responsibility in the course, these strategies might help to illuminate issues previously not considered in classroom structure and rules, which Bahrainwala illustrates in her essay as creating a lack of citizenship for nontraditional students at universities.

Learner-centered teaching also includes helping shape students' abilities to think critically and deeply about course material by sharing our own reading, studying, and learning habits with our students (Weimer, 2013). Rather than assuming students have an effective system for taking notes or studying, take a few minutes at the end of class to discuss effective techniques for understanding material and/or let students share their successful strategies with their peers. Instructors should also give students time to teach one another what they understood about a lesson before moving on to the next. These moments of connection and collaboration not only foster a deeper level of learning but also help students in the course to build communities of learning that will help connect them to the course and each other. As researchers, we should strive to empirically test the associations of these simple strategies on student outcomes such as motivation, efficacy, and perceived and actual learning.

Indeed, many of these behaviors resonate with research being done in communication and instruction. Specifically, Bolkan and Goodboy (2011) explored teacher behaviors that "inspire and intellectually stimulate" students to be their best (p. 11). They found that students enrolled in courses with teachers practicing the communication behaviors of transformational leadership are more involved, engaged, and participatory in the class (2009). Finn and Schrodt (2016) studied discussion, a pedagogical strategy that encourages student responsibility, engagement, and critical reflection. They found that five teacher communication behaviors could contribute to effective discussion (i.e., affirming students' contributions, organizing discussion, provoking discussion, questioning students, and correcting students). These and other studies in communication and instruction offer an example of how our scholarship can be used to forward learner-centered pedagogy across disciplines, and to the benefit of students who experience themselves as noncitizens in one way or another.

Conclusion

The title of this essay terms addressing student precarities as a "responsibility." The suggestions offered in this essay should not be viewed as something to do in excess of already heavy teaching loads or scholarship requirements; instead, prioritizing student precarities in our teaching and scholarship should be viewed as enhancing the work we are already doing. In fact, addressing students' precarities should be viewed as *part of* not *in addition to* our effective teaching. Effective teaching is achieved when teachers strategically utilize behaviors that not only maximize positive student outcomes (i.e., affective learning, cognitive learning, motivation, efficacy/empowerment, interest) but also foster a positive teacher–student relationship, therefore inspiring students to become self-motivated and responsible for their learning in the course.

I also note in my title two positions on the topic: teachers and scholars. I will add a third role we play: members of our university and academic communities. Ultimately, universities must have the resources to help students in need, such as food pantries, education on managing student loan debt after graduation, and affordable housing and childcare. However, it is also our responsibility as instructors to be knowledgeable of these resources and share them with students. This approach can be as simple as sharing links to existing resources on your course's web management system or using opportunities in the classroom to let students engage with one another and build systems of support that will connect them to each other and the university. It can also be as involved as being an advocate for students facing such challenges—

provide a voice for these students in faculty governance, in our committee work, and in the ways in which we shape our curriculum and advising structures within our academic units. Finally, as our understanding of student precarities grows, so too much our outreach to other educators, both within our discipline and outside of it. These precarities do not just exist in the communication classroom. The myriad ways in which we, as instruction and communication scholars and educators, can engage in mitigating and addressing student precarities are endless. It is our responsibility to engage in them.

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EDITORS' REFLECTIONS

"Yes, and … *" continuing the scholarly conversation about student precarity in higher education

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> You'll see here the cost of tuition, room, and board here. We take pride in being a university that works very hard to address all unmet need for the cost of attendance here.
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*A central rule for improv—to not stop the flow of the performance—is to respond with "yes, and … " (instead of "no" or "yes, but") to lines that comes before you. The idea is to create an environment where all become involved in keeping an idea or storyline alive and evolving; encouraging players to make associations and to connect things in innovative ways (Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009).

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My (Dannels) daughter is a junior in high school; we have already done seven college information sessions (admissions officers) and tours (students). The above quotes are only some of the many emerging from these sessions and tours that are focused in some way or another on the cost of college (and, specifically, on mitigating that cost). It struck me on the second or third tour that regardless the institution type (private, small liberal arts, large public, or land grant), the refrain has been the same: we will work to make finances a non-factor in your attendance at college or the amount you pay for college will gain you more than it cost you (in terms of experiences or job prospects). Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with these refrains, their persistent and patterned presence points to this: the financial burdens of a higher education are real. Universities know it, parents know it, and students know it. And if students do not know these burdens as they sit in an information session or tour because of their backgrounds and trajectories to that point, and even if some continue to be protected by the privileges afforded to them, no one is immune to the perils of precarity.

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U.S. universities and colleges in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were structured to cater particular classed and racial interests. As Burke (1982) details, during this time, higher education (particularly in the Northeast) was understood as a finishing school for the white, wealthy landowners who would advance their cultural, social, and economic capital through both learning content knowledge and the (in)formal ways they acquired the tastes, habits, relationships, and dispositions of the ruling class. Importantly, the resources necessary to access higher education made it almost impossible for those outside of these groups to enjoy their spaces, ensuring those from elite families had the ability to continue their dominance through intergenerational transfer of wealth and prestige. However, as scholars have noted, in the late nineteenth and into the midtwentieth century, groups typically barred from higher education (e.g., women and racial/ethnic minorities) won hard-fought legal battles to broaden access to college and university campuses (e.g., Burke, 1982; Wallenstin, 2008). These victories laid the ground for future advocacy (e.g., disability, LGBT, and immigrant rights movements) in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The current landscape of higher education is one that, at least on its surface, is firmly on the path to realize the promise that all members of society are welcome to realize their potential through education.

However, as scholars from a variety of fields noted, the seeds of inequality were being planted in the aftermath of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s as the U.S. adjusted to a neoliberal capitalist political economy (Giroux, 2007). Student debt was made more difficult to discharge in 1978 and, by 2005, was made almost impossible to discharge, trapping millions of poor and working-class students into perpetual debt. Sallie Mae, once the largest nonprofit lender for student loans, became fully privatized in 2004 and functioned primarily as a way for corporate shareholders to increase their profit at the public's expense. In 2018, a time when there was nearly $1.5 trillion in student debt, Sallie Mae had a yearly net income of nearly $500 million (Sallie Mae, 2019). In 2012, graduate students were no longer eligible for direct subsidized loans, meaning that their loans would accrue interest while enrolled, making it financially riskier for poor and working-class students to commit to postbaccalaureate programs. Pell Grants, once a robust program to ensure college enrollment from poor and working-class students, has been increasingly underfunded and now provides less assistance to students who need it most (Protopsaltis & Parrott, 2017). After the 2008 financial crisis, states retreated from funding higher education, with 44 states spending less per student in 2017 than in 2008, opening up new markets for private and for-profit student loan lenders (Mitchel, Leachman, & Maasterson, 2017). These, and other, instances demonstrate how society's approach for how to pay for higher education (and by whom) is increasingly pushed onto students and their families as federal and state governments retreat from their traditional obligations. The effect this shift has had on students—from the everyday (e.g., food/housing insecurity) to the long-term (e.g., student debt)—marks student precarity as a "wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973)[1] for investigation.

The term *student precarity* focuses attention on how the current social and institutional configurations of U.S. higher education are meant (if not by design, then left intact through apathy) to encourage a social life that privileges a continuous sense of uneasiness and scarcity (Standing, 2016). Students are supposed to choose the correct major, institution of higher education, loan company, part-/full-time job, time-management app, or any of way of address their economic hardship because, ultimately, such hardship is viewed as their individual responsibility. Failure in the market economy is simply the result for not acting as a rational economic actor, and complaining after the fact (e.g., activism to reduce student loan debt) is viewed as trying to weasel out of an (admittedly one-sided) contract. Although institutions attempt to alleviate the worst aspects of student precarity (e.g., food banks), it has become increasingly difficult for them to do so, as state funding has been cut. As a result, institutions increasingly target middle-/upper-class students with marketing campaigns, social media gimmicks, and high-end luxuries to shore up declining monies with less and less resources made available to address students in need (e.g., Brock [2017] estimates that paid advertising by U.S. colleges and universities reached approximately $1.65 billion in 2016).

This set of relationships, whether viewed as a series of accidents or design, have a clear product at their end if left unchecked. On one end of the spectrum, poor and working-class students are barred from traditional higher education, except in those instances where scholarships, grants, or other forms of assistance can secure a place for the meritorious few. Those who cannot secure these programs will most likely be shut out of the larger economy or shunted into the increasingly rapacious for-profit sector of higher education. At the other end, middle-class students will attempt to secure their economic potential by going into debt as a way to obtain their preferred professional employment opportunities through higher education. Those who do so will become the increasingly common face of the current student debt crisis—a 24–34-year-old with an average of $33,000 of student debt (Whistle, n.d.). Above this brute reality for the majority of the population sits the wealthy who, through excess economic capital as well as social capital (e.g., legacy admits), are able to continue their path of dominance. In short, the current trajectory of higher education lands our society more or less where the history of higher education began: a haven for the white and wealthy.

To intervene in this situation, higher education must be able to identify not only roots of its affliction but its remedies. Thankfully, the forum contributors for this issue provide this labor in full. As Bahrainwala insightfully identifies, the archetype of the traditional student continues to plague the imagination of faculty, administration, and legislators alike when addressing the problems of higher education. It is increasingly rare for students to have the cultural capital to navigate the bureaucracy of admission into or to complete higher education, the economic capital to work little (if at all) while enrolled,and the social capital to obtain (paid) internships before graduating and starting a career. And yet, higher education's everyday culture—from classroom space to scheduling—continues to cater to this imagined archetype. Doing so not only puts higher education on the path of irrelevance to the population it purports to serve, but does real, lasting harm to those students who cannot fit the strictures of this mythical norm (Lorde, 1984). Wright, Haskett, and Anderson address the specificity of the student experiences of precarity by detailing their work about, and living in a state of, food and housing insecurity. Their essay offers a stark reminder of the very real experiences students have of pursuing higher education while living in want, and the ways that institutions can respond to this increasingly common issue. LaBelle's essay connects student precarity to mental and physical health issues, and sheds insights into how student struggles in the classroom are connected to the larger social and economic systems they navigate. Importantly, her essay provides ways that instructors can address these problems through communicative behaviors such as classroom connectedness and climate, thereby creating class environments where students feel safe to disclose their struggles and get the aid they may need.

The essays in the forum call on communication and instruction scholars to address the student needs that begin beyond, but certainly impact performance in, the classroom. Communication and instruction scholarship has historically shied away from the broader set of social concerns connected to education, instead, focusing on classroom management and learning. However, higher education and, indeed, all of society will have to reckon with the type of world that is much poorer—economically, socially, and spiritually—if student precarity is not forcibly addressed within and beyond our classrooms. As such, we encourage scholars in our field to begin programs of research to address student precarity. We draw upon Craig's (1999) seven traditions of the communication discipline to generate research questions that future scholars and teachers can pursue:

(1) How can public deliberation about student precarity reveal the limits of public imagination about hunger, poverty, and health?
(2) How can instructors create systems of meaning that encourage students to reveal, and seek help about, their experienced precarity?
(3) How can instructors and students build relationships that provide the mental and psychological resources necessary to withstand or overcome precarity?
(4) How can instructor and administrators create clear, consistent messages to publics, bureaucrats, and politicians about the need to address student precarity?
(5) How can insights into students' sociopsychological traits provide avenues for intervening into their experiences of student precarity?
(6) How do rituals of institutions (e.g., parking, healthcare, and scheduling) serve to (re)produce harmful tropes, stereotypes, or understandings of student precarity?
(7) How can dominant discourses about student precarity reveal the ways that the normative features of the current political economy attempt to inculcate shame, alienation, or disconnect in poor/working-class students?

Yes, and …

Note

1. By definition, wicked problems are those that are complex and resistant to linear or reductionist answers, and therefore difficult and at times impossible to solve (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

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