

Royel Johnson:

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash and all indigenous nations, tribes and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore:

Three, Two, One.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family. And welcome back to another episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast, focused on Humanizing Higher Education. I am your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, Associate Professor of Higher Ed and Social Work at the University of Southern California, Director of Student Engagement at the USC Race and Equity Center.

Shout out to my colleagues at the USC Race and Equity Center for being a co-sponsor of the series.

And I have the very distinct honor and privilege of working with my dear friend and lifelong academic partner, Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you, Dr. Johnson. Excited to be here. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felicia Commodore, Associate Professor at Old Dominion University in the Higher Education and Community College programs. We're excited today.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

We've got some great scholars here. We're going to talk about various elements of Humanizing Higher Education and particularly, what that looks like, considering the changes and shifts that we've seen happen at our institutions because of COVID.

And thinking about how this has impacted how we approach work, how people see their work, how people see themselves as workers or do not see themselves as workers. And so, we're going to have a really great chit chat about that. And then thinking about what does working at our institutions look like as we move forward.

Royel Johnson:

Okay. Join us in welcoming our special guest, Dr. Kevin R. McClure, who is the Murphy Distinguished Scholar of Education at the University of North Carolina. And then Jonathan Okstad, Research Associate at Loyola University of Chicago. And last but not least, Dr. Toby Jenkins-Henry, Associate Professor and Director of the Museum of Education and Interim Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the University of South Carolina, the other USC.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes, Dr. Jenkins-Henry got a lot of jobs.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. Mini hats.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Let's talk about that.

Felecia Commodore:

I can't wait to talk about that conversation. Before we jump into our round table conversation, we do have a little activity, a little fun we want to have that we are doing with all of our guests and it's called, This or That.

So, we're going to give you two options, just two and you're going to choose the option you prefer most.

Royel Johnson:

Only one?

Felecia Commodore:

Just one. I know that's tough for us scholars but just one and so, we're going to do that and we're going to learn a little bit more about our guests here today. So, I'm going to start with Kevin and because of Twitter, I know Kevin has a very robust kid, movie, entertainment life, because he has a wonderful-

Kevin McClure:

That is true.

Felecia Commodore:

Beautiful family. So Kevin, Encanto or Moana?

Kevin McClure:

Okay. So I've got a lot of thoughts on this. So, I am a Moana fan and this could be because Moana was one of the last full movies that my five-year-old would watch from start to finish, before he inexplicably developed anxiety around watching movies. And so, evidently it's a thing where some kids just the uncertainty around movies-

Felecia Commodore:

Interesting.

Kevin McClure:

Gets them worked up and they can't handle it. Moana is one of the reasons that we used to be able to watch together. And we would listen to the music in the car and he would sing when he was younger and so, that one I think holds a place in my heart. And I still know most of the words of the songs, so I'm going to go with Moana.

Felecia Commodore:

That just gave me all the warm fuzzies. Yes.

Royel Johnson:

All right. So Jon, this is for you. I am a Chicago native, so this is an important question. Cubs or White Sox?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

I'm glad that's not the question of, does Chicago have beaches? Every Florida person gives us such a hard time about our beaches in Chicago. I will have to say Cubs, because I literally live within an eight minute walk to the Cubs stadium.

Felecia Commodore:

All right.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

So I know it's but it's close and convenient.

Royel Johnson:

Okay. All right.

Felecia Commodore:

We'll let it go. Okay. Toby, this question's for you. Their Eyes Were Watching God or The Bluest Eye?

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

I'm going to go with Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

So, Zora is like close to my heart and particularly because I'm a woman from the South. I don't work in South Carolina but I'm from South Carolina. So, I came home with this position and I really appreciate the way that she just centered the voices of Southern folks. And just sitting on porches and just the ways that people talk in their folk ways and their life ways and everything. So Zora, I'm always going to ride for her first.

Royel Johnson:

Nice.

Felecia Commodore:

So its always my people, Their Eyes Were Watching God is my favorite book of all times so it's my heart. Southern Women Q, Frankie Beverly made, Southern Girl. Absolutely.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

So this last one, this is for all of you all. It may shake some tables.

Felecia Commodore:

Enter at your own risk.

Royel Johnson:

All right. J-H-E or R-H-E? Journal of Higher Ed or the Review of Higher Ed ? I want to acknowledge that this is ASHE sponsored podcast, so shout out to RHE but JHE or RHE?

Felecia Commodore:

Everybody's nervous.

Kevin McClure:

I have a thought.

Royel Johnson:

Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay.

Kevin McClure:

So for the record, I actually have no real opinion on this because they are obvious both run wonderful people and are folks working hard to bring us the best and brightest. But I will say that RHE remains kind of my white whale, in the sense that I've never been able to get anything in there.

And so, I have somewhat of a soft spot for JHE because I remember being early in my career, something on a whim and saying, "There's no way this is going to even be considered, either they'll treat it like a joke and kick it to the curb." And it was one of those times where you were seriously elated to get a revise and resubmit for something, because you were like, "Maybe I can do this, maybe I'm a real Ed scholar." And the feedback was substantive and it was kind.

And so, it was one of those times where actually it was an affirming moment and so if I had to pick one, I would go with JHE for that reason.

Felecia Commodore:

Shout out to affirming reviewers. Yes, we love that.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

I don't know if I can pick right now because I have an undercover review.

Felecia Commodore:

We get it, Jon.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

When this podcast comes out, it will be public.

Royel Johnson:

Abstain.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

So, here's the whole thing so at that time, please check it out.

Felecia Commodore:

Jon said, "Everyone is lovely."

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

Everyone's great, love on.

Royel Johnson:

Beautiful gowns.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

So for me, I have an eight-year-old son and so sometimes he just does the random, I don't know the answer, so I'll just...

Felecia Commodore:

I love it.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Because I honestly don't publish with either. I'm an underdog journal type person, right? So I feel like if we would just leverage the underdog journals and get our students to publish their-

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

They wouldn't be underdogs anymore.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

There it is. Tony says, "Support all journals."

Royel Johnson:

And that's that on that.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay. Thank you all. As we move forward and continue to ponder and probably judge some of your answers, I'm looking at you, Jon and the Cubs.

But we're going to go ahead and start our conversation. And so, we wanted to start off just asking you all to tell us a little bit about yourself and the work you've been engaged in and what Humanizing Higher Education means to you?

We'll start off with you, Jon. Why won't you share what your thoughts are?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

So, I'm on the tail end right now completing my dissertation, I am a policy analyst, so I'm hopeful for a fall defense here. But before getting back my PhD, I've worked in Higher Ed about 10 to 15 years here, mostly in sponsor programs and faculty development, I did a stint in Guatemala overseeing a nonprofit. And right now, I'm working at Loyola but I'm also a research associate at the University of Chicago in the school of social work.

And so it's interesting for me, when you ask what does Humanizing Higher Ed seem like to me? Is that, I think, I'm in an interesting spot right now of, I'm literally on, well, I do some consulting work for Virginia Commonwealth. And I'm on three different list serves of issues that happen on the national level or local level and how does each institution communicate that to their constituents? And so for example, Roe v. Wade, when that announcement came, I got emails within an hour from three very different institutions. And was excited, fun to critique the messaging behind that and what did that look like for students, faculty, and staff.

So, I think for me, I think, a lot of it's around really what needs to be at the center of it and communication. I think, a lot of that right now, where I think where I'm struggling with most of it is in these times is a lack of communication. And I think if folks knew what was going on and what's happened, they could maybe understand a little bit better. And I think, communication can go one way to come get folks engaged with the process. And really understanding how do we get here, right? So, I think that's kind of how I look at it right now and I think everyone's struggling right now.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

I agree. So I think, particularly the idea that there's this shared struggle, I think there's this shared exhaustion, people are tired I tell you. We run on a treadmill that just like we can't get to the stop button to slow it down and everything. But I guess, for me, this idea of humanizing and I talked about being in South Carolina and from South Carolina. And I always start that, because the sense of community rootedness, everything really always has to stay present and at the forefront for me, to remind me of why I'm doing this, right?

So I'm like, as you all said, I'm Associate Professor in University of South Carolina and I also run an aesthetic research center in the College of Education, is the Museum of Education. And I also serve in the grad school in a DEI role, which is largely what most of my work throughout my career has been. So, even the 10 years that I worked in student affairs before becoming a professor, I primarily worked in DEI in student affairs and cultural centers and everything.

And so, in part of that, I think, what drives a lot of that work is this centering people and that to me is a part of humanizing, so we use terms student centeredness and everything, whatever. But I think it's

really important to be people-centered in our work, because it's amazing to me how many meetings or administrative meetings I'm at sometimes. And I'm wondering, "When do people become these agents for the institution like that?" Where your focus is saving money for the institution? Or what I'm saying, for the benefit, everything is for the benefit of the institution and not necessarily for the people. And what would be best for the people, even if that might mean that the institution has to bend a little bit. And that's a different kind of mindset sometimes than how people choose to leave.

And then the other thing I think that comes with that, means that you have to see yourself as a person and not as a position and an agent, whatever. So it's like, it's okay and much of what drove the exhibit that we did at last year's ASHE conference on the pandemic and faculty and staff life, was about faculty and staff lives that they matter too. And that we need to understand that we need to see each other and tell our stories and that our stories matter and the stuff that we experienced matters. And it's okay for us to have fun, it's okay for us to be angry too.

Felecia Commodore:

Exactly.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

There's this quote that, "If you can be calm when all around you is chaos, perhaps you don't understand the situation." But I think, this type of push for people to be objective and to not, whatever, in our roles and positions in higher education. Or at particular institutions and everything is crazy, we are human beings.

And so if the institution or if the world is doing something, we have feelings about it and it's okay for us to have feelings about it. When it comes to this pandemic, we grieved, lost people, everything, it's okay for us to express those things and to admit those things and everything. So, it's also given ourselves permission to be people, to be human.

Felecia Commodore:

You know, you said something and it reminds me, I was in a conversation not too long ago thinking about generations, kind of younger generations rejection of institutions and so, we were having a dialogue about it.

And I was like, the question came up, "Can institutions be beneficial for people?" And my response was that, when institutions exist to serve people and create community, I think they can be beneficial, kind of organisms. But when it turns into a situation where people exist to serve the institution, I think, then we see that's the challenges that we see and the conflict that arises there.

Royel Johnson:

So, it's why I always struggle with the language of institutional agents. So, I appreciate the work of certain scholars and others who have written about the role of administrators, practitioners and being brokers of capital and connecting students to institutions.

So, what would it mean to be a student agent? Not an institutional agent, because what we're called to do in supporting students sometimes requires us to do things that are in conflict with the institution. And to be an agent of the institution versus an agent of the students, agents of people at a college university is a different sort of dispersive shift. I struggled with the language of institutional agents.

Kevin McClure:

There's also kind of interesting conversation just around the agency of institutions and some of the ways in which we inadvertently, kind of humanize or embody institutions when institutions by themselves don't have agency.

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Royel Johnson:

These people.

Kevin McClure:

And people that make up these organizations. And so, I've been in my own dialogue with myself around some of this conversation around, we can't count on institutions to love us back, so why do we pour ourselves into these institutions? And where I'm kind of at with this now and it comes back to how I'm thinking about Humanizing Higher Ed is.

I completely agree with that sentiment and we can't expect that institutions are going to love us back. But I do think that we can still expect something from ourselves and from the cultures that we are attempting to build at these organizations. And we can hold people accountable when the working conditions and cultures that have been created are toxic and are not treating people well.

So, I was just nodding my head kind of through everything that Jonathan and Toby had said so far in the sense of, I'm thinking a lot these days around, "What does it mean to will care institutions?" And I don't mean I think that the institutions themselves as entities are going to take care of us. What I'm thinking about is, kind of tossing out the window this idea that everything that we do, all of our labor ought to be funneled in the direction of institutional success and competitiveness.

And we need to be doing a much better job of paying attention to and caring for all of the people, up and down the hierarchy and across the organizational chart. And I think if we do that, if we build a caring culture for everybody, inevitably there is going to be organizational success down the road.

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Kevin McClure:

But if that's what's pushing us, if our sole focus is on the organization and loyalty to the organization and what we do to protect the institution, I think you are going to lose an awful lot along the way.

The other part that I think is really important around Humanizing Higher Ed for me at least, is trying to step back and think about a lot of the people and the labor that kind of goes invisible.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Kevin McClure:

And as I move forward in my own thinking on this, I want to try to do a much better job of capturing the folks that are just so central to the enterprise of higher education. Who are educators but whose work just does not even register often as we tell these narratives of organizational success.

So anyway, that's where I'm at with some of this around Humanizing Higher Ed and I came to this somewhat by accident and largely through the pandemic to be honest. But my background is in really thinking about organizations and organizational theory. And started off, that's right, Oregon gov and-

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Kevin McClure:

Started out studying privatization and academic capitalism and then, drifted into looking at broad access institutions and regional public universities. And have applied some of that organizational theory and governance to questions around the academic workplace, really just within the last three years.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

You make a good point there Kevin, thinking about building this community, right? Because I think, a lot of it is that when we think about how a lot of folks have been at these institutions for a long time, that we've seen this long-term loyalty from some senior administrators, right?

And I've heard it too many times to count of some of the language that will be set up like the institution owes you nothing and you owe nothing to the institution, right? I know I've heard that from several administrators and it's kind of like, "Is that real? Is that what we want out this system?" Because I didn't go to school for that. Isn't that why I've dedicated my career to it? I'm like really?

And I think that's why it's been the last couple of years, during COVID times that folks are exhausted and so some of it like-

Felecia Commodore:

Exhausted.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

That type of language gets into your head and you're like, "When do you call it, right?" Then we've seen many incredible faculty leave tenure track roles because they're burnt out and the institution has done nothing to retain them, to support them. And they'll say that they have but did they really?

It's a challenging time, right? It's kind of the shift that we're seeing and it's hard when some of, I don't want to use the term old guard. But some of this mentality of this culture shift that needs to happen that's happening in institutions.

Royel Johnson:

It's a perfect segue into the next question around the great resignation. So, there's so much conversation right now about what's happening, the sort of mass exodus of folks from various industries, including Higher Ed. What's happening in Higher Ed, such that people are leaving right now? I think you allude to some of the things; that fatigue, exhaustion and so forth. But what's happening in Higher Ed as it relates to the great resignation?

Kevin McClure:

I mean, we are in a moment where there is a lot of movement happening. So not all of it is people quitting Higher Ed altogether, some of that is happening, of course. And we've got an awful lot of people

who are shifting within their own institutions, looking for something else, looking for different opportunity. We've got people who are shifting to other universities or places adjacent to Higher Ed, where maybe they got a salary bump or more flexibility connected to the job.

And so, this is a moment and I hope it continues, of worker empowerment where folks feel as if they have more choices available to them and they're taking advantage of those choices. The movement itself creates some of those opportunities, right? So as people shift, jobs become opened and so people take a look at those. But all of that is kind of very much this current moment and it is certainly connected to the pandemic and a reevaluation of a lot of things in people's lives.

But what I've been trying to do is connect this moment to what I think is actually a much longer running story, which is that Higher Ed has not particularly paid attention to working conditions or working cultures for a very long time. We have just hoped, banked, relied upon folks coming and staying. I don't think that we have made a real serious push to be competitive, at least, compared to some other knowledge organizations in a world of talent acquisition and retention. And certainly, we've got long running problems connected to racism and sexism and not doing a particularly good job of ensuring that people are not completely consumed by work in pursuit of what is sometimes framed as a passion.

And so, I think what we are seeing is, not this just pandemic-induced spur of the moment change that people are pursuing. I think what we are seeing is that, there have been folks for a long time who have been questioning and wondering, "Is this as good as it gets?" And are now for a variety of reasons, seeing a way to put that questioning into action. I know that it creates a lot of uncertainty, turbulence, problems sometimes at institutions. But I actually think that this is maybe a good thing, that we need a shock to the system. And my big thing is that, we would be really dumb as a sector to not step back and to try to understand this and make some changes.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

So for me, I really feel like there's just this having saying this moment and it's this moment of like so much entrepreneurship happening across industries. And people just being able to pursue different ideas and having access to do that and freedom to do that and have a livelihood attached to it, whatever. But one of the things is, as he was talking about, it's been going on for some time, I think it's so true.

It's almost like this if you've been in a bad relationship or it's like not so healthy relationship, you know what I'm saying? And so it is not toxic where you're like, "I'm running." You know what I'm saying? It's abusive, I got to get out of it but it's just like it's really not that great. And you don't leave it, you just have a period where maybe that person leaves for a while, like they go on holiday extended, they go over to work for a long, they travel for work or they're gone for a minute. And you're like, "The house is so peaceful, like things are so great." That was the pandemic.

I think for a lot of people it's like, okay, I kind of like, "I don't have to deal with this.

Royel Johnson:

Don't have to go back to that, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Ridiculousness that when I was showing up for work every day and it's actually kind of peaceful, I kind of like this, that type of thing. And it's inspiring people to recognize that they don't have to deal with it. And I think, when you look at how competitive even some corporate industries are, when I first became a professor, I was really baffled at how much people were overworking themselves in the professorship. Because I was working in student affairs and so my interpretation was that, that was the area where everybody-

Felecia Commodore:

That was the area there was burn out for real.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

I'd move over and I'd have coffees and what I'm saying? And then, I'd come into these cultures where everyone's trying to come to work every day and I'm like, "Wait a minute. I didn't take a \$20,000 pay cut to-"

Felecia Commodore:

Say that again.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Come into and be policed in many ways. And it's like, "No. The benefit of this is the flexibility, is the lifestyle. And like why aren't we embracing it, right?" And I think this pause with COVID, even for a lot of those folks, allowed them to recognize that they could still be productive and it almost kind of forced them to engage that traditional, kind of faculty life. Where you're not necessarily coming into the office every day but you're still engaging in your work and everything.

But I'm like, when you have corporations whose work cultures are becoming known for being really fun and flexible, like pleasant places. And folks are making more money over there and they're paying people?

Royel Johnson:

And you ain't got to deal with the mess. Yes.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

We want you to have a global mindset, so we're going to pay for you to go on an international journey every, however many years. Why would you stay in this?

Royel Johnson:

Why choose violence?

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

If it's not fun, if it's not really pouring in fun and joy coming to a campus if-

Royel Johnson:

It's not humanizing.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

And I think that this is something you said Toby married with something Kevin said and thinking about the ways in which we normalize rejecting, like what was the benefit of doing this, right? I wanted the flexible schedule, I wanted to have time to think and do things. And then, the socialization and the culture tells you to reject that, in order to be productive, in order to be a notable person. Or someone who looks like they're doing what they're supposed to do, you have to overwork or do those things.

And I think about that also in relationship with, Kevin talked about invisible labor and the people we don't see who are working really hard. Which brings me, when I bring those two things together, to a question I have for Jon who mentioned to us that he is a graduate student who works.

And I'm curious because I feel like our graduate students, particularly in Higher Ed programs, our graduate students tend to work and they tend to be the glue that holds a lot of our institutions together. They're working on campuses, they're in offices and they're really important. But even in my own institution, we had to have conversation like, "Hey, you all are looking at our students as if they're just employees. And they're also students that need care in certain ways."

And so Jon, I'm curious from your perspective as a graduate student, how did you experience COVID impact graduate students? Not only as students but as students who are also campus employees?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

Real talk, so I had just started, went back to get my PhD seven months before COVID, the onset of COVID. And so I had in-person experience, it was great and then it was like, "Leave your office." I didn't go back for two years.

For me, somebody that worked full-time and then coming back, obviously, there's this assimilation and getting back into it and being a full-time student but then also being a research assistant. And it's interesting of looking at how it's progressive the last two years and it's interesting that this last spring, I had served on several different committees. And I kid you not, two different other faculty members from different departments on these committees would make jokes of like, "You're a junior faculty number right now. Everything you've been doing is a faculty staff."

I'm like, "You're not paying me."

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

This has been all been volunteer, like this is over, above and beyond. And I think that has been a big part of it too, that we have students that are part of it, that some of our cohorts have never met each other in-person until this last year. So, there's those barriers, right? And students, as we all know, just student mental health and there's just a lot of issues that are going on.

But a lot of universities have been utilizing their grad students as additional labor or workforce. And when a lot of that research associated with such as time given towards research and actually doing research and not programming stuff that the institution should be doing and paid more by a staff member. And I know it's not akin to one institution, right, it's all across the board and I think that's where it's been really struggling for students. And then, especially when students seeing transition and their faculty and their advisors have been changing several times and seeing different decisions overlooking at the institution it's like, "We study this stuff. A lot of us work at the institution."

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

People forget that part, right?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

It's like, this is our discipline. So we could tell you how to improve this if you asked or took our opinion or some of us work at the institution, it's like you treat us students. And when you ask us about decision-making and policy, then you treat us an employee when you want us to do the labor and work, so it's like, "What are we, right?"

And stop emailing me about the retirement plan, because I'm not eligible, save your postage, I don't need it anymore. So I think, now that, so what Toby and Kevin had said with taking now as a learning opportunity of fixing these structures that people transition out or a cohort graduates. How do you fix what we're doing to kind of steer the course back to where we want to be going?

And I know it's easier said than done but it's like a lot of these things, if you do one inch one way, all these other things need to trickle, right? That we can't just say, "We're going to change our enrollment practices because it's going to trickle everywhere else. To our funding allocations to our staffing of the faculty in these courses." But it's one inch one way makes everything else have to trickle and follow after.

And so, I think there's a lot of this conversation of some dehumanizing work that it's not the respect. And I think the big part of it too is that, we're expected to do all these things. But it's not the support for when I'm ready to launch and look at faculty roles, there's not systems that are in place other than my advisor who will take off a Saturday to meet with me because they're overworked at the institution. But they'll meet with me to talk about my dissertation, do job talk coaching with me on a Saturday, when he has his own family too. So it's-

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

So, he feels that pain and the commitment to the people and trying to build this culture but then, it's also feeling that too and how do you wrestle in those spaces. So, COVID only exacerbated this, right? I think, this existed before and similar experiences, right? But I think COVID and being remote for so long, just made these so obvious and the need to do some fixes.

Royel Johnson:

So, how do we fix it? What are the structural policies, practices that we ought to be thinking about to create better workplace conditions? And that offer protections for faculty, staff, and students?

There's been lots of conversations about unions and their role in this conversations about shared governance and the sort of fight between administrators and faculty members. What are some things that we ought to be thinking about that offer some protections?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

I think the first step, right, is we look at our policies and what's there, it's-

Felecia Commodore:

That's key. We probably should know what our policies are. I'm about to get on a soapbox so I'm going to step back down. Go ahead.

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

But if you think about it, we have some of these incredible, if we look at faculty staff who's expected to have their button to seat five days a week but our faculty can come at a different schedule, right? But it's how we're treating folks differently, right? And these things and graduate students can come in whenever they feel like it.

And so I think some of those things of actually meeting each kind of constituency of what group and what are our needs and what do they want in a workplace, right? We look at these organizations that are attractive, that allow remote work when they want to in-person exciting and fund benefits in other sectors. Well, we can do that too, there's no reason why we cannot.

So, I think a lot of it is looking at what are the structures that are in place, that are the current barriers but it's giving voice to people in those roles, right? Are you making a policy on remote work? And it's made at a dean level by each school or college. Did you actually ask the people that this affects, are they on that committee and helping write that policy? Most of the times, that's true, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Do you ask that higher education scholars at your institution about things like governance and decisions?

Royel Johnson:

Well, you would have to see them as experts.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, right because we don't just-

Kevin McClure:

This should have been burned before I think, sounds like.

Felecia Commodore:

I have a lot of little soapbox, I have a soapbox city that I just, it's just my way of thinking.

Kevin McClure:

Jonathan, as I was hearing you talk, one of the things that I thought about is the fact that, one of the challenges, of course, that we've seen over the last couple of years in the face of some of these

challenges. And there being pushback from higher education workers is, a fair amount of refusal or it's some refusal, at least. And faculty that are trying to figure out what are the boundaries that I'm going to set and saying no to more things. And I certainly had my own fling with refusal for a period of time in there but what I ultimately came kind of back around to is the fact that, "If it's not me who is going to be part of change, then how exactly is this going to happen?"

It's not going to be the exploited grad students or the administrative assistants that need really need to push some of these conversations. It really is folks that are in a position to be listened to, I think, in a different way. And so, I'm now kind of moving in the direction of those of us that feel like we are in a position to be able to do something, need to be pushing in a different direction. We need to actually be pushing more towards a strategic set of yeses that are going to help the cultures at our institutions in a different way.

And what that means, by the way, is that we've got to say no to some other's stuff, including we may have to give up on the prestigious journals, we may have to give up on that post. So ASHE, don't get mad at me but we may have to give up on that position within a professional association. Or we may have to check our ego at the door and say, "This stuff that obviously brings us recognition and reward, is not actually bringing about the type of change in a lot of cases at our institutions that we were advocating." And so, I'm trying to think a little bit differently.

Felecia Commodore:

That means we also have to shift reward structures at institutions?

Kevin McClure:

It would certainly be helpful if our organizations helped us with this, right? So one of the other big things that I've been talking about a lot is, these are organizational problems, they require organizational solutions. And so, what that means is that, I'm not individually going to move the dial on a lot of these things. I'm going need to get on board, a larger group of people through governance systems or through collective organizing. And I'm going to need to get managers and leaders to understand what we were talking about and to believe them to us that these are. So, I know that many of you will agree with this and Felicia, I know you in particular will agree with this but we need better leaders.

Felecia Commodore:

He said it you all. I'm just agreeing but he said it.

Kevin McClure:

Somebody tweeted at me recently, that all many of these morale problems are not just morale problems, they're bad leadership problems and it's true, I mean, that is very much the case. And so, that means by the way that, it's not going to just magically happen, we need to build systems that are going to encourage people to learn and grow as they are stepping into leadership roles.

Because too often, we just have people that step into these roles and then, they're in them for a period of years. And we equate experience with knowledge and skills and then, they just move on to a new leadership position. And that's just not going to work, its not going to be good enough moving forward.

So, the other thing I think we all have to be prepared for is that there A, is going to be a lot of pushback because there are a lot of people who, as I said, do not believe that these are problems. That we're very happy with the way things were and were successful-

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Royel Johnson:

They benefit from it.

Kevin McClure:

They benefited from it, it worked for them.

Felecia Commodore:

It worked for them.

Kevin McClure:

And so, this is going to be a process and is going to take time. And there is no guarantee of success because of some of those challenges. And so, that's why I'm really hoping that we can get and I include myself in this, so we can all sit down and say, "What is my place in this conversation? And what are the steps that I can take that are going to bring about concrete, helpful changes in the spaces that I'm walking?"

Felecia Commodore:

And I'm so glad you brought the leadership thing because I think two things come to mind. One is, what you said about needing better leaders, a conversation I often have with Dr. Jehni Robinson, shout out to her, as we talk about leadership. Is that there's an assumption there, because people go through these 'validating kind of processes' in higher education, that they know how to lead. So because they're tenured or they had a certain position, that they know how to lead. And so, we just throw them in positions and the reality is they don't know how to lead at all. And so, they're just moving around trying to figure things out on the fly and we see what the impact of that is.

I think, the second thing is, as we are moving into a different era and understanding and manifestation of higher education, particularly in the US, that we may need to rethink like what leadership is. And diversify our understanding of leadership models and leadership kind of actions and what leadership is, who leadership looks like, all of these things.

And so, that brings me to you, Dr. Jenkins-Henry. From your perspective as an expert in DEI in higher education, how has the pandemic challenged institutions in the areas of inclusion and belonging and diversity. And how can we use this moment to shift our thinking, regarding humanizing work conditions for higher education workers?

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

But I think, the biggest thing is, like everyone's saying is to listen to people and ask them what they want and what does an inclusive environment even look like? What does it feel like for you? And having those conversations and then, trying to truly recreate that. I remember the first study that I did, as a faculty member, well and really my dissertation was around understanding what culture was. So, we're saying we're leading cultural centers, well then how are you doing that if you don't understand how they even define culture? And how they see its utility? And how do we recreate something that we don't even know or understand? And we're just basing it on what it is for us? Or that type of thing, whatever.

So, I think, we're going to have these conversations and be willing to hear what people have to say and not just, so I always say this thing about, it's not just about letting them in, it's about letting them in and let them live. So, let me live, let me live in the way that I'm used to live. If my sensibility is to, I like some loudness in my environment and your little quiet campus, you might need to do something with that.

But that's the reality like, if I look at my home space, why would I ever want to leave the cozy, comfortable, aesthetically pleasing environment to come to your stale institutional space? And I'm supposed to be inspired? And this is where I'm supposed to write?

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

Innovate, you know what I'm saying? No. So we really have got to be open to changing things in some real, concrete ways. And whether it's policies, whether it's some paint, you know what I'm saying? It might be a lot of different things or strategies that we have to take, that you would be amazed at how it would change, just some flexibility and fun and you know what I'm saying?

I keep saying it but it's like nobody wants to be in spaces that sucks the life out of them, particularly to be in the business of creation. And so, I think like even understanding that, as Kevin was talking about organizations and stuff like that, what do organizations, that spark that type of creation and innovation and energy and everything. What are some of the things that they do? And guess what? We might be able to learn from other types of environments, not to hold so steadfast to higher education or colleges or universities, feeling the way that they've always felt. They might need to feel different.

Royel Johnson:

My colleague and friend Dwuana Brad uses the term dignity-affirming, to refer to the kinds of policies and practices that we need to reimagine dignity and humanity-affirming practices within in higher education.

Felecia Commodore:

That's good.

Kevin McClure:

I'm glad that you had mentioned thinking about other spaces and other organizations, just because there are folks that sometimes respond to my writing and say, "Listen, you all think that the private sector is wonderful and its not. It's got problems too and you don't realize how good you got it or we've got it in academia or in Higher Ed." And I guess, the way that I've been thinking about this is, first of all, the grass isn't greener all the time anywhere. You could make a shift to another institution and things are worse or just exactly the same, it's just at a different place. And similarly, you can move to somewhere outside of Higher Ed and it's still got problems.

But I do think that we would be really foolish not to look at other knowledge organizations, whether they're nonprofits or companies and say, "These are places that are people-centered and they are productive and folks are satisfied there." And they are managing to accomplish their goals in a way that doesn't absolutely run through people or isn't predicated on the idea that you've got one group of people that gets all of the benefits and one group of people that gets absolutely nothing, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Kevin McClure:

Because that's how a lot of colleges are operated right now. And so, why not look to those places and try to get a sense of, what could be adopted? And even just as a small scale experiment, give it a try. And there are people who get really worried that somehow going to corporatize the university and I'm like-

Felecia Commodore:

I mean, they already doing it.

Kevin McClure:

We are already privatizing it by ourselves.

Felecia Commodore:

That's what I was saying, they're already privatizing.

Kevin McClure:

And I'm not advocating for that, I've got of a lot writing that would oppose to that idea. But if there are some ideas elsewhere that will help us get to a place where we are doing a better job of humanizing the work that we do, why not give that a try?

Felecia Commodore:

And I'm a country girl, I grew up in The Middle Of Nowhere, Maryland, it's really wonderful. Not really but anyway, that's a story for another day.

But what you said Kevin, I always find interesting people are like, "Well, you think the grass is greener on the other side but it's not." The grass is greener where you water it.

And so, if we think about it in that way, how about we make it easier for us to water the grass, right? And so, it's not so much that we're saying like, "It's so much better over in the private sector." But there are some things going on in other sectors and other organizations, that are allowing people to be able to make their grass greener. And so, why don't we take a step back and thinking to your point, to think about, are there things we can do to make the water flow a little better, so that we can have the green grass?

Royel Johnson:

Can we get a sprinkler system?

Felecia Commodore:

No offense, spigot, something.

Royel Johnson:

So, as we wrap up the conversation, I am wondering how are you finding and or creating joy these days in your own life?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

Professionally?

Royel Johnson:

Personally and professionally?

Jonathan (Jon) Okstad:

I think for me, it's been just really important to find what are my joys. And now that we're able to do things that maybe we weren't able to do for a couple years, so traveling and exploring, so not realizing that. And then, being okay with rest and being like, "I don't have to be 12 different things going on." Because as a grad student, you have 12 different jobs and you're trying to make rent and keep living your life and so, I think there's that.

And then, I think also that personally but also then professionally, I think trying to find that balance of what is my professional life and what's my personal? Because I think, in Higher Ed, our personal is professional and our professional is personal. So we're in this thing that it's like, "Well, what do you do with your free time? To read but what are you reading? Is it always academic? Is it always related to these deliverables that you're working on?"

So I think, what's the joy of my personal life and then professional is, I think just continuing to build a strong professional community that I enjoy being with, right? We can hate the way the system's messed up, we can get frustrated with decision-making that had happened at the institution. But together, we can have community and a warm culture together and we're kind of weathering a storm together.

So, I think to me, it's just trying to find community in and out of the academy, I think has been really important. And has it allowed me to start and finish a PhD during a pandemic? Never thought I'd ever do that in my life but here we are.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

I think for me, I don't know. So I like an eight-year-old that's so super busy with football and basketball and all this stuff, whatever. So I'm like into this, I'm chauffeuring him around in my free time so, I guess, that can bring some people to some joy.

Royel Johnson:

Some people.

Felecia Commodore:

Does it bring you joy? Looks like the joy is still out.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

And I share it because it's not like I'm just working all the time. But even in some of the other things, responsibilities that we have in our personal lives, that's work too.

Felecia Commodore:

Second shift.

Toby Jenkins-Henry:

It's a different kind of word but it's not necessarily leisure and everything. But I think, in some moments now, because I am also dealing with, still grappling with, I have serious health issues and so I'm still wear a mask and not doing different things or whatever.

So, I'm still finding joy in binge watching TV shows or just having time to redo my playlists on my phone, so that I can enjoy it, because some things I just never had time to do over the last couple years or whatever. So, I'm trying to learn how to not centralize, I used to travel a lot in my joy, whatever life had to be, these big amazing type of experiences, whatever. And I think one of the things COVID has helped me to do, is to appreciate the joy in just the smallest little things that are just giving you some space to enjoy nothingness or whatever, if that's even a thing.

Felecia Commodore:

That's great.

Kevin McClure:

So yes, I relate very much to personal life, sometimes just being more work. My children are not sleeping a lot right now for a strange reasons and they're a lot, so I'm just kind of tired. But apart from just my general tiredness all the time, I have gotten a lot of joy just from being able to be part of conversations like this, where I've gotten to meet a lot of people.

And as I said, I am kind of new to this particular conversation and what it means for me is like, I have so many questions and I feel like a learner again. And there's so much that I feel like I need to get to better understand and somebody questions out there that we need to kind of collectively tackle that. As someone whose brain kind of works and sparks, this is still very much a moment of discovery for me and so, that's been really, really exciting.

And being able to just connect with other people as I've been writing and thinking about these things and hearing about their experiences has been unlike anything in my career so far. And so, I'm getting a lot of joy from that.

Royel Johnson:

That's beautiful.

Felecia Commodore:

And I'm going to say, that one of the things that brings me joy is Kevin's Twitter and so, I think it's a tie between-

Royel Johnson:

I see some snaps in the studio.

Felecia Commodore:

A tie between Kevin's Twitter and Brandon Kent Well's hard sell sale reviews on TikTok. But also, this conversation has brought me joy.

Royel Johnson:

So much joy.

Felecia Commodore:

And it's been really great for us to think through, like the challenges of those of us who are working in this system, that we are so actively trying to make better for more people and more accessible for more people. And so, I want to thank you all-

Royel Johnson:

Thank you.

Felecia Commodore:

For coming and joining for in this conversation, for being candid and open and brilliant. And I'm sure our listeners are going to walk away with a lot of things to think about in this show itself, so really thank you so much.

Royel Johnson:

So grateful for sharing your time today.

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you to our guest Dr. Kevin McClure, Dr. Toby Jenkins-Henry and Jon Okstad for joining us today and making us think about, what it looks like to make a more humanizing higher education workplace, in a world forever changed by COVID-19.

At the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called Scholar Soundtrack, as we reflect on what musical selections bring in our minds, as we think about the day's conversation.

The song that came to mind today was Understanding by Xscape because really, we could change and accomplish so much if we would just listen to the needs and knowledge of those on the ground and in the trenches, making our institutions run day after day.

Well, that was today's song for our Scholar Soundtrack. You'll be able to find a playlist of these songs, along with the syllabus for today's episode and all of the episodes in the ASHE Presidential Podcast series and there's still more to come.

Royel Johnson:

We'll be back next week for another exciting conversation about Humanizing Higher Education. I promise you, you don't want to miss it. Till then, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felicia.

Royel Johnson:

Until next time, keep it human.

Felecia Commodore:

Keep it human.