

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Greetings ASHE family and welcome back to season four of the ASHE Presidential Podcast where this year our theme is the bend in the arc. And shout out to our sponsors, The Gates Foundation and LeadersUp.

I'm your co-host, Royel Johnson, Associate Professor of Higher Education and Social Work at the University of Southern California. And I have the privilege of working with my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Hi, everyone. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore. I'm an associate professor of higher education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. And we are excited to be back for another season of the ASHE Presidential Podcast. We really missed you all. We really did, whether you believe that or not.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

We really did.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

But there's been so much that has happened since we've last been in your ears, and so we're going to talk about that today. There's been some great things, some exciting things, but there's also been some things that have really challenged us as individuals, as institutions, as a society, and also as a field of study. And so we're here in Denver for another ASHE Annual Meeting and Convention. Shout out to Denver because we got to see the Northern Lights last night.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Oh, cool. Yes. Yes.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

They're really gorgeous.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Wow, wow.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

So we're here in Denver and as a field, we're going to wrestle with the various issues and happenings in higher education and the world at large. And we're going to more deeply explore the theme that Royel shared, the bend in the arc. Throughout this season, we're going to reflect on where higher education has been, contemplate where it's going and unpack what actually lies in the bend in the arc.

So, we hope you were able to join us in episode one where we got to talk to our awesome president, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher. And we're about to keep the party going with episode two, where we're going to discuss curriculum as contested terrain. It's going to be a great and insightful conversation. So, buckle up, we're about to go in.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, join us in welcoming our special guest, Dr. Jamie Lester, who is Vice Dean for Academic Affairs at Johns Hopkins University, and Dr. Brian McGowan, who is full professor now at American University where he previously served as associate director in the Center for Teaching, Research and Learning.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yes, yes.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Welcome.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Thank you.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Welcome.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It's so wonderful to have you all on the podcast this year.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Happy to be here.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Thank you for having me. Great to be here.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, we kick off every episode of the podcast with a game. We typically do this or that. Sometimes we do questions that need answers. So today we're going to do questions that need answers just to break the ice a little bit.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yes, a little QT&A.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, this question is for you, Brian.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Okay.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

If you could swap lives with any celebrity for a week, who would it be and why?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I feel like I know this answer.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Who would it be and why? You know something? For those who know me, I love to sing. I love music. I even sing in my classes, John Legend.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

John Legend. Interesting.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

John Legend.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I had two people in mind. John Legend was one of them.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Who's other one?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Beyonce.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

John Legend.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Why John?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah. John, I think about his philanthropic efforts. I think about his commitment to justice and community, but his voice. I think as a voice major, he's someone whose voice I... I mean, if you hear me sing, I have that raspy tone as well. I just love it.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, maybe we'll get a little bit of Brian in there singing.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

We'll see. We'll see. Let's just see how this goes.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Okay.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

But yeah, John Legend. Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And shout out to University of Pennsylvania because John Legend is an alum, so go Quakers.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

And he just did, it was the anniversary of one of the albums. He performed at the Hollywood Bowl.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Get Lifted.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah. In LA recently, a couple weeks ago. So okay, so John Legend.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

John Legend all day.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Okay, Felecia.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Okay, Jamie, we're to you. What superpower would you not want to have?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Ooh, that's a good one.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It's a twist.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

That's a good one. I would say mind reading. I don't really think I want to know what everybody thinks-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I agree.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... about me all the time. As a woman and as an administrator and my other job as a professor, but most of my time is spent as an administrator. I don't think I really want to know what people think about me most times, yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I think that's right.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It's probably for our better, for our mental health, right?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I also am not sure I want to know what my kids think about me all the time.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And also I think I'd be a little perturbed if I thought people were thinking about substantive things and then I found out the whole time they're like, "Oreos are really tasty."

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Exactly. You're saying something really brilliant in class. They're like, "How many minutes do I have left in this class?"

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Yeah.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Okay, Brian, one more. If your life were a movie, what would the title be?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

If my life were a movie, Unapologetically Authentic.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Come on.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Ooh.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I like that, yeah.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

We're going to snap for that, right?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, we like it, we like it.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 00:05:34] to know that this is who I am and I lead with heart and I'm going to tell it like it is. I'm very direct and blunt, but I also have a big heart. So, Unapologetically Authentic.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I would watch that movie.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Tune in. It's coming. [inaudible 00:05:45] just be you.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I'd definitely watch it. I'd definitely watch it. Jamie, question for you. If you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Oh, gosh.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

It's always a good question.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

That's a great one. That's a great one. Oh, do I have to pick just one?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Give a couple.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I mean, if you want a dinner party?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

[inaudible 00:06:12] at the dinner table?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Why not?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Any historical figure? Oh, I'm not sure I'm going to have a definitive answer for that. So, I have an undergraduate degree in women's studies from University of Michigan. And I think back to the era of the suffragettes. I think back to the civil rights movement. I think back to what it meant for...

And so I would love to have a dinner with multiple women of those eras to talk with them about how they overcame all of the challenges in their activism, both their resilience as individuals. But also how they worked the system, if you will, to give many of us many of the rights that we have today that are under different forms of challenge, but that we have today. So, I'd love to hear how they did it.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Huh, I like it.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

That's very cool. Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Okay.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, we're going to jump into the conversation and unless you've been living under a rock, and honestly, I wouldn't blame you because it's probably much safer.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

A rock sounds really good.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Right. But there is a full on attack on higher education, right? And education generally, K-12 and higher ed. And part of that attack has been around curriculum, what is taught, whose histories, whose knowledges are valued. We saw that take place primarily at the K-12 level with the 1619 Project and the supposed CRT that's being taught in math classrooms all around the country.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

It's not.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Exactly.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

But we've also seen it creep into higher education and though we have supposed academic freedom, the state level bills that we've seen pass, the chilling effect that it's having on conversations in the classroom. We want to set the context for the conversation in that way. So, I'll let Felecia jump into the first question.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Sure. So, as Royel mentioned, curriculum is being politicized right now in ways that we haven't seen in many years. Some would say we haven't really seen this since like McCarthyism. And so my question is with book bans, legislative threats, gag orders, all the different-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 00:08:31]

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... efforts around controlling what is taught at higher education institutions. How are you all really seeing this unfold where you sit in the positions that you're in and what's keeping you up at night when you think about this?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah. I would say we're seeing it at every level. I think about different stakeholders in higher education. So at the student level, I genuinely feel students aren't getting a full education. They're getting a partial education. They're not getting it at its richness.

Faculty are afraid. There's fear tactics. There's a level of trepidation to even teach and be in the classroom. I think about ... And when I think about curriculum, even staff in this conversation, because I don't think we always talk about staff in terms of curriculum, how are we even defining that, because I think about the co-curricular as well.

I think about staff members who are thinking about compliance and balancing that with conviction, right? Even on the front lines and just broader just policy, we see the weaponization of curriculum for political gain. So, that's what I'm seeing in my seat.

In terms of what's keeping me up at night, full transparency, I think a lot about health, wellness, and rest-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Good, good for you, yes.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

... so I'm going to reframe that. I want to reframe that because at night I'm not thinking about that, but when I am rested and I'm up, what keeps ... I think about sustainability a lot. For the folks that are doing this work, how we be sustained and how we are helping institutions resist what is happening.

I think it's so easy to just lean in and I'm just encouraging folks to lean out and to resist. So, I'm thinking about rest as resistance. I'm thinking about not should we be doing this, but how to do it. I think we need to be thinking about strategy and what does that look like in this climate.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Thank you.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Yeah. I mean, you know what? It's interesting because I think when I talk about higher education in any space that I'm in, I often try to unpack the diversity of higher education. So, when I think about this particular question, I think about the different variables that come into play for the individual institution, for administrators, for faculty members, and the environment and the context and how this is impacting them. So, public institutions, for example, my former institution, Georgia Mason University, has been very much in the news for what they've experienced-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Oh, absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... through the governor, the board, and all the complexities there. That's very different, for example, than what I experience now at a private institution like Johns Hopkins. It's also very different what state you're living in. It matters how boards are appointed, the governor appointed, or they elected by the institution or chosen by the institution. It does matter if you're public or private in this space, and it very much matters what state that you're in.

So, I think that we have to imagine that we, especially as a field and discipline, that we have to unpack what the different impacts are in the different institutions, and then what are the strategies that can help our faculty be effective in this environment, because not all strategies are going to be effective or even needed in every environment.

So, what keeps me up at night in the institution I'm in and the role that I'm in is not, thankfully because of where I work, the governmental, whether it be state or local, the governmental influence on the institution, but really whether or not faculty are self-censoring. And so I've had faculty come up to me and say, "I'm redesigning a course. Do I have to remove DEI content from my course?" And I say consistently, "Please do not self-censor. As an institution, we are not asking faculty to take those actions."

And until the institution makes those decisions, as we follow the institutional guidance, that is not what's being expected of you. So, that's what keeps me up at night because there's what we're required to do, there's what we think we need to do, and then there's aggressive compliance.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It's interesting to hear you reflect about the different contexts that matter, right? So the state context, the institutional context, I'm at a private institution, but I still increasingly see faculty self-censoring in a way where we hear the word capitulate, capitulate, capitulate, like faculty are afraid to have conversations.

And there was a recent story in the news, maybe last week, where a picture of a slide goes viral where it was examples of explicit forms of white supremacy, more implicit forms and-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Oh yeah, I saw this.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

... they were fired, right? That the professor was taken out of the classroom. Now, this wasn't a tenure track professor, but still another example of how the classroom is being politicized in a way.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And I think to that point, I think, because I've been wrestling with this myself, not so much the self-censoring, but preparing for if something I said in class or taught is misconstrued.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Or recorded.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, because I think classrooms have become heightened surveillance spaces in ways we haven't seen before, because of technology, because of social media, and especially bad actors in social media who put things out of context and things like that. And so I think that's a extra layer of labor as a faculty

member and mental gymnastics that I don't know that when I started, I was thinking about as much as I am now, but now I even say in my class like, "If Big Brother is listening, because I'm also not sure there aren't mics in the class."

But I feel like faculty, there's this feeling of being constantly watched. And I want to say that I think marginalized communities have always had faculty who are part of those communities always thought about that. But I think this is in a different way when it comes to what we're teaching, not just who we are.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

I appreciate that as well, because I also, in addition to where you work, I also think a lot about who you are. So think about identity, like my gender, my sexual orientation, my race, my belief systems. I think about all of those intersections as well in this conversation, because who you are and what you're teaching as well, those things in tandem, we have to think about both of those things.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

When I was at Penn State, group of Black women professors in the College of Liberal Arts used to complain about the kinds of comments that they would get from students, and the teaching at the end of the year, like, "I really love that dress that you wore." Or, "I love when you wear your hair like this." So, based on who you are, you're already being surveilled-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

... and politicized in a way, and this context only exacerbates that kind of scrutiny in ways, to your point, disadvantages of folks who live at the intersection of multiple minorities. Next question I want to ask you, what do you think is the most dangerous thing about these attacks on inclusive curriculum in the name of intellectual diversity? That's some new language that we're seeing people lean into, and what do we lose when we stay quiet in this moment?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, I'd like to reframe the question of that.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah, sure.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And I'd like to reframe it because I think this is a critical moment of reflection for higher education, and I think we've started to see that. I think there is a ... When I think back to ... I'm thinking way back to my days as a graduate student, and as I just said, I feel like a dinosaur.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

[inaudible 00:16:06] way back.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I'm like a dinosaur in the discipline now, right?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Is that the 20 years?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Oh, 20 years is when you become a dinosaur in the discipline. My joke is that I walk around ASHE like a T-Rex. I'm a dinosaur, like a little arm. But I'm still young, of course.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

But I think I was a grad student, and I read a chapter out of a book. I don't even remember the title of the book by Amy Gutmann, who was Penn President.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Former president.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Penn again, right?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Exactly. We keep plugging Penn. And that was the first time as a grad student that I read a very thoughtful piece that connected the idea of a democracy to the critical nature of higher education as an institution.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Sure.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And so part of what the conversations I've been having, and I think that we as a discipline can do this, we as an association can do this, we can do this in small groups, in large groups, it can be facilitated, not facilitated, is really think about what role do we play in a deliberative democracy. And where have we as an institution either gone too right, too left, not to use political terms, but gone in one way or another, with any fever that has led to us having a moment, a role, in what it means to be in a post-fact world.

I mean, we live in a world where everything is a social media snippet, what is credible evidence, what is credible research? Those are questions that we have not necessarily faced before as a sector and as a critical part of our democracy. So, I'd like to reframe it a bit.

I'm not suggesting that there isn't danger to the kinds of attacks in our curriculum. I think there certainly is. I think it can limit what our students learn. I also think there's an opportunity, and this speaks to the last questions, for our faculty to have conversations around how do we help our students understand the different perspectives that they may have with each other in the classroom, but certainly that they are facing as they go out in the world into jobs, into careers, and how do we help them learn to engage

in professional, just polite, critical, constructive dialogue that helps to educate others around what is credible evidence.

I think if we, as institutions, can get back to that, get back to that space, while layering in the critical knowledge that we have around diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, etc., I think we will be better serving our democracy. And I think we can lead in that space, but we have to lead from what does it mean to be educators and what does it mean to educate what is a democracy that is, quite frankly, under attack right now.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

When I think about this question, intellectual diversity, I think about multiple ways of knowing, valuing differing opinions and perspectives. I think about the research that has been in student affairs for a long time-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

A long time.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

... about difficult dialogue work. I mean, we've been thinking about these things, you know what I'm saying? Thinking about what does it mean to promote bravery in the classroom space, right? So, all of these things, like civility, I think a lot about civic engagement in this climate, like dialogue across difference.

I may not agree with you, but we can talk and learn from one another, right? The hallmark of higher education when you think about academic freedom is allowing space for those types of conversations. And we've lost that. And I just think the space that we're in right now, if we're not going to continue to be down that path, and we are not down that path right now in any way, shape, or form.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

But your point around intellectual diversity, it reminds me when all lives matter. Yes, we know that all forms of diversity is important, but it's the fact that not all folks have opportunities for equitable kinds of contributions for their perspectives to be valued and respected. So, it's almost like intellectual diversity is being weaponized as a strategy for maintaining the status quo.

To your point, student affairs has always been a leader and creating space for difficult dialogues-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

... and thinking about inter-group dialogues and strategies for groups across identities. You were going to say...

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

So, I think with this, because I was just having a conversation with someone the other day about this diversity of thought phrasing-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yes, that's what I...

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... and intellectual diversity. And I think there is, and this kind of pairs with what Jamie was saying, I think we have to be bold enough to reclaim phrases. Because if we think about it, these phrases have been put out by a certain group that has a certain ideology and they're not what they claim to be.

And it's crafty, it's crafty language that can be used a particular type of way. And I think what I see as an opportunity for us as scholars is to be scholars and to be creative and think about, okay, we know what the intent is here. This is maintaining a status quo, but how can we use that with the intellectual capacity that we have to actually foster intellectual diversity?

And I do think that, not to start to sound like I'm crapping on the academy, but I think a lot of us got comfortable with just teaching canonical things, just teaching what we thought students should know, and we haven't had an external push to be creative in how we present information. And I do think this kind of diversity of thought movement is forcing us to have to rethink, how do in a post-fact world, do I present information that I know you're going to need as future scholars, as future practitioners, how do I present this in a way that does push you to think beyond what I think you should know?

And especially when we're now, by the time I teach graduate students, these are students that in K through 12, were taught to the test, right?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Were taught to learn things, to regurgitate them, to repeat them. We have to push and be creative in making them think, and not just think how we want them to think, but to think. And so, that's something I've been really thinking about in my classes.

There's a line in my syllabus where I say like, "You don't have to agree with the professor and the class is probably better if you don't." And it's really to push. And I have an exercise now where I like push students to debate a topic, and I assign them a side. So, a lot of them end up having to debate something they don't believe.

And it's really interesting to watch it happen, but what I say to them is, you have to be prepared for what the counter argument is to make a good argument. So, these are the ways that I look at how can we reclaim what we know is being used to control or squelch the curriculum and be creative as scholars in flipping it on its head.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

It's the opposing views. I think back to, I designed a course, I don't know 10 years ago or so when I was at George Mason, and it was effectively an education theories course and the students wanted it. I was really excited to create it. I co-created it with a group of students.

And I think back now, and I very unapologetically had three weeks of critical race theory, very unapologetic, let me be clear, I would still teach three weeks of critical race theory, let me be clear. What I didn't have then, and what I would have now are the YouTube videos, the readings, the artifacts on the-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

[inaudible 00:24:11]

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... oppositional views. That's where I think, I'm going back 10 years, I went wrong, because I gave them the tools, the skills, the language, the knowledge to speak about from the very foundation of critical race theory all the way to its application in a variety of settings and as an org scholar, mostly organizations, but I did not give them the tools and skills, the language, etc., to engage in those conversations, those sometimes very challenging dialogues in, well, Thanksgiving coming up, at Thanksgiving table or in their organization or at a dinner party, any other setting that they were in.

So, I think for me, that's where I think we can reclaim this moment and redefine our role in society in support of a democracy by, one, helping to train our students to opposing views, two, to have research that's credible and to define credibility.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Credibility.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yes.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

There is good [inaudible 00:25:10].

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Can co-op it, yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Because right now I think it's define credibility. And also, I think where we as institutions and scholars, and I'll be self-critical as well, is that we have also not always thought about how we do research to impact policy, whatever level that policy may be, local school districts, state offices, all the way to the feds. And because we haven't done that, because there's times we have done very niche research, let's be honest, I've done it too. We've all studied the three students at the one very unique institution. We've all done it, right?

And you know what? Those were great studies and I read them and I ... And we have not always been good about saying to others as a discipline, "What is it that you need to know-"

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's it.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

"... when you are making critical policy decisions, when you're at the table and you need to understand what the research says and why it's credible to make those decisions, to engage in those dialogues at state offices, in the capital, etc.," we have not created those links. And I think we can do that as institutions and as a discipline, but we need to be really, really deliberative about it.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, both of your comments made me think about how important faculty development is in this moment also.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Huge.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

And I know both of you all have interacted in that space, but to your point about like a post-truth era, right? What does it mean to prepare faculty to engage with students who are inundated with falsehoods about education, about race, about identity, who are leveraging AI and hallucinations through AI, that they bring those things to the classroom as beliefs about truth. How do we prepare faculty in this current moment to tackle the range of things that students are bringing-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 00:27:01]

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Brian has all the answers.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

And you know it, and I wish I would [inaudible 00:27:04] have a lot more money in my pocket if I did. Seriously, I wish I had the answer.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Turn up the volume. Turn it up, turn it up.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

It really makes me think about ... So, we've also been having conversations about pedagogy sitting here, so not just what we're teaching, but how to teach it. And I really appreciate that. It makes me think about Geneva Gay's work and made me think about Gloria Ladson-Billings's work, cultural responsiveness and teaching and pedagogy.

In our classroom spaces, I think the solution is around that. I think we have the formula. I think how are we creating environments that are emancipatory in classroom that's ethical, that's moral, like how are we teaching for those types of outcomes? And I think that's what we need to be thinking about, these outcomes, and how are we designing to meet those outcomes.

So, it's like this universal design, this backwards approach. That's how I think is one of the solutions, but we need to hit this in multiple ways. But in terms of pedagogy, we must center it in all of our efforts.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

But I consistently hear from faculty that they don't feel prepared to have some of these conversations.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And they're not-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

And we want the classroom to be-

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... they're not prepared.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Right, they're not.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, we want the classroom to be the space where we can have difficult dialogue, but some of the faculty aren't even comfortable with engaging in...

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I'll go a step further, right?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Let's do this.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I'm about to... I'm tenured. So, I have to remind myself of that. So, I think when you talk about students dealing with all these falsehoods or various opinions that may or may not be rooted in truth-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Sure.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... You make the assumption that the faculty are going to do the same thing.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And this is something I experienced during the George Floyd situation. We had started having dialogue at our institution around police brutality and Black men and Black people and police deaths or deaths through police force. And some of the faculty were like, "That's just not true." And there's a part of you that's like, "Wait, what?" Right?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

But I think that's good to know, because if we're talking about how do we get faculty to navigate this, I think we first have to ask ourselves... Be honest about that faculty are on a spectrum of beliefs-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Sure. Absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... about multiple truths and what is truth and what is not truth. I mean, even down to how we view methodologies. Like I used to teach a qualitative methods course and the first thing I would do was ask my students on the first day, "How many of you think qualitative research is a bunch of malarkey?"

And half the class would raise their hands. Why? Because their advisor told them that qualitative research is in real research. And so I think we have to face that reality head on and not always see it as something coming from the outside in-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Sure. But inside.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

But sometimes it's stuff coming from the inside, and it's all over. And so So, this idea of hitting things from many points, I think that is something we have to think about. And I do think we're very conditioned in higher ed to think about problem solving in linear ways. If we do this in intervention, then we'll get this outcome.

And a lot of times it's we have to do this intervention, then we have to do some educating over here, and then we have to do some restructuring over here, all at the same time. But I think it's important for us to be honest that everyone's not on the same page.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Which is ironic, right? Because of the perspectives that people have about higher education is liberal indoctrination that you would think that all faculty-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And that's not true.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 00:30:46]

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I can't even get the students to read the syllabus. And I don't know how you think I can indoctrinate anybody.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

But that's a really important reflection. And I've thought a lot about this in my role in that at the end of the day, I'm the vice dean to every faculty member, to every student-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... and to every staff in my unit, regardless of who they voted for. Regardless of their politics.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's right. That's right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I am still here to support them, to represent them, to lead this unit. And that was an important reminder for me as I experienced my own feelings around this last presidential election. I think that we don't capitalize on the diversity of thought and perspectives and understanding within our own institutions.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

It's already there.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Exactly. There are opportunities to engage with each other on these kinds of conversations. Do I think they need to be sort of staged? Do I think there need to be ground rules?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Do I think we need to try to make sure they're positive and productive? Of course. But we also tend to bring in speakers who have similar perspectives as ours, not necessarily ... And it's a panel of all the same perspectives instead of opposing perspectives. So, I think, yes, we're in a ...

Many of institutions are concerned that the spotlight will be moved to them. And so there's reasons to be conservative in a certain way, where we're concerned about risk all the time. But for faculty, and this is where you mentioned Felicia being tenured, that's where I think we have to ... Our faculty need to engage from a place of defining, and I want to say capitalizing on their academic freedom, whether you be tenured or not, but tenure means something. We all know that. Let's be clear.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

And under attack in some places too.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Very much so.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And also ask our shared governance units, our faculty senates, our other groups to step up-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

[inaudible 00:32:40] that.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... and lead in this space. Again, not from just a place of advocacy of who we are now, but where we need to go and how we need to be engaging and including all of these perspectives together. Because I think fundamentally, if our faculty don't do this work, I don't see how we can expect our students to do this work.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's right. And we have to ... I think by engaging with folks who have different viewpoints than we have and feel that their research backs that viewpoint, I think it shows and models for our students how they interact with that in an academic, scholarly way. Because-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Sure.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... the reality is we all are going to have people that ... As scholars, we always have people push back on our research.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 00:33:27] or two.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Or one.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And regardless of what type of research you do. And so, I think it's good to model for students, what does it look like to engage in discourse that may be on different sides using data that may be different, right?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

But doing this in a scholarly productive way. And you may walk away from the table not agreeing with each other, but you at least had the conversation.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah. I want to bring one other point up. I'm thinking about a consultation I had with a faculty member a few years ago and thinking about innovating, wanting to try new things in the classroom to promote dialogue in these types of ways. And I posed a question about harm, right?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yes, [inaudible 00:34:13].

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Because well-intended people do harm.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

For sure.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

And I don't think we always talk about that piece. It's like, oh, and I'll be thinking about our teaching metrics or thinking about teaching excellence and how to demonstrate that, one of the ways to experiment in my teaching and designing assignments in ways that can harm people. I think it's important as we're being able to-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Like the privilege walk.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

... I'm glad we illuminated that reality and we're seeing less of that. We should see less of that. We shouldn't see it at all. But anyway, point being, just making sure we're also thinking about harm as we think about design.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yes, it's important.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I'd also like to bring up in terms of faculty, our reward structures, as well as-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Ooh, Lord.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... the assumptions that we have within higher education. And I think many of us can probably agree that we have so many baked-in assumptions of how we operate and what it means from ... I think a lot about the semester. I like to say, "Who has done research that says that students actually learn all the content in a course in 15 or 16 weeks?" I want to see that research, or in some cases, eight weeks.

But we have a lot of assumptions around credit hours. We have a lot of assumptions around semesters, we have assumptions around promotion and tenure criteria. We have assumptions around what we vote we value.

And I think, again, in the context of this being what is the saying, never let a crisis go to waste. I mean, for faculty in their role and in their governance role, there's an opportunity for them as collectively to take a look at some of these areas and really call into question what we value. And I think this is a moment. And I'm not seeing a lot of that, unfortunately. I'm not seeing faculty, senates and others sort of step up-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Where they're still left.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... in these spaces, where they're still left, but there's value to that.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

That's hard, yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. I think this is the shared governance, which you know I'm always going to go out for, piece is really interesting in the context that they're in, because I also think that where we're at now, because of all of the different legislation that's been going on and trying to dismantle things that we have always seen as pillars in higher education, like shared governance, I think have highlighted for us the ways in which we were so concerned with the business of higher education, that some of these principles around what are our values, what do we believe is important, and philosophically around higher education have slowly eroded because we have been so focused on business models.

And I think what you're seeing, I mean, from my perspective of folks not as engaged in the shared governance practices and models is because we muted them over the last 20 years. The more and more we became concerned with bottom line and outcomes and enrollment, there really wasn't a reward. Or I think in some places even faculty is like, "What's the point? This is theater."

We are engaging in shared governance theater, is what I call it, where we go through the motions to say that we did it, but we know at the end of the day, there's a corporate level that's going to make some decisions, and we're going to have to follow them. And I don't think we realized how much we had normed that until COVID-19 when administrations were making decisions without faculty about faculty, right? And so, I say that to say that I think we're seeing more conversation about shared governance because I think in some ways, not to use the W word, we woke up, like I think we were like, "Wait, what

happened to this pillar of what made higher education a unique space, a democratic space? What happened to it?"

But I think it's going to take us a minute to figure out what is the balance between, yes, we need to think about how we fiscally sustain and fortify our institutions from a business perspective, but we also can't lose that element of this democratic decision making and power-sharing that shared governance provides. And I believe, I always say higher ed is just a microcosm of the larger society. And so we shouldn't be shocked to see what's happening in the larger society around democracy. We already started seeing it, the seeds of it in higher education.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Well, I think we're seeing an interesting test happen right now with the current administration's invitation for institutions to join this academic compact for, was it academic excellence, that essentially functions as a loyalty oath that institutions have to make decisions about limiting admissions from certain countries. There's certain topics that are off limit for teaching. Essentially, the government is asking the institutions to give up their autonomy-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Autonomy.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

... for prioritization and access to federal grants. And fortunately, the initial or nine institutions that were offered, I think we're still waiting to hear from UT Austin what they will do, but I was grateful that my own institution said no.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Think UNC. So, can I tell a quick story to pick up on what you're saying, Felecia?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, I was at an event and I won't say who it was, but there was a former chancellor who spoke at this event very recently, and he said something that I have been, it's been mulling over in my head over and over again. He said, "A chancellor wakes up every morning and the only thing they think about is how do I make payroll?"

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's real.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

A chancellor wakes up every morning and all they think about is how to make payroll.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Isn't that interesting?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

That is interesting, yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And this was somebody who was being very critical of higher education, who was a famous scholar, still a famous scholar. And the point, and I've been thinking about it so much, because to your point, there was, and I don't know the date or the decade off the top of my head, but there was a moment that higher education made a decision, not necessarily consciously, to where the agreement between the feds and federal research dollars to support the research infrastructure, to the ways in which states and the state formulas fund their state citizens in higher education and the other types of subsidies and various other forms of funds that go to higher education, made this deep connection between the two. And I would say that we did not realize, whoever the royal we is, understood the implications.

And if a chancellor is waking up only thinking about payroll, then that tells us that institutions are bound financially in a way that is one-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's true, yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... unsustainable, which we're starting to see, but two, to your point, what does that mean for the basic values of who we are as institutions and what role we play in society, what role we play in going back to providing an educated citizenry-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah, citizenry.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... in a democracy. And so I would be curious for a historian to sit down with an historian of higher education and talk through, where was that pivot to-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Eddie Cole, where are you?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I have theories, but what I'll say, connecting-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

This is on podcast.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... this to curriculum, I'm not going to get into my tin foil hat of higher ed, but connecting this to curriculum, right? We see the trickle down of that relationship to curriculum, particularly at resource strapped institutions. There is an argument that can be made that institutions offer majors and programs and classes to the ability of their fiscal freedom.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Absolutely, absolutely.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Checks, yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

So, we're even seeing now, right? We've seen over the last five or so years, programs, especially liberal arts programs, humanities be cut, not simply because there's a movement to constrain humanities. But because they can't afford to offer humanities or there is a board or a group of advisors or consultants who are saying, "Hey, the money is in business, engineering, these majors and fields that lead to high paying jobs that will lead to high donating alumni," supposedly.

And also the government had some say in that, right? These metrics around a job placement, I can't think of the word, but when we started to use as a outcome measurement or accountability metric, how much people are making when they leave-

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Gainful employment.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Gainful employment. I couldn't think of the best word. So, you have legislators who are saying, "Hey, you're graduating students, and they're not making more money than they were when they came in, you're not doing a good job." And so I think all of these things-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah, the value proposition.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... play a role in a-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Or they're also leaving the state and not staying in the state and contributing to the economy.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Right, brain drain, right? So, you have leadership who are like, "Yeah, I think it's important to teach philosophy, but my bottom line says it's not." And my board wants me to pay attention to this bottom line and I'd like to keep my job. I think these things, we don't always make those connections between these business models and what's happening with the program.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, who do we serve?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's a good question.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Do we serve our boards? Do we serve our donors? Do we serve our students?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Now you're asking the the big question, right? That's interesting.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

My answer has shifted. I think there was one point I would say, "We are here for students," and I think that our discipline and that's what we teach in our prep programs. And I just think given where we are, that's still central to my core. But there are lots of other competing pressures to put that question in [inaudible 00:44:38].

Dr. Royel Johnson:

There was some documentary I used to show in class. I cannot remember the name, but they're ultimately making argument that higher education becomes like this luxury resort also. That we're-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Was it the Declining by Degrees by chance?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

What's the name of it?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Declining by Degrees.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Declining by Degrees, I showed that my class.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Is that what you ...

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I don't remember.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah. Okay, okay.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

I showed it my class.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It sounds like it.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

But they're talking about the...

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I showed it. I think it's PBS, I think. I think I have CD of it.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

The infrastructures, the pools, the luxury sort of apartment buildings and so forth that we're selling this sort of experience. So in some way, it is serving a student, but also it's the boards who also who are making the final decisions.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

So, I offer that we serve a multitude of stakeholders, and I think the challenge-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... has been that we have not always thought about how do we find what best serves the most people, most stakeholders, right? I think we, from our positionality, qualitative researcher, we decide who's the most important stakeholder, and that's who we focus on. But what that leaves us is in the segmented ways of serving across the institution.

So, your executive level is serving a particular stakeholder, your faculty are serving a particular stakeholder, your staff are serving a particular stakeholder, your development office is serving a particular stakeholder. And we're not often all in the room together talking about the intersections of all those stakeholders. And so I think we serve a lot, and I think we serve more constituents and stakeholders than higher ed was ever designed to serve.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Sure.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And so we are wrestling with how do ... We wrestle with holding on to possibly a structure that does not serve this day and time anymore and trying to fit things within a structure that doesn't fit anymore. I'll use this same whether I [inaudible 00:46:41] talking because you see I'm getting excited.

But I took a retention theories class with Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt when I was a master's student, and she had us do this exercise and I'll never forget it for the rest of my life. We had to buy a plant and we had to like grow a plant throughout the class. And then at the end of the class, we talked about what happened to our plant and my plant was growing. It was doing great things and whatever, and then it needed to be repotted because it needed more room and I didn't repot it fast enough and it died, right?

And so we talked about that in terms of retention, but I like to think about that in terms of higher education. In that we probably have outgrown the structure that we have relied on so long in the practices and if we don't move swiftly around how do we restructure in a way that accommodates the

growth and diversity that has happened that higher ed never prepared for, what will happen to higher education?

And I think this moment, what I look, again, opportunity, I think this moment is challenging us to, we said it for years and now we're here to reimagine higher education and to reevaluate who do we serve? What do we believe? What do we believe is the value of this? So, I actually think some of these attacks, harm excluded, because I think that's really important, the harm that it's doing to people within the system, but it's pushing us to reimagine in ways that we've dragged our feet on for decades.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I mean, we've talked about this in the context of serving students, that higher education was designed with a particular type of student in mind. Our students today are way more diverse. We even, student parents, adult learners, etc. We've tried to retrofit policies, programs, and ways of doing that don't serve well, the vast diversity of students who ... But your point makes me think about that it's not just about students though.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

No.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It's about faculty, how ... Bill Tierney did a really excellent lecture the other day for the Pullias Center about academic freedom and the origins of academic freedom at Stanford University. And it was so enlightening just how academic freedom has evolved also.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Evolved, and it's not that old.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

No, it's not.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And most people don't know what it is, nor do they know that they have it even if you're not tenured.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And we only got it because of a time like this, right?

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Yep, yep.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Like McCarthyism and stuff-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And then folks who are like, "Wait, we need to protect faculty." So, yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, if I could bring it back to curriculum just a little bit, not that I'm not enjoying every second of this conversation, I mean, how much time? We have another two hours, right?

I think part of, it's that we have multiple stakeholders. It's that we have kind of bifurcated, segmented our university structures, our roles and responsibilities in a way to serve all those different stakeholders. But I would say it's even more challenging in that we've created inherent contradictions, so that some of these structures, these goals, these stakeholders, are in conflict with one another.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's good, that's a good [inaudible 00:50:05]

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, I'll give you one example. I think that, and this goes back to faculty and goes back to curriculum. Many of our institutions, not all, but many of our institutions have large research enterprises. Those research enterprises cost money.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Much, a lot.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

In some cases, they cost very little. In some cases, the indirect funds are going back to... The IDC is going back to the institution, to whatever the budget model is of that particular institution, and there is a minor benefit. But at most institutions, we are completely tuition dependent. We rely on those dollars to operate.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

That creates an interesting contradiction for different faculty groups, that creates a contradiction for what we value, where we put resources, what gets valued for said administrator.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And then that trickles down, at least in what I've seen, in where we put resources for curriculum, where we put resources for faculty development, where we put resources for our students to help them retain-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And the relative value that we give to our academic programs, to our curriculum, and to our philosophical, pedagogical commitment that we have to our communities, whatever, however we're defining those communities. And so, I think until we out those contradictions and really have deep conversation and then make some really hard, critical choices around what our institutions are going to look like and who we're going to serve and how we're going to resolve those, we're just going to keep continuing in that space.

And it's challenging because the two words that I'll use as an administrator when it comes to tuition dependency is deferred maintenance, because that's how we have survived during...

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, that's true, that's true.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... if we can't increase tuition, we just continue to live in a space of deferred maintenance, which will eventually can't be deferred any longer.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

It's catching up to us right now.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, Josh Brown is one of our faculty at the School of Education. Hopkins wrote a really great book and part he went around to institutions and did a bunch of case studies. And they were institutions that built the rock walls and the lazy rivers and the luxury resorts. And they did that and now they can't afford to maintain it.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Maintain it.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, they're just crushing under the weight of lower enrollments, the inability to increase tuition because there is a point people can't pay. If you haven't looked at your unmet need of your students on your campus, please pull FAFSA data. It may be depressing, but you should pull it.

So, they're just crushing under how they can't maintain the facilities, but do institutions ever physically shrink? I mean, not often. So, I think curriculum gets stuck in the middle of a lot of these contradictions, but it's almost hidden because you have to uncover the big splashy stuff, the research dollars, the academic programs, in order to get to that to the heart of the curriculum.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

This makes me think about ... And so I think about my own practice, me as an instructor, me as a faculty member, and how I move in space and the lessons that I've learned in this process. Three years ago, I've been able to team up with a group of researchers, Corbin Campbell, Milagros Castillo-Montoya, Bryan Dewsbury, and we received a Bill and Melinda Gates grant that really looked at equity based teaching

and looking at it from an ecosystem approach. And so all of these actors and how they're in concert with one another.

So, I think it's so important. So we interviewed students, faculty, staff, deans, provosts, we did literature scans, combed through thousands of pieces of scholarship. We looked at who's teaching these courses, because I think a lot of times we talk about equity based teaching, but who are actually teaching those gateway courses. And so there's a report, so feel free on EverywhereEverylearner.com. You see this report ...

Dr. Royel Johnson:

[inaudible 00:53:58].

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Or dot organization, excuse me. Shameless plug. But what's important in that is that we look at each of those actors and how are they thinking about equity based teaching, what are the systemic levels that are needed to do that work. And so when we think about curriculum, we all own it and we need to have an ecosystem collaborative approach to this whole process.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And I think the who is teaching is so important because at certain research universities in particular, but I think institutions, many institutions, are becoming more research universities. We have more R1s now than we've ever had, that faculty are incentivized to not teach, to get sponsored dollars-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... to take yourself out of the classroom. And more and more, I'm seeing institutions where faculty that I even learned from, faculty that others have learned from, have not taught in the classroom for years. What that means is that we've unbundled the faculty model, some going way back to academic capitalism, and in that context, we need to think about who are the teachers.

They're often our clinical, our term faculty, they're our adjunct faculty, and they are having the greatest impact on our students there. And are we providing professional development, faculty development and engaging them in things like department meetings so that when they're delivering curriculum-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 00:55:16] more.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So it's not disconnecting, yes.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... When they're creating it, that it's creating under the values that the whole faculty are trying to put forward for the students.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And I would add the other side of that, and I'm going to say two things. I feel like I'm really teeter-totter on controversial here, but I think the other side of that are your teaching intensive institutions are also overwhelmed. And so you have faculty who are often underpaid and carrying four or five loads, which is too much.

And then sometimes they're at an institution where they're carrying that 4-5-5-5 load, and now the institutional leadership has decided we want to move from being a regional comprehensive institution to a research intensive institution. So now I want you to teach all these students and go get grants and publish more. And your classes are large.

And I think you have people who taught at these institutions because they did want to teach and they were passionate about teaching. But they actually just don't have the energy to actually engage deeply in teaching, because it's so many classes, and so many students and getting all these other external activities that do between advising and administrative roles.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And so I think that also, on the non-research institution side, is a challenge.

And the other thing I'll say, be diplomatic about this... I think there is something to be said about having institutional leadership who have never been in classrooms, and not saying that they can't be great leaders, and I think the best of those are those who understand that that is a point of knowledge that they need some more information about, and they build teams to help them understand that.

But for those leaders who have never been in the classroom and don't understand it to be a place that they don't have knowledge, some of the things I've seen is that these presidents, particularly, but it's also sometimes other administrator, upper level administrators on campus, are asking things of faculty that are just, if you actually have been in a classroom know or beyond capacity, are asking things of faculty in teaching and curriculum that they don't provide adequate resources and infrastructure to do. Partly because they don't realize that it's something that's needed, and then when faculty say, "I need this-"

Dr. Royel Johnson:

They don't have the framework, yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... get back to this business model that, "Do you really? I don't think you need that to do more with less things." And so I think we have to start. We haven't really, I feel like, gotten to that conversation, but I think we need to start talking about the impact of asking faculty to do things when you don't... It's like having a Secretary of Education who's never been in a K through 12.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And if I can add to that, I think it's even when you do know.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Ooh. That's good.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I think we need to have a really big conversation around what's the race to the bottom. In the race to the bottom, there's a world where, and I'll say this as an administrator, you have reduced resources, you're getting less research grants or maybe you've had research grants canceled, you relied on that IDC, you relied on ... In the best case scenario, those were sponsored, soft funded faculty, and you're not obligated to pay their salary anymore. Worst case scenario, you are, and now you're watching that budget just, watching the hole get deeper.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's real.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

You're then looking at your tuition dollars, you're looking at your enrollments, you're trying to ensure that those are strong. You're also struggling with international enrollments. Quite frankly, I think we're going to all start struggling in grad ed with domestic enrollments.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

It's coming.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

You're seeing it.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And then you're probably laying off people, staff, faculty, not tenured faculty, but non-tenured faculty, and then you still have all the same work to do.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That part, that part.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And that to me is the potential race to the bottom. And I see it with faculty now where they're stretched too thin. We're not good at faculty workload. There are a few institutions that aren't. Thank goodness for KerryAnn O'Meara and all the work she's done because it's fantastic. But it's very hard to do that work. It's very time-consuming and you're asking faculty to do more to figure out their own workload, which is another conversation.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

It is.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And that increasing any other resources.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Exactly. So resources are going down. Number of people to do the work is going down, but the actual amount of work, even if fewer students, the actual amount of work is not going down.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And so faculty, so even as an administrator, if I have fewer staff, who's going to do the work? And so it's one of those contradictions that I spoke about earlier that I think we have to be in community talking very clearly about. Because at the end of the day, the work needs to get done and yet, you only have these people to do it.

And yet how do you help them innovate in curriculum? How do you help them figure out how to come together and have critical, deliberative dialogues so that they can become learners in this space themselves? How do we make all of this happen?

And quite frankly, I don't have the answers. I'd like somebody to give them to me. So, go ahead.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I was going to mention earlier when you were talking about faculty not teaching, I remember interviewing at USC and I had my session with the students. And you know what the first question they asked me, did I plan to buy myself out of all of my classes?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Wow.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Because they would not support my application because they've been frustrated that-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Sure.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

... they don't get an opportunity to learn from faculty. But faculty are also pressured to bring in grants.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

And grants require project management and so forth. And it's taking us out the classroom.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And this is where I am a little, not excited because I don't think that's the word. I am inspired by what has happened with the grant funding from the federal level. And that sounds weird, especially since I'm a person who lost their grant.

But I think, again, it's shown a spotlight on how we have built so much of our funding and fiscal structures-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Futility, yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... off of federal research dollars. The IDC that... I think we've just become very reliant on it. And one of the things, I just said this on another podcast, I worry that we're too reactive in higher education when we have opportunities to be proactive.

And so I feel that we saw what happened when the federal government pulled all this money out. And I feel like in some places we're trying to just patch up the holes, which is important, but we're also not doing some tabletop scenario planning in the meantime. How do we prepare for if the whole bottom falls out?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Let's prepare for it now, hoping it doesn't happen.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Part of the challenge is that there has been this implicit understanding that universities have played a role in scientific discovery that supports our nation's sort of larger goals. Irrespective of who the leader is, Republican, Democratic, our current administration does not respect the university in that way, very clearly.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Well, they don't see its role in their [inaudible 01:03:01]

Dr. Royel Johnson:

They don't see its role in that at all, absolutely.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

They see its role differently, right?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And I think that's what we have to wrestle. I just think we become so comfortable with these assumed truths. Even if priorities change, the government's always going to fund this. Even if priorities change, there'll be academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

And I just think we have to step back and say, "What if those are not true anymore?" And how do we continue to deliver opportunities for higher education and credentialing? And to some extent, not just an educated citizenry, but helping in the development, the personal development of citizenry who participate in higher education, how do we do that if everything we thought was true is no longer true? And I think that's really hard for us, but I think it's a necessary exercise to help us rethink what we're doing, how we're asking faculty to do things, how we're asking staff to do things.

Because we're somewhat asking them to do these things, it feels like with the assumption that everything will eventually go back to how it was, and it may not. And so I don't know. I often wonder if we miss the opportunity, to your point, to dream again.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, it's a good segue to the next question.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Oh, there's another question.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

And this question ... So, the theme is-

Dr. Jamie Lester:

We haven't been asked questions.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

This is a good conversation.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I forgot there were questions.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 01:04:47] no clue.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

This is my way of moving us along.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's his job. I'm not good at that.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, our theme is bending the arc, right? And so evoking MLK and the arc bends towards justice. What does bending the arc look like for you and the roles that you have been fortunate to occupy? And what does it look like in this day-to-day work that you've been doing? Especially in a moment that is so contested, that's so different from what we are used to and what we've imagined.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And stakes seem really high, I think, now, right now.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

You want me to go?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Of course.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

It's such a great question. And I was actually at a ... I'm not going to remember the title of it, but it was ASHE sponsored. It was a conversation with administrators, I don't know, several months ago. And it was on Zoom, and I thought, I need to talk to someone about this because we are all having a hard time.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I'm like, "Is there therapy provided? Is there follow up coaching? Somebody help?"

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Group therapy.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Exactly. But we're all challenged in different ways in our different roles. And certainly, as I've said out loud to many people, especially the people that I work with is in all of my years in higher education as a student, as a faculty member, as a scholar of higher education, this has now been the hardest 10 months of my career. And I keep adding a month as time goes by.

It has been existential and challenging and unexpected and constantly changing. And unlike COVID, where you got to a steady state of just being quarantined, this at some point was-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

[inaudible 01:06:34], yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... new information every week.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Every week.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Grants getting canceled.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Multiple times a day.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And just having to get creative. So, I think there's been a lot of moments of creativity I've seen in small pockets, not major rethinking of who we are, but in small pockets. There's also been, I think, many days where I have had to think about where my line is and the line being, where do I decide that this, I am no longer willing to push my values any further. And I will be honest, I'm surprised at myself because I imagined that my line was not as far as I've had to push it.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Oh, interesting.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And we can all self-reflect on why we pushed our line to where we have, and there's personal reasons, there's professional reasons for one to do that. So, the biggest challenge personally has been to identify how far that's going to go and to know where it is. And so I was talking with this group at this, again, ASHE-sponsored event and others were reflecting the same sentiment. Made me feel a little better, I think.

So, there's that moment for me. I think a lot about institutional courage and what that means and how that's defined and what position you're in and where your line gets pushed. I think a lot about if I'm a chancellor and I'm thinking about payroll, do I shine a light on my institution by making said decision, by speaking up publicly on an issue that may be against my values, but I'm then jeopardizing the employment of, in some cases, tens of thousands of people. And if I'm in that position, my lane probably is not probably further than I imagined it to be.

So, the responsibility that we hold is very real and trying to reconcile one's personal values with the responsibility that we hold is really challenging. And I think many of us are in that space all the time. I think that one of the ways that we can... I mean, I think we, one, have to support each other as a community. I think we have to give each other grace.

I think we have to think long term and think about how are we going to bring back some of those things that are of high value to us that we know from research tells us that this is what helps support students and faculty. We got to pre-plan, got to plan for that day whenever that is. And we also need to take on the responsibility of producing highly credible, again, highly credible, actually, highly rigorous, methodologically work that we all do, but being going out in the world, out to policy makers, legislatures, state offices, our communities, and really talking to people about the value of that work

and helping our faculty, helping ourselves be policy relevant, relevant to those who are in positions to make these decisions.

That's a long answer with a lot of different elements that tells you where like, what was the title of your movie was so great. Mine would just be chaos.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Chaos.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

I'll go back to this. I've been thinking a lot about how to center joy in the midst of chaos. That's something that I'll go back to that, but in terms of bending the arc, I want to build on what you said around institutional courage. I think about, it can be messy, it can be innovative and exciting.

Something that happened a couple years ago on my campus, and something that I'm very proud of is thinking about promotion, tenure, and merit and having an equity centered practice, knowing what we should be doing, what does that look like beyond a particular unit and thinking about it at scale across the entire institution where everyone's P&T guidelines are different, what gets rewarded is different than reward structures, right?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

And so, one of the things when I first got to AU, I chaired, I was on a committee, excuse me, not this committee. I was on a committee that looked at these issues across the university. And this was some really hard work, difficult work, but one thing that came out of that work, conversations across disciplines with people with different ideology about what these things should look like in direct conflict with one another in many cases, right?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

At the end of this, and it goes to the institutional courage, and I'm proud to say this, that every unit on our campus has to take account for how they're thinking about issues of DEI, in promotion, tenure, and merit in their documents. So, each unit has been in consult with the provost office. What does that look like? What does that mean?

It has reshaped conversations. So, I think bending the arc, even on ... I think a lot about faculty development, faculty support mentoring, like that is just to my core. But something like that, that's systemic at that level, when we think about all the issues and the intersections that we've been grappling with today, like that is something that I can look and say on my campus...

Now how to do it, then that's another conversation. But the idea that there's a document and policy, again, you think about what you value through your policies and your practices, there's a document that conversations are being forced upon units to think about this in meaningful ways. And to me, that was a win.

So, in terms of bending the arc, I'm like, yeah, I want more of those moments. Those are the moments. And this is our why and why we need to keep doing the work that we're doing, even though we're operating in a social political climate that could allow us to be fearful and to not want to do this work. I'm encouraged by those types of efforts. And I'm hoping that this story is a common story amongst others who are listening to be doing these types of things. Culture shift is collaborative. It's not individual. It requires you to get outside of your silos, and it has benefits for everyone.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, go ahead.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

I was going to say, that's interesting because other institutions have gone and who've done that work, have gone in and removed it.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Yeah, they've removed it. Yeah. Yeah. And we haven't ... I'm knocking on this wood in front of me.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And so I think this goes back to also, right, as we think about intellectual diversity is institutional diversity. And if we're going to say that institutional autonomy is a unique and important element of US higher education, then we should also encourage these institutions to figure out who they are, who are you, what do you value? And be unapologetically authentic.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

And name it accurately, name it, name it. Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

So, that people know what community they're getting into when they get into it, whether that's faculty, students, staff, I think ... And again, we want to not encourage institutions to be doing harm to populations of people, but I think this does give an opportunity for institutions to say, "This is who we are and this is who we aren't." And let's decide from there who wants to be part of this and who doesn't want to be part of this.

But with that being said, I do want to offer one last question. This has been great, great, great conversation. And as we've talked about the bend in the arc, one of the elements of this year's theme of ASHE is really thinking about creativity and its role in the work that we do and who we are as a field in higher education. And so I wanted to ask the both of you, is there a piece of scholarship, art, or pop culture that's influenced how you think about curriculum more than any policy ever has?

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Two things come to mind.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Okay.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

That Gates document that I mentioned earlier, a lot of work went into that. There's 15 recommendations for practice. I really do think that's a document that could help in terms of the ecosystem, systems level thinking about how to enact equity based teaching. So, that's one.

But beyond that, on a more fun note, again, back to my music, I think a lot about gospel, I think about neo soul, I think about hip hop, I'm just thinking about music and lyrics, and we talk about meeting students where they are, right? We talk about that. Our students are immersed in music as well, like how to design in ways, and so I think about call and response.

So, I do these types of things. I bring music into my practice as an educator beyond just singing. And so yeah, I just think about ways to do that all the time. And when I do that, it's a connecting point. Even with people across different ideologies, music is a connector. And so-

Dr. Royel Johnson:

It's also humanizing. Shout out to Joy Gaston.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Thank you. Thank you.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Shameless plug.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Absolutely. But yeah, so music for me is something that I think about a lot.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Love that.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

So, we got some of these questions in advance. So, I was thinking about this question and I kept thinking, gosh, what are all the readings that I've done over the years that have influenced me? And I thought, none of those are particularly exciting to share.

And so I was really thinking deeply about this and it's not for me, it's people. And sometimes it's big moments of being inspired by somebody who's being courageous, somebody who is... And sometimes it's watching someone struggle with learning how to teach or with a particular question of how they're going to... We have a lot of online courses, how they're going to develop certain artifacts to reach certain learning outcomes.

But I'll say probably my biggest influencers when it comes to me thinking about curriculum and thinking about education are my kids.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Aw.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Aw.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

And it's because it's ... Yeah, not "aw," because they drive me crazy too. I have a teenager. I have a high school senior-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

This is a whole different kind of year, I'm telling you. When you're on the parent side of it-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

It's a [inaudible 01:17:00]

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... When you're on the parent side of it, you're like, "Whoa, this is too much." I actually hired a college admission counselor. I was like, I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it anymore.

But they're young and they're growing up in an environment that I certainly did not grow up in, but I on a regular basis learn how they're engaging in the world, and it helps me think about not only my teaching, but also my leadership practice and how do I need to be thinking about communicating with reaching other generations as they come through higher education and what does that mean for them and what does that mean for what we're delivering. And what our courses look like and how we're engaging with students.

I was just talking with one of our faculty who does a lot of recruitment internationally and she said, "I sent emails." She was in China, "I sent emails for this event and nobody responded. And then I went to WeChat and everybody responded." So, the idea is that they're interacting-

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Oh, I just had this one.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

... in the world differently. So, for me, I learn mostly from others and that's where it inspires me as well. Yeah.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Do you want to answer this question, Royel?

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I'll let you go first.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Oh, of course you would.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Because I know you have some musical...

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. I think one particularly, and then one's going to be a reach, but it's been on my mind lately. But one thing that really piece of pop culture that really makes me think about higher education, particularly from an org standpoint, but it really makes me think about things and relations and how we make decisions is Big Brother.

I got sucked into Big Brother during the season where the first Black woman won, Taylor, and it really shows how when people are put in a situation where they have to be in a pseudo community or a forced community, but know that they're in competition, whether that's for resources, whether that's for power, how they use elements of that created community to amass those things and to manipulate things and to make things move. And I think our institutions are more like that than these structured organizations that we think they are, right?

And I think we often, particularly as faculty, people who like were trained to faculty and not trained to kind of think about org dynamics, we think we're going into this structured system and forget that we're actually like in this forced community, where people, if I'm going to use like Bowman and Deal, like we're in a jungle, a jungle situation where we feel there's limited resources and so we have to begin to think about how do we build coalition, how do we move around in certain ways?

But I think what's interesting about Big Brother is like, there are people who are like, "I have a line and I'm not crossing that line." And there are people that are like, "There are no lines, right? I just want to win." And all these people have to live in this house together, people are doing confession, you don't know what people are thinking. And something about that, I think we can learn from an org dynamic space that involves people and servicing people and to some extent producing like people as an outcome.

And so I've gotten more into these like forced community shows and really thinking like how do people navigate like building relationship, but also knowing I'm building relationship in a bigger system that I have to at some point wonder if this relationship is going to be detrimental to me or beneficial to me. Because I think what we're seeing socio-politically is a world, a society, that is moving towards that. Every decision about who I'm aligned with, who I'm not aligned with is a pros/cons, benefit/not benefit kind of situation.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Interesting.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And I think there's a space in the middle where you still be authentic and strategic and not lose your moral compass and build authentic relationships, but understand that that's the game you're in. So, I've really been thinking about.

The other is... This is so awful another side. So, Kehlani-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Let's go.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Kehlani came out with this song *Folded* that kind of crept into like notoriety as a single. Part of that was it becoming a TikTok challenge and like it just taking off from there. It's a really great song.

Through that TikTok challenge, all these like seasoned R&B artists started covering her song or doing different interpretations of her song. And she like just would find them, right? They'd be like Toni Braxton and Brandy and people she had idolized, and she turned that into an EP that she put out with all these different like-

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Cover songs.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

... covers from people who she'd idolized in R&B. And that's really inspired me because, one, it's so anti what we have known music industry to be, like where you have to like pick this single and push, push, push, promote it to make it rise. And we're seeing how TikTok has turned that on its head.

But also how when it was good, something that was like just authentically good, pulled in artists who are generations apart from this particular artist and connected them in ways that they might not have been connected otherwise, and then produced another body of work.

So as a higher ed scholar, it's something I'm thinking about, about how do we, in this moment, think of new ways to do our work, be brave in the work that we're doing, but also do work in a way that is built upon a foundation of people who had to go be revolutionary in their own way in their work, but also calls out to other scholars to want to engage and work with us, to a place where we begin to build a new body of knowledge together that we may not have seen coming. So, those are two things.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

So, mine is more aligned with Jamie in that I think about some of the most significant teachers in my life who are not educators. And so that shapes how I think about an approach to classroom, decentering myself as the ultimate knower in the classroom and empowering students in the classroom to exercise and use their voice. You said something earlier about like, it's probably better if you don't agree with the class, right?

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

I think so many people fear saying the wrong thing in this moment and how do I set up a space, an environment, where students feel comfortable bringing their full selves and their opinions, and we can have civil discussion around it. And it's not always looking to me for the answers. My most significant educators have been people who don't have formal education and the lessons that I hope I've taken from that.

And so that's the kind of classroom experience that I want to create and emulate such that everyone is a teacher in the classroom. We're learning through our collaborative dynamic interactions. And yeah, there's nothing as artistic that thinks that I think about, but it's certainly the people, the people in my life who educated me.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

I love the whole constructed piece that you just described-

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Absolutely.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

... It's so important to be in community and in tandem to do all these things. It's so important.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

And not for nothing, as I hope we rethink higher education in this moment, I also hope that we open ourselves up as institutions to co-construct what higher education means with the communities that we find ourselves in. Because we have all these entities telling us how higher education should be serving the public, but it's not the public. We're not sitting down with the communities we're in, we're not sitting down with the families that are connecting with our institutions, and saying like, "How do we do this together? How do we best serve you?"

We have like talking heads and legislatures and not knocking them, but I don't know that we're getting to the people. And I think when we see higher ed have its best moments, it's when it connects with the people and what the people are asking for and calling for and what the people are pushing for. And higher ed has often been a place where, when the people have reached the limit of what they structurally can do, like influencing policy and stuff, higher education can come along the side and create some buttressing to what the people are calling for.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

But what was Sean's theme was power to the people.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

Power to the people.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Power to the people.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Dr. Brian McGowan:

Power to the people.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Thank you all so much-

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Thank you.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

... for being a part of this conversation.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

This was great.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

This is what great conversation's about.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes. And I think that is a wrap.

Dr. Felecia Commodore:

That's a wrap.

Dr. Jamie Lester:

Yes.

Dr. Royel Johnson:

Thank you. Sorry we went a little long.