

Recovering What was Stolen by Embracing the Process of Rebuilding

Elizabeth A. Lee

Portland, Oregon, United States

Author Note

Elizabeth A. Lee is the Former Director of Institutional Research at a university in the Pacific Northwest.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth Lee, Email:

elee8461@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay recounts a journey of one woman in higher education responding to and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. The journey for all women in STEM is diverse, yet likely one common thread is a high standard for competence. Our ability to feel confident in our competence is threatened by the isolation and disruption brought on by the pandemic. The hope is that by sharing this personal narrative, the reader may be inspired to rebuild the areas of life needing attention. Self-care is time well spent, if for no other reason than to be able to regain what was lost. The ultimate goal is to rebuild back to a point of being resilient enough to serve as advocates for ourselves and others. By serving as confident advocates, women are well positioned to provoke the changes needed in order for institutions to effectively persevere during times of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19; Self-care; Resilience; Institutional leadership

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It was a weekday in March of 2020, and I was agitated while jogging up every aisle in the supermarket. It was the moment I discerned that the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting me on a very personal level. I was there just like every other would-be hoarder making a massive shopping trip, except I was facing the realization that someone stole my shopping cart from behind my back, literally. I was browsing for batteries while my cart, filled with necessities, was with me one moment and gone the next. I became increasingly ready to confront the person who had no excuse for what they did, but I could not find my cart. I will never know if I was targeted for being an Asian woman. I was struck by the painful awareness that this incident occurred during a time of ever heightened anti-Asian rhetoric (Misra et al., 2020).

As my institution announced a transition to remote work, I had to acknowledge and cope with the many changes to navigate. I tried to bring order through contingency planning only to have to surrender to the moment: no one knew what was going on. So, with the assistance of trusted allies--family, colleagues, and friends--I have continually worked through the daily stress, what I call the "COVID tax," as there was no sense in waiting until the world settled back down to normal. COVID tax is a personal term I use as a shortcut to encompass the everyday stressors we encounter that are increasingly pervasive and salient due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the need to have a clean mask handy when leaving home, the frequency of technical difficulties that arise during conference calls, the fear of stigma associated with what could be a simple sneeze due to allergies, the vigilance of Asians fearing public harassment, the ambiguity in the rationale for someone not wearing a mask, etc.

As someone who has experienced lifelong tokenization as a woman of color, I did not necessarily want things to return to the all too familiar patterns of invisibility and hypervisibility

(Dobbs & Montecillo Leider, 2021). A recurring theme throughout my career involves witnessing people who identify with a historically marginalized identity get hired into leadership roles, though never enough of these individuals that they could ever form a coalition and become a majority in any given space. Relatedly, another recurring theme involves seeing what a colleague calls the “only lonelys,” that is, the individuals who are the sole representatives of their marginalized identity within their proximal work environment. Having no immediate colleagues who might relate to the lived experience of an “only lonely,” this person is often treated without any consideration of whether or not they feel included and welcomed on campus.

The pandemic brought isolation and disruption that challenged my sense of self, but reflecting on how I previously dealt with feeling isolated equipped me with evidence that I am more resilient than I felt. None of my self-care is glamorous (e.g., eat decent food, move my body, get some sleep), and the pandemic necessitated further attention to my own needs. I learned to give myself time to make sure my technology was cooperating and to avoid “zoom fatigue.” I carved out opportunities to wonder genuinely what the future will bring and jot ideas down in my (almost) daily, one sentence journal. The nonjudgmental journaling helped me slowly recommit myself to yoga and gardening. I made a point to reconnect with people and gravitated toward those who understood that the current times required intentionally extending to each other sincere concern, patience, and recognition. For some kindred spirits, our new context drove an urgency to reconsider the roles we have served in and what new paths we could explore.

My outrage at so many things happening in 2020 had eventually seeped into a chronic state of dismay bordering on burnout. As the Director of Institutional Research, I took seriously my responsibility to coordinate institutional data processes that empower campus-wide reflection

on questions such as: “Were all students receiving equitable support in their academic careers?”; “How will we maintain the program review process without making it even more burdensome for faculty?”; and “How can we best disseminate campus climate data to spur collective dialogue and improvements?” With the lockdown, all this work was crashing to a halt.

Those ubiquitous campus silos that isolate us and the ways campus communities rely on individuals to carry initiatives solely by the merits of their personal passion underlie the deal we make in higher education. We are asked to do more with less for the sake of our student-centered missions, which I was amenable to when the institution was stable. In the chaos of the pandemic, however, our campus’s strategic plan expired in 2020 without a new one ready to go, leaving many employees ill-informed to coordinate and prioritize their strategic efforts. Like other colleagues’, my situation changed from being highly motivated by and productive due to my commitment to public service (Brooks-Immel, 2014) to realizing I cannot possibly do it all and will have to do less with less. I was in the middle of piloting a new focus group service that makes my office’s resources and expertise available for collecting qualitative data. I was in the middle of hiring another cohort of students for micro-internships. I was in the middle of setting a new schedule of *Data Retreats* for front-line employees to concentrate on foundational data projects. To manage my grief in pausing these efforts, I reminded myself of where I derive my strength (e.g., what kinds of guidance do folks often request of me?) and stability (e.g., who are the folks I can trust and lean on?), and then I was ready to pursue change.

As the pandemic's impacts continued to be felt, institutional communications elicited outrage and alarm, regardless of whether the communication was regarding the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement. The institutional handling of these dual crises led a grass-roots group of faculty and staff allies to organize around common concerns not otherwise being

addressed by my institution. The only way to make activism sustainable was to connect with a community of challengers to the status-quo. I was reassured, knowing that when I was too exhausted to sign up for a task, there were folks I was regularly collaborating with who were pooling our limited energy and limitless expertise for the greater good. These are the good folks who see the potential benefits inherent in change and are willing to be comfortable with discomfort.

Leaders in higher education oversee a sector that is all-too-often change-averse. Yet the most forward-thinking leaders among us at all ranks are the ones who want to be given the chance to innovate, the very folks who should be nurtured with leadership development so that they are ready to step in when all hands are required. The more I advocated for concrete changes (e.g., empowering an officially recognized staff senate body akin to the faculty senate), the more I acknowledged that history was not looking to include the victories of women of color, only to continue relegating us to stereotypical roles (Seo & Hinton, 2009). Then the same month I announced my departure for an intriguing opportunity to be in a role that would be more “adjacent to” rather than “immersed within” higher education, I found out two other Asian women in leadership roles at my institution were moving on to pursue opportunities outside of the higher education sector. These simultaneous departures acutely highlighted my regret in not having been more proactive and pursuing a mentoring relationship with them and my realization that there was no structural support fostering adequate mentorship (Kawamoto, 2011; Nickerson, 2020).

Seeing how much leaders across higher education institutions had failed to mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis reminded me that our leaders are human. I do not say this to excuse them. I say this to help myself and other women push back against pervasive

imposter syndrome. The people who end up in charge of institutions are no more brilliant or deserving than the rest of us who serve as unheralded leaders influencing change without explicit authority to mandate change. Institutions will do well to embrace the need for continual recalibration of how much we rely on a strategic plan to stay grounded in expected priorities versus how much we permit ourselves to pivot in light of new challenges. Just as I worked through various stages of grief only to draw on my personal resilience, I hope that institutional leadership can similarly tackle immediate concerns yet embrace the lifelong learning needed to inform preparation for the next crisis.

I sincerely believe we cannot rely on traditional tools and methods for addressing new and dynamic problems. We all benefit from the willingness to bend, so that we do not break as a community. For example, the norms and standards for what sound leadership looks like should expand to incorporate expressions of leadership that make stepping into those roles more inviting to women of color. This invitation should remain open indefinitely in order to recruit an ongoing pipeline for women of color, so that institutions can achieve a critical mass, not a sprinkling of tokens. Institutions retain their emerging leaders when women of color can imagine a path of growth and advancement seeing how others have paved that future for them already. Another strategy is to offer not only opportunities for employees to develop an affinity to their institution, yet also an affinity to each other across silos. The commitment borne out of shared solidarity is an intangible asset that feeds the campus and the individuals that make it a community, not just a place we clock in and rush to clock out.

What we say we want to do in theory is only as praiseworthy as what we actually do in our daily practice. Relatedly, the system of higher education is most clearly reflected in the most precious focus of the mission: our students. If students leave an institution not modeling the

value of open-mindedness to being pushed out of one's comfort zone, the institution has failed to reach and teach that student. I have said to myself that I want to keep becoming a stronger person in order to have the capacity to effect positive change for others. The time spent reflecting on my strengths has helped me further build up confidence that I am a person capable of pursuing and embodying changes even during these extremely uncertain times.

Being an Asian American woman born of immigrants and the first in my family to go to college, I experienced many situations that disrupted my sense of safety and belonging. Having someone steal my shopping cart was not the most aversive incident I have experienced, nor will it be the last. Yet incrementally building up a portfolio of accomplishments helped me realize I am a worthy person with a lot to offer the world! Those experiences affirm my coping and resilience, along with a commitment to advocacy and coalition-building for the benefit of anyone made to feel marginalized. There are folks depending on me to keep hanging in there through these disrupted times, and I do not plan on letting them down.

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