

Recovering from Burnout and Budget Cuts by Cultivating Faculty Writing Communities

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Valdosta State University (VSU) implemented writing-focused faculty learning communities (FLCs) to recover from burnout and budget cuts. Specifically, Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT)-sponsored faculty writing communities at VSU build community across ranks and disciplines, promote a growth mindset, and create a supportive safe space for faculty writers to cultivate resilience and care for themselves, colleagues, and VSU. The essay draws on existing literature about burnout, FLCs, and centers for teaching and learning, reviews institutional history, and analyzes participant observations, self-reflections of facilitators, and personal narratives from participants in faculty writing communities at VSU. The authors ultimately argue that center-sponsored faculty writing communities can be a “change agent” for individuals and institutions in crisis, renewing college campuses as intellectually and socially vital places.

Introduction

By many measures, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, American higher education was in crisis. Federal and state funding for higher education is plummeting, while universities squander what funds they do receive (Sanders 2013), thereby underfunding academic programs. Science, humanities, and the arts are politically under attack so often now that entire monographs come to their defense (e.g., Zakaria, 2015). College tuition and student loan debt are rising at an alarming rate (Akers & Chingos, 2016). The U.S. population is more educated than at any other time in history; however, numerical gains in undergraduate enrollment, retention, and graduation are not improving significantly for students from lower-income and diverse backgrounds (Blumenstyk, 2015). Instead, far too many students leave universities today not with a degree but with crippling debt (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Simultaneously, there is increasing reliance on adjunct labor, fewer

tenure-track positions than in the past (which place escalating job demands on tenured faculty), salary stagnation and sporadic merit pay, and furloughs or layoffs following budget cuts and program elimination (Childress, 2019; Flaherty, 2019). At the same time, administrator turnover plagues more universities, resulting in institutional instability and low faculty morale because shifting priorities and visions leave universities adrift and faculty frustrated (McGlynn, 2018).

From reduced funding for higher education to prolonged stress and overwork with little monetary or non-monetary rewards to faculty for their accomplishments, empirical evidence demonstrates that all of those factors, and more, contribute to faculty burnout (e.g., Sabagh, Hall, & Saroyan, 2018). Before the hard data on faculty burnout was collected, Minter (2009) claimed universities were a breeding ground for burnout. Definitions of burnout in the literature vary. In general, it is conceptualized as a psychological condition in response to chronic job stressors, resulting in emotional exhaustion and fatigue, cynicism, apathy, alienation toward others and one's work, and a reduced perception of personal and professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1996). Minter (2009) emphasizes how burnout in academia leads to detachment from students, staff, and peers, a loss of overall job satisfaction, and a loss of overall sense of accomplishment (p. 1). Reportedly, burnout levels among university teachers are comparable to the experiences of healthcare professionals (Watts & Robertson, 2011). This description is real and bleak. It describes Valdosta State University (VSU), a comprehensive regional state university in South Georgia where the three authors of this manuscript work in different academic departments and positions. Even when some of the aforementioned factors improve, as recently happened at VSU before the pandemic, can universities recover? Can centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) and faculty help their colleagues and institutions rebuild after such depression and damage has been done?

Our response is a cautiously optimistic "yes." We argue in this essay that faculty writing communities sponsored by the Center for Excellence in Learning & Teaching (CELT) at VSU helped us start to recover from burnout and budget cuts. Specifically, CELT faculty writing communities build community across ranks and disciplines, promote a growth mindset, and create a supportive safe space for faculty writers to cultivate resilience and care for themselves, colleagues, and VSU. Inspired by Boyer (1990), Cox (2001), and the 2010 issue of the *Journal on Centers for Teaching and Learning* about CTLs as centers for institutional change, we suggest that center-sponsored faculty

writing communities can be a “change agent” for individuals and institutions in crisis, renewing our campuses as intellectually and socially vital places.

Existing literature on faculty learning communities (FLCs) shows that their primary outcome is building community among faculty, no matter whether the FLC focuses on a professional practice like writing, the scholarship of teaching and learning, a pedagogical topic, or a particular cohort of faculty (Cox, 2001; Cox & Richlin, 2004; Cuevas, Campbell, Lowery-Hart, Mallard, & Andersen, 2013; Loveless-Morris & Reid, 2018). By connecting faculty to each other, FLCs break down disciplinary silos and isolation—characteristics of academia that become more rigid during crises when faculty “hunker down.” In her note as series editor of Cox and Richlin’s (2004) signature volume about building FLCs, Svinicki says faculty speak of being isolated at their universities, but “the faculty learning communities movement can be a solution” (p. i). Likewise, Boice’s (1992) foundational work on new faculty reveals they feel lonely and experience isolation from colleagues. Boice discovered, however, that fostering collegial ties with fellow faculty was a significant determinant of job success and morale. To enhance feelings of connectivity among adjuncts at two-year colleges, another population of faculty who are estranged due to their part-time positions, Elizaga and Haynes (2013) formed an adjunct FLC that helped overcome disconnection usually inherent to the job. For mid-career or tenured faculty at advanced career stages who experience “mid-career malaise,” disillusionment with higher education, or limited social interaction on campus, FLCs provide renewed engagement in the profession and in collegiality. Karpiak (1997) and Blaisdell and Cox (2004) found that at midlife and beyond, faculty long for support networks and growth, contrary to the misleading perception of their lacking vitality. Other benefits of FLCs range from alleviation of faculty burnout (Sipple & Lightner, 2009) to effectiveness at addressing university-wide challenges and transforming institutions, especially when sponsored by CTLs. As Shulman, Cox, and Richlin (2004) claim, “FLCs can profoundly affect campus culture and may represent a major institutional change” (p. 42).

Not surprisingly, research on faculty writing groups—a particular type of FLC that focuses on the professional practice of scholarly writing—demonstrates that they do more than help faculty become productive writers. That is, they foster community with colleagues and can combat burnout and isolation, especially for underrepresented minority and female faculty (Friend & Gonzalez, 2019; Rafei, Sipple, & Skatar, 2013). Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald,

and Burns (2012) argue that writing groups provide a platform of social and emotional support contributing to personal well-being. For more than 15 years, Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) ran a faculty development program called “Professors as Writers” at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where they offered writing space and built collegial networks. Participants reported how this created an intellectual community that broke down the isolation they felt as scholars and teachers. Autoethnographic stories of a faculty writing group at a Canadian university also “celebrate... academia not as an isolating, disconnected place but as a nurturing, organic relationship that navigates instability and uncertainty” (Badenhorst et al., 2016, p. 6). Like other FLCs, writing groups not only address the isolation and emotional needs of individual faculty, but mitigate institutional instabilities as well. In fact, Gillespie et al. (2005) observed how a writing/research circle helped junior faculty adjust to increases in workload when there were more institutional demands for faculty service to sustain their newly formed institution. Ultimately, it is no wonder that writing groups aid burnout recovery as they have been a staple in American society for centuries that long operated with an ethics of care and community (Gere, 1987).

In the essay that ensues, we first overview institutional history and local context to the year-long faculty writing communities at VSU that we call “Faculty Writing Circles” and a correlating “Faculty Write Away! Retreat” during Spring Break at VSU’s CELT. Next, we follow innovative rhetorical field methods (e.g., McKinnon et al., 2016),¹ rather than traditional scientific methods, to analyze interrelated themes that emerged in the discourse from participants, including participant observations as fellow faculty writers, self-reflections as facilitators in the case of two of us, transcripts of e-mails and asynchronous online discussion forums from participants in the faculty writing circles, as well as personal narratives written by participants at the semester’s completion of a faculty writing circle and during a final activity at the writing retreat. This approach influences our writing in first

¹ Our method is inspired by rhetorical field methods that collect and analyze data through a range of tools to help answer research questions (McKinnon et al., 2016, p. 5). In our case, we utilize participant observations, self-reflections, personal narratives, electronic transcripts, and a needs assessment survey distributed to all faculty at the university for the original purpose of institutional research. Since FLCs, writing groups, as well as burnout are multifaceted highly-emotional human phenomena that are difficult to capture by one person’s narrative, in text alone, or with a survey, then we chose a mixed methodology that resists systemization as a social scientific method but which enabled us to discursively study how to recover from burnout and budget cuts by cultivating FLCs.

person and references to ourselves by first name. At the same time, however, we use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of other colleagues. Finally, we close with a call for administrators to (re)commit to community, especially after crises in higher education such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

From Dissertation Dive-Ins to CELT-Sponsored Faculty Writing Circles

Cox (2001) documents how FLCs resemble student learning communities that preceded them in higher education. The current Faculty Writing Circles at VSU have a similar history: They grew out of “Dissertation Dive-Ins” (DDIs) for graduate students. Given an explosion of admissions in graduate programs at VSU in the past decade and the subsequent number of graduate students needing mentorship in the dissertation phase, in 2015 the Graduate School asked the Director of VSU’s IDEA Center (which was an early iteration of a CTL) to brainstorm how to help these student writers progress. The Director of VSU’s Student Success Center joined the effort to design small support groups of six to eight graduate students who would meet weekly to exchange pages of progress and talk over concerns and strategies for overcoming writer’s block with one another and a faculty mentor.

When the Graduate School advertised the groups, the number of students interested far exceeded expectations and the initial groups were doubled within a semester. Maren, one of our Scholars-in-Residence at VSU’s IDEA Center, was asked to join the mentors in re-designing and expanding the pilot for the second semester. In addition to face-to-face groups, online groups were offered as part of the newly titled “Dissertation Dive Ins,” and each rapidly filled given a significant online graduate population at VSU. Other refinements included changing meetings to every other week to avoid overwhelming students, but a final major change happened, unplanned, the first week. In preparation for the first gathering, Maren examined the submitted goals of the students and saw a pattern in every student writing inventory: pleas for support and accountability. As the groups stood organized, students would only be offered direct support and made accountable two or three times per semester when submitting pages to peers. On impulse, Maren went into the shell for the DDIs in the online learning management system to create “Goal” spaces for every meeting date. She decided to ask each student to make and report on goals at every meeting for the first 20 minutes of the meetings, using the rest of the time (about an hour) to go over writing,

as initially planned. Maren made one other alteration: She determined to be a participant in the group, too, a mentor by example and presence, making writing goals alongside the students, reporting back, as they did. This choice was grounded in Maren's training as an English professor in egalitarian writing instruction. The results at semester's end were significant: Students made measurable progress with a supportive and sympathetic group dynamic. All DDIs follow this model to this day. The Graduate School has seen a great outcome: a substantial increase in students completing dissertations through the program and positive reviews from participants and dissertation advisors.

The DDIs crossed faculty lines a few years later. During Academic Year 2016-2017, Scholars-in-Residence at VSU's IDEA Center designed a needs assessment survey for all faculty at VSU to gauge interest in participation in faculty development programs that support teaching and scholarship, but also to gauge how faculty were feeling more generally. Thirty percent of VSU's full-time faculty filled out this survey (N=124) that was primarily quantitative, with a few open-ended qualitative questions, such as a concluding question that asked to expand on potential barriers. The results were sobering. Documented was low morale and faculty burnout from budget cuts, heavy workloads that included increased teaching, research, and service demands, administrative turnover, and recent layoffs of tenure-track faculty. This survey was not originally designed nor ever analyzed through the framework of the Maslach burnout inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996), the social scientific standard for measuring burnout. However, some results are similar, such as how faculty commented they were overextended and exhausted by their increased workloads and apathetic about faculty development, and they did not feel recognized for their accomplishments. What Maren saw most clearly in the survey results was a possible intervention—faculty pleading for writing support and discussion with colleagues. As she began brainstorming models for faculty writing groups, another IDEA Scholar explored writing retreats. In researching writing circles, Maren realized that the DDIs were a model. She piloted VSU's first center-sponsored Faculty Writing Circle during the Fall 2017 semester. Seven faculty warily signed up. Maren did not ask for a writing inventory or personal goals statements, since faculty indicated they already felt overwhelmed and isolated. Instead, Maren kept key questions in mind as she asked each faculty writer to introduce themselves to the group: What were their strengths and weaknesses as writers?; Their habits?; Their frustrations? At that first meet-

ing, faculty gradually relaxed as they heard colleagues faced the same struggles, and they expressed interest in their differing approaches to writing and meeting goals. Crucially, Maren identified herself as a facilitator *and* a member of the circle, as she had in the DDIs, but now as someone who also struggled to meet the myriad responsibilities of faculty.

That initial semester, Maren organized gatherings along similar lines to the DDIs: The Faculty Writing Circle met every other week, participants made goals and followed up on them together in each meeting, and everyone took turns sharing pages of progress. Maren observed an important trend in the goal sharing that took place the first 20 or 30 minutes of each meeting: She watched terrifically talented and caring fellow faculty slam themselves for having failed to make sufficient progress, even when they met many or all of their goals. Maren became mindful of the negative energy faculty can bring collectively to writing and themselves whenever the subject comes up. She called attention to this trend and instead invited her colleagues to find a different way of envisioning their work and themselves. Since she used the phrase, "Progress is progress!" in the DDIs, Maren introduced the same in the Faculty Writing Circle, highlighting and praising the successes of group members (even when not meeting every goal), and pointing out where faculty were not crediting themselves for work. In essence, Maren modeled and encouraged everyone to become cheerleaders and champions for faculty, as well as to practice self-care and feel less guilt.

Maren's approach aligns with a "growth mindset" advanced by psychologist Carol Dweck (2007) even though Maren was unaware of this idea when facilitating the DDIs and launching the Faculty Writing Circle. Dweck's research has recently grown in importance for higher education to examine student retention issues and persistence in college, faculty perceptions of student learning, course redesign and teaching strategies for growth, as well as what mindsets educators have of themselves that impacts their development and success (e.g. Boyd, 2014; Clark & Sousa, 2018; Lang, 2016; Shapiro & Dembitzer, 2019; Wentzell, Cox, & Richlin, 2020). According to Dweck (2007), a person with a "fixed mindset" believes intelligence is static and a deep-seated inherited trait. Thus, faculty with this deterministic view may avoid challenges or have low resilience in the face of obstacles, failure often leads to shame and doubts about their competence and ability since their fixed mindset defines success in terms of results, and they feel threatened by the accomplishments of others, among other negative outcomes. On the other end of the continuum, Dweck says people with a "growth mindset" believe intelligence and abilities can be developed with effort and learning.

Subsequently, for faculty with a growth mindset, Shapiro and Dembitzer (2019) explain, “Every challenge becomes an opportunity to improve, every misstep a chance to enhance our ever-changing intelligence” (p. 959). With a growth mindset, faculty are more likely to persist in the face of setbacks, see the capacity to learn and their ongoing effort as the path to mastery rather than focus on the perceived adequacy of results, and they find inspiration in the success of others, among other positive outcomes. Growth mindset is not only embodied by Maren, but also it is a theme in the discourse of another facilitator and participants in the Faculty Writing Circles at VSU, which we explore later in this essay.

At the end of that first semester, Maren asked participants in the pilot Faculty Writing Circle to provide feedback. There was consensus in that group members liked everything except reading and commenting on one another’s written work. They felt doing so cut their already minimal writing time, and as one faculty member observed, they had colleagues in their fields with whom they exchanged drafts to serve that purpose. What they primarily needed from the Faculty Writing Circle at VSU was goal-setting and accountability, a community on campus to share accomplishments, and a dedicated time and space to write. As a result, during the Spring 2018 semester, the second half of each meeting included individual writing time for the last 20-30 minutes. Some participants even peeled off to become “writing buddies.” This model is the one most often used now since even 15-20 minutes of reading, brainstorming, writing, editing, or thinking in peace and quiet is refreshing. For example, Maren wrote entire conference papers in those minutes, and others began new research streams or found inspiration for current writing projects.

As of July 1, 2018, the IDEA Center became the Center for Excellence in Learning & Teaching (CELT), with Jamie Landau (Jamie L) hired as the new full-time Director and Associate Professor of Communication Arts. CELT’s mission is to support faculty at VSU by providing professional development opportunities related to their roles as teachers, scholars, practitioners, and leaders throughout their career stages. Following this mission that expanded upon the IDEA Center, CELT takes a faculty-centric and holistic approach to professional development. A signature program of CELT is offering more than 10 FLCs each semester for faculty to work together to explore new pedagogy, support one another as a cohort when at a similar stage of their career, engage in cutting-edge conversations about a topic in higher education or strategic planning initiative, bond over another identity that might connect

them professionally or personally, and/or research and write together. Faculty Writing Circles align perfectly with CELT and continue to this day at VSU. Additions include a second concurrent circle facilitated by Jamie L., a two-day Faculty Write Away! Retreat over Spring Break at CELT co-facilitated by Jamie L., and reflective personal narratives at the end of each semester documenting not only what participants emotionally gained from being together in writing groups, but also, specifically, what projects they completed. Such reflections again highlight and affirm individual faculty accomplishments (and even surprise and impress faculty—we threw ourselves a party!). These narratives also provide a record for administrators to justify investing in CELT Faculty Writing Circles as a means for transforming campus culture after crisis by increasing scholarly productivity and fostering friendships among faculty across the university.

More than Writing: Building Community, Promoting a Growth Mindset, and Creating a Supportive Safe Space

Several interrelated themes emerged in the discourse about the CELT Faculty Writing Circles and the Faculty Write Away! Retreat. First, community-building across disciplines and ranks was a prominent theme. As evident by Maren's previous description of launching and facilitating the initial writing groups, faculty emphasized the sense of community they felt from being part of a writing circle, no longer feeling alone in their struggles, alienated toward others, and siloed at VSU, which are indicators of burnout. In an online discussion board in which writing circle participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, Nicky wrote, "I have been a member of the circle since Fall 2017, and I keep coming back because working in community with other faculty encourages me to focus on accountability to myself and helps me maintain my joy, about research and writing (which isn't always easy)." Notice how Nicky's apathy about conducting research is going away thanks to this faculty writing community. Another faculty member, June, described how she grew to "love" her writing group with "peers":

If my relationship with writing group is a love story, it's not love at the first sight. It's difficult to cut out time for research and writing when there are lots of other obligations to fulfill so I often felt defeated at the beginning and blamed myself for not being productive as other group members. But over the period of two semesters, I found out that I actually begin to FALL IN LOVE with writing group.

My participation changed from passive attendance to active participation. And I was looking forward to the Tuesdays instead of dreading it.

The group is such a supportive and relaxing environment that I don't self-talk down myself anymore. I still learn to master the skill of listing realistic goals and pushing myself out of my comfort zone and becoming a little bit more ambitious in my goals. I celebrate my progresses, even when they are small. Because, progress is progress! My peers motivate me with their commitment to research and their accomplishments. Maren is a great group leader for us. She is both encouraging and understanding.

Like June, participants continued to comment on how writing communities helped them not only set and achieve their writing goals but also motivate them as well. Meg noted, "The writing group served as an external motivator to help me meet my writing goals in the midst of a teaching and service heavy semester." While writing goals and accomplishments varied from person to person, members identified progress on manuscripts, book chapters, conference papers, and other scholarship. The productivity achieved by participants is consistent with Ward and Selvester's (2012) finding that FLCs provide a social network and supportive structure for faculty to be successful in their professional endeavors. Unlike faculty who continue to feel burned out, participants' professional efficacy increased. The boost in productivity also aligns with studies by Johnson and Ryba (2015) and Yee and Hargis (2012) that show CTLs are key places for faculty socialization and support of scholarship.

Sentiments like June's about being motivated by the accomplishments of others and no longer blaming herself nor feeling defeated by perceived failure in a part of her job—a related theme of "growth mindset" that we discuss more in the next paragraph—were also expressed at CELT's Faculty Write Away! Retreat that drew faculty from across employee groups and colleges, whether tenured full professors in the humanities, associate professors in the sciences, assistant professors in nursing, contract lecturers, or adjunct faculty. Although the retreat was open to all faculty on campus, more than half of the faculty who came were members of the writing circles, once again revealing their bond as a community. An official learning outcome for the retreat was "Faculty will engage in community-building across disciplines to create a community of practice." At the end of the retreat, participants were asked to reflect on learning outcomes by writing anonymous responses on poster boards hanging on the walls in CELT. The following narratives from

faculty indicate that the retreat helped them “Encourage one another through writing even though we are in different disciplines,” as they, “Talked to colleagues from across campus and learned a lot from them about how what we do is similar and different.” One participant stated, “I like to join others to encourage each other on writing,” while another “Felt like I met others in ‘the same boat’ with whom I can relate.” These comments about the benefits of being in community are similar to those expressed in Felton, Moore, and Strickland’s (2009) research on a faculty writing residency that included a “welcomed kind of peer pressure” and “going public” with SoTL (p. 51), a four-day version of the Write Away! Retreat sponsored by Elon University’s Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning.

As we further reflect on what those responses demonstrated, we realize disciplinary divides were broken down and community well-being with a growth mindset became the focus. In fact, when facilitating the retreat and a writing circle, Jamie L. envisioned herself as a coach who emotionally supports and inspires faculty colleagues to succeed individually *and* as a team when confronted with challenges, a growth mindset approach similar to how Maren models and encourages colleagues to become cheerleaders of themselves and champions the efforts of each other, irrespective of “the results” (e.g. progress is progress!). Petrone and Ortquist-Ahrens (2004) claim that an effective FLC facilitator is a “champion” and “energizer” (p. 64) by motivating participants to take risks, make changes, and overcome barriers while nurturing enjoyment, empathy, and a climate of mutual respect so each person’s voice is heard. This contrasts with fixed mindset thinking that Clark and Sousa (2018) say thrives too often in academic workspaces: “When things fail—such as publications, grants, or teaching innovations—shame and silence about this failure are far more likely than growth-focused open sharing and gratitude for the opportunity to learn” (p. 28). As a result, Clark and Sousa suggest the creation of communities of practice akin to faculty writing communities, wherein:

[T]hese groups directly challenge fixed mindset thinking and cultures by reducing stigma about challenging experiences and failure, promote mutual support and sharing, and the opportunity to learn and grow from others' challenges too. Discussions of career or classroom failures can provide vital permission for others to share their own challenges—and break the links common in the fixed mindset between performance and competency. This sharing, if open and authentic, and particularly from senior or more experienced staff, chal-

lenges the tendency for fixed mindset thinking to perpetuate culturally over time. (p. 29)

In other words, VSU's Faculty Writing Circles and Faculty Write Away! Retreat are about more than writing—they build community and promote a growth mindset to recover from burnout. These findings align with Rands, Bender, Gillette, and Orgler's (2017) assertion that "a community of faculty who share a common interest...can create connections across departmental divides and take collective responsibility for managing and sharing the knowledge and resources they need to be successful" (p. 61).

A third interrelated theme was the creation of both a psychologically and physically supportive "safe space" that cultivated care for faculty writers themselves, their colleagues, and VSU. This is another departure from the depression and detachment that occurs with burnout. Comments ranged from affirming peers and no longer beating themselves up to having a "safe space" and locating the perfect writing spot at CELT. Jamie Workman (Jamie W.) emphasized her status as an assistant professor who feels "safe" in the circle and at the retreat. When asked for feedback on her writing circle through the online discussion board, Jamie W. wrote:

I LOVE our writing group! We are incredibly supportive of each other and that is something I truly value. Also, being a part of this group has helped me make my scholarship a priority and not put it on the back burner. The goal setting is also a really important part of this process for me. I feel like I should be accountable to myself and the group and try to make as much progress on my goals as possible! I also like that we have created a "safe space" to talk about challenges (i.e. with co-authors) or just get the opinion of the group on various topics.

Jamie W. explained that, as a pre-tenured faculty at a comprehensive university, she now knows she is not alone when her scholarship gets sidelined by teaching and service demands. Having the "safe" opportunity in the circle and later at the retreat to interact with supportive peers who experience the same challenges she does, even after they earn tenure, helped Jamie W. know that when her research takes priority over another aspect of her job, that it is not only okay, but also what she is *supposed* to be doing at times. These experiences parallel earlier research on faculty writing groups at a comprehensive university that found they provided "support for faculty at various stages in their career... an intellectual community of scholars that need not be divided or defined based on traditional boundaries or labels such as 'tenured,' 'associate professor,' and the like" (Hampton-Farmer et

al., 2013, p. 61). Dave felt so strongly about the emotional support he received from his circle that he elaborated in a letter addressed to the VSU's administration:

It's been enjoyable to share our joys and frustrations in our various fields of publication, as in the past I had no one with whom to compare notes. It was satisfying to discuss issues such as: What do we do when a publication has had a paper for almost a year and has given no feedback? How do we deal with collaborators who don't meet deadlines? How should we deal with publications that don't seem to be a good match for our field or topics of research? How can we "re-purpose" a paper, and send it elsewhere? And how much should we "beat ourselves up" when we don't achieve our own goals or deadlines? These topics and more were discussed throughout the semester in a personal, supportive, and constructive manner by Maren and others. I feel people helped each other to "achieve quality outcomes," as we all say in academia.

Similar thoughts were shared in an anonymous personal narrative of a CELT Faculty Writing Circle when one faculty wrote, "I appreciate the affirming emails and the reminders to get back on the wagon that come with each meeting." Another faculty member stated, "This writing group appreciates our differences, and provides an accepting and supportive experience." This next participant described how departmental silos were broken down, resulting in feelings of "fitting in":

It was useful to be able to talk about writing within the context of academic culture and practices. Silos exist within our department as well as across the campus, so it was very helpful to fit into a group where we could define successes and analyze setbacks...[I]t was extremely important to hear about all the types of work that goes into the topic of writing, editing, revising, compiling, presenting.

The physicality of the building that houses CELT also helped construct a supportive community at VSU. CELT is located on the edge of main campus in a beautiful two-story historic house with multiple meeting rooms and gathering spaces where faculty can work together or alone, and where they can socialize in the lounge, in the kitchen, or on the front porch. Coffee, couches, and sofa chairs with cushions, rocking chairs, and fireplaces add to this welcoming atmosphere. Retreat participants recognized the constitutive function of the space when, for instance, they "found good relaxing places to write," "found a nice, cozy spot upstairs," discovered that "the porch at CELT is my ideal writing spot," and "located a quiet, uncovered desk where

I would successfully write.” Elbow and Sorcinelli’s (2006) description of the faculty writing space that they created at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst sums up what now exists at VSU: “This is a quiet, comfortable working space for faculty, free of the distractions of office or home. It is also a common space, predicated on the notion that faculty will be more apt to do the solitary work of writing if they surround themselves with other writers pursuing the same goal” (p. 18).

Conclusion

Nearly 30 years ago, Boyer (1990) described the need in U.S. higher education for renewal after darker times. We believe that his claim is worth repeating given current crises across the country and what happened at VSU, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty burnout should be taken as seriously as and in conversation with budget cuts and student issues. Recent studies show an increase in concern for college student mental health needs (Chessman & Taylor, 2019). Is there a parallel study for faculty wellbeing? Perhaps there should be, as affect is labor and capital that will be depleted if not replenished. For example, Aguilar (2018) documents how burnout and lack of resilience in K-12 teachers has already had a serious financial cost, resulting in a teacher turnover rate of 20% in the U.S. that makes it hard for schools to accumulate professional capital and negatively impacts student learning. Existing empirical evidence shows serious consequences of burnout for faculty and universities, such as ill health and reduced work activity (Sabagh et al., 2018, p. 142). In turn, Minter (2009) and Shah et al. (2018) call for interventions to faculty burnout, claiming it can be reversed and faculty vitality restored with individual and institutional changes. As our essay illustrates, community-building is urgent to help individual faculty and institutions become resilient.

Administrators and faculty developers in CTLs would be wise to cultivate community by specifically investing in faculty writing communities, whether a university is designated as a research or teaching institution, and especially in response to the current pandemic. Doing so implements Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach’s (2006) future agenda for faculty development where CTLs take a leadership role on campuses by fostering institutional change. Lip service to supporting faculty writing is insufficient. Instead, a (re)commitment to community and writing has the potential to be an intervention for faculty burnout, to transform campus culture with a growth mindset, and to complement other structural changes and inequities

in academia that need to be addressed in the early 21st-Century U.S. (e.g. increased faculty workloads, adjunctification of higher education, COVID-19 pandemic).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, VSU faculty need writing circles even more. They are feeling overwhelmed by work again and isolated from colleagues due to social distancing. For example, in March of 2020, Maren pivoted the Faculty Writing Circle fully online and continued to offer it virtually for the next academic year by using synchronous video conferencing, in addition to leveraging the university's online learning management system for goal setting like she always did. This writing group online continues to be a lifeline and to shift faculty mindsets during the crisis of the pandemic, as attested by one of the long-standing participants, Jamie W. During the first meeting of Fall 2020 semester, Jamie W. shared that she almost did not join the FLC again. The first meeting occurred mid-September and Jamie W. admitted to already feeling burned out after laboring through the spring and summer to revise courses to be delivered in new modalities, adapting to new campus safety protocols associated with COVID-19, and spending countless hours in video conference administrative meetings that were previously face-to-face. Even the thought of another online meeting, and having to do anything beyond what *had* to be done, was exhausting. However, by the end of the hour-long first Faculty Writing Circle, Jamie W. felt a renewed sense of enthusiasm toward her scholarship as well as a rejuvenated connection with peers—much needed for resilience during a pandemic.

As Wentzell, Cox, and Richlin (2020) declare about the importance of a growth mindset in the COVID-19 era, “In challenging times like these, we may be inclined to question our abilities.... We need to recall our own past successes in the face of adversity, and remind ourselves that this, too, shall pass. In addition, it is important to seek the support and advice of others we trust and admire. We will rise to the challenge” (p. 1). We second their claim but also restate that we must continue to broaden the role of CTLs by moving from transforming faculty to transforming institutions, similar to what occurred at Quinnipiac University (Clark & Saulnier, 2010). Educators can improve their resilience, but our ability to be resilient is connected to our circumstances. As Aguilar (2018) emphasizes about K-12 schools and we reiterate for higher education:

Focusing on individual well-being and action is not enough. If the conditions and context in which teachers work are suboptimal, it is not enough to tell teachers to sleep more, check their attitude, and be

grateful.... To address burnout and turnover, leaders in organizations must take responsibility for substantially improving the conditions in which people work.... We must address the macro, political, and economic context of our education system. (pp. 5-6)

Faculty writing communities are by no means the only forms of faculty development for recovering from burnout and budget cuts, with or without a pandemic going on. Nor can they fully change institutional culture without other systematic solutions. But they heal, and for now, we are cautiously optimistic at VSU.

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