

4 reminders of why we work with purpose in higher ed

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Living through the pandemic calls us to careers with impact—and higher ed has a tremendous impact

The COVID-19 pandemic suspended life as we know it and caused us to question things we used to take for granted. We look back on a full year ago when schedules packed full of appointments, social gatherings, and errands were suddenly wiped clean. Work shifted from bustling campuses and office buildings to improvised home workstations, carved out in corners of dining rooms or spare bedrooms.

Naturally, many of these changes have created a sense of loss. However, in the midst of the disorientation, some have found opportunity. For many, this season has prompted evaluation of life choices—including career. A crisis can be a key inflection point to make a decisive shift into something more meaningful.

A [career](#) in higher education has resonated with many as a way to make a lasting difference. Colleges and universities are shaping the next generation of leaders. They are our future. The students in classrooms today will rise to meet the challenges of tomorrow. Individuals working at every level of higher education help students to become thoughtful, resilient, and innovative leaders who will make a difference. Education leaves a lasting legacy. This sense of purpose has only intensified during the pandemic. Students have banded together to adapt to new learning platforms, care for their community, and grow in fresh ways.

While work in higher education appropriately focuses on serving students, the reality is that students give back in countless ways. Here are four of the benefits students provide to those of us working in higher education:

1. **A strong connection to values.** Working with students reminds us why we do what we do. It is easy to get lost in the daily grind and forget why we are passionate about our work. Whether we are articulating lessons to students as an educator or watching students wrestle with ideas for the first time, we benefit. As students understand ideas,

we are invited to appreciate our principles once again. Getting back to the basics can be fundamental for centering ourselves in the present and ensuring continued success.

2. **A fresh perspective.** Students arrive on campus with an extra dose of animation and optimism. Their energy reinvigorates the campus community upon every return. The expectation and confidence of collegiates is a potent antidote to cynicism and malaise. Student creativity and insights routinely spur innovation in those working among them.
3. **A sense of community.** Campuses foster a sense of identity and belonging among the students, staff, and alumni that are part of them. The community spirit travels beyond the grounds of the campus, as institutions of higher education are integral parts of their communities. The whole town comes to life when the cars heaped full of boxes show up for move-in day. Students remind us that we are a part of a larger group and that each of us can contribute to the wellbeing of our neighbor.
4. **An eye to the future.** Higher education is in the business of equipping and mobilizing. Student populations are in constant motion. New students arrive, grow, and step out into the world. Students bring a forward momentum that prevents those in higher education from getting stuck or short-sighted. Students remind us to get outside ourselves as we meet the challenges of the moment and the opportunities of the future.

I have worked many years in higher education and it just never gets “old.” In fact, nothing could be further from it. I am constantly challenged by my professional colleagues, stimulated by new ideas, and inspired by the students for whom we collaborate to serve.

It bears underscoring that a career in higher education is possible for individuals with diverse skill sets. Additional to our celebrated teachers and accomplished administrators are counselors, accountants, housing managers, maintenance teams, grounds crews, and food-service workers. One positive result of the pandemic is that more people have recognized the vital service every type of frontline worker provides, day-in and day-out.

Higher education is a rewarding profession with a meaningful mission. The COVID-19 pandemic may have upended our activities, but it has only sharpened our resolve and strengthened our purpose. One year later, we have a fresh opportunity to step forward with renewed focus on the vital role education plays in each of our lives—as well as those who may wish to join us in our professional calling.

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