CHAPTER 22.

INTIMATE PRACTICES FOR NEOLIBERAL AND PANDEMIC TIMES

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Recent scholarship in writing studies has documented the impact of neoliberalism on the academic community (Stenberg; Welch and Scott). Neoliberalism, as we're defining it here, is "an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life" (Brown 30). Neoliberalism, thus functioning as an ideology with profound consequences for human communities, calls for an understanding of its impact and potential responses.

We encounter neoliberalism in all aspects of our lives: from our work to our private lives, from the informational media we consume to entertainment media, and increasingly in the public sphere, within educational institutions, and at all levels of government. Within university administrative contexts this mode of reasoning often is accompanied by dwindling budgets, retrenchment, and top-down decision-making. Questions accompanying the retrenchment and redistribution of resources within academic contexts include: What kinds of courses are most "valuable"? What is the value-added worth of one major over another? What is the return-on-investment of a particular major, or of a college degree itself? What areas of professional, academic endeavor merit serious investment by the institution? What are the political risks and costs (in terms of public support) of reaffirming faculty governance vs. top-down administrative decision-making? What is, in dollar terms, the value attached to universities and public institutions broadly? All of these questions pre-date, but have been re-emphasized since, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which put additional stressors—logistical, health-related, and especially financial—on institutions of higher education nationally.

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Given this economic framing, in our own experiences we have observed that the academic, neoliberal context is characterized on multiple levels by four kinds of dynamics: 1) competition as a defining element of professional relationships; 2) the pressure for efficiency; 3) an emphasis on individual (and often private) decision-making or achievement, suppressing collective or collaborative actions which are often cast in terms of "redundancies"; and 4) an impulse toward "standardizing" decision-making processes, such as decision-making focused on the distribution—or redistribution—of limited resources. All of these dynamics discourage the kind of reflection (and supporting organizational structures for reflection) that leads to the cultural work of challenging institutional inequities and forging new practices.

As we search for new ways to engage with the neoliberal pressures on agency that confound our work, we believe that looking back on U.S. clubwomen's work may help us imagine strategies for productive leadership in these neoliberal times. In this chapter we examine two moments of administrative challenge during which neoliberal assumptions come to the fore and suggest how faculty's and administrators' responses to these challenges might be informed by the insights of Anne Ruggles Gere's scholarship on U.S. women's clubs at the turn of the 20th century. We draw on scenarios from our home institutions in order to explore the dynamics of neoliberalism on our campuses and the efforts at collective agency to address those dynamics. Ultimately, we focus especially on the promise of critical reflection, reimagined as a collaborative and public strategy for leadership in the increasingly corporatized and neoliberal higher educational context in which we find ourselves.

Within neoliberal contexts authoritarian perspectives "exploit [challenges or crises] in order to consolidate power" (Snyder 103). Even in the absence of such exploitation, however, real or perceived crises actually increase our reliance on others for sharing responsibilities and resources. Yet the pressures of efficiency and competition, made manifest especially through eroding resources and streamlined reporting structures, promote an understanding of neoliberal expertise as solitary, even unitary—just the kind of dynamic that succeeds in propagating a cycle of competition and individualism. Within such a context, deans, for example, may frown on the distribution of course releases or other support to multiple faculty, seeing such distribution as promoting "redundancy" rather than supporting distributed leadership. Such a framing makes even more difficult the pursuit of collaborative, reflective work, as individuals are increasingly siloed into narrowly defined roles and job descriptions. At the same time, any decision-making that might benefit from collective, faculty-administration reflection—reflection that mobilizes affect and results in shifts in the institutional culture—is moved to strictly administrative (or staff) oversight.

Specifically, it is the cultural and affective or emotional work that 19th- and 20th-century women's clubs achieved over time, and which Gere explores at length, that is most significant for thinking through many of the challenges inherent in a 21st-century academy profoundly shaped by neoliberalism as well as by lingering effects of the pandemic. Furthermore, these women's clubs illustrate the reflective and collaborative strategies that faculty and administrators might adopt to address neoliberal challenges. Gere writes:

> Women's clubs were part of public life, but as intermediate institutions located between the family and the state, they also fostered intimacy among members. That is, clubs had political as well as personal dimensions, and literacy figured prominently in both. Although clubs occupied a subordinate political position, they offered strong and creative resistance to that subordination through literacy practices that cultivated the making of meaning in the company of others. At the same time that clubwomen used literacy to resist the limitations, distortions, and denigrations imposed on them, they used it to develop strong affective ties. Literacy is, as Roger Chartier has observed, at once a private, hidden practice and manifestation of power, "power more effective than that of public office," and clubwomen used this power in their cultural work on behalf of the nation and themselves. (13)

We propose that the leadership needed to interrogate the status quo of power and control in the neoliberal university must attend to both the cultural (political) and affective (personal) dimensions of academic life. Such leadership draws on Gere's "ideas and analytical perspectives which are capable of deconstructing [institutional] interests and political processes" (Reynolds and Vince 4)—at times directly challenging long-standing assumptions about what's "best" for the university while simultaneously having the potential to build personal bonds between individuals (both faculty and administrators alike).

Effective leadership in the 21st-century neoliberal university includes personal as well as political dimensions. In this chapter we use personal experience and observation culled from our respective institutional contexts as sources of knowledge-making and analysis, an approach affirmed in much of Anne Gere's scholarship. Such experience and observation very frequently (though not always) mobilize literate acts which challenge prevailing ideologies and help to form affective bonds within a community. These literate acts may take a range of forms and formats, from targeted email communications to faculty handbooks to policy statements and even mission statements (or the critique of mission

statements). Due to workplace climates (including in higher education) "which are increasingly governed by risk aversion, fear of blame and economic stringency" (Fook et al. 2), however, such literate acts of leadership as those we describe in the following are increasingly rare. But they are necessary for maintaining the integrity of, among other principles, academic freedom and for pushing forward the internal, cultural progress of universities, which is required to maintain the integrity of the research and teaching enterprises. These literate acts of leadership are also necessary for communicating to the larger public the goals and value of higher education more broadly.

PROTEST AND AFTERMATH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

The first scenario we consider took place at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), the state's flagship campus. In late August 2017, a small group of protesters assembled outside the student union where an undergraduate student was recruiting students to form a campus chapter of Turning Point USA (TPUSA). The undergraduate began to film the protest, and one of the protesters, a graduate student who was also employed as a lecturer, began a verbal exchange with the undergraduate that grew heated. According to an American Association of University Professors (AAUP) investigative report, the protest ended shortly thereafter when the undergraduate, who was upset by the confrontation, packed up her table and left (Monnier et al. sec. 2). As the report notes, the undergraduate sent the video she had taken to a TPUSA colleague shortly after the protest ended, and "Within a few hours, Campus Reform, a conservative student news outlet, and similar websites posted the video taken by Ms. Mullen," the undergraduate student (sec. 2). The follow-up to this event lays bare the challenges of post-secondary leadership in neoliberal times in which practices of shared governance are challenged by a tendency toward privatizing and streamlining decision-making and by a privileging of efficiency. In this particular case, as well, we'll explore the important place of affect and collective reflection in this work of standing ground and rebounding from a violation of trust—intimate practices for neoliberal times.

Perhaps not surprisingly, representations of this conflict (and comments about it) began circulating on social media within 48 hours. Numerous published accounts of this incident and its aftermath provide details, but—in broad strokes—the graduate student/lecturer was removed from her classroom teaching duties, initially for her own and her students' safety (Kolowich; Glass; Schleck). According to the AAUP report on the incident, there was considerable media coverage, including an opinion piece published in a local newspaper by three Nebraska

state legislators alleging that the university was hostile toward conservative students and insinuating that the investigation of this incident was dishonest, and an open records request from the Nebraska Republican Party which surfaced a set of email messages between a current and former university administrator in which they worried about the climate on campus for conservative students (Mennier et al. sec. 2). In the midst of this swirl of publicity, the university was also facing the possibility of severe budget cuts as the state government was facing a very large tax revenue shortfall. Eventually, the graduate student/lecturer was informed that she would retain her stipend and benefits but she would not be permitted to resume teaching in the spring semester because the university anticipated further threats to her safety (Erdman, qtd. in Mennier et al. sec. 2). In essence, her removal from the classroom would extend to the end of her contract.

By the time the AAUP imposed censure on the administration at UNL in 2018, faculty had repeatedly and collectively signaled its disagreement with the administration's handling of this case. As early as a September 5, 2017, meeting of the Faculty Senate, one senator took the floor during the open mic time and drew the faculty senate's attention to the incident which had begun to garner local news coverage ("UNL" [September] sec. 7.4). On October 3, 2017, UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green made a routine appearance at the faculty senate meeting, but it was his first address to the senate on this topic since the incident ("UNL" [October] sec. 3.0).

A look at the October 3 minutes provides an interesting representation of the dynamics of collective reflection as a feature of shared governance. As the minutes state, Chancellor Green "reminded the Senate to not believe everything that people have heard or read about the way things have been handled in regards to the incident that occurred on August 25. He noted that the university has dealt with the issue in an appropriate and private manner although others have tried to make it a public issue" ("UNL" [October] sec. 3.0). One faculty member asked "if at some point the true facts of what happened at the August 25 incident will be made [public] to some subset of the faculty" to which Chancellor Green responded that "some of the information is confidential because it is a personnel issue" ("UNL" [October] sec. 3.0). In these earliest public exchanges, we see calls from faculty for a less neoliberal and more collective approach to due process—one that involves faculty review. In addition, we see a warning about the dangers of "trusting" circulating news stories. Ironically, rebuilding trust among faculty and administrators is exactly the cultural work that the campus will have to undertake in the aftermath of the lecturer's eventual dismissal following her political activity on campus.

Before turning to an account of the collective work that has seemed crucial to rebuilding trust, it is important to note neoliberal dynamics at play in this

controversy. Most pronounced is the chancellor's relegation of this decision to a private, legal matter rather than a collective concern of the faculty. It is this tension (between privatization and a more collective deliberation at the heart of shared governance) that vexes public colleges and universities as they pursue shared governance in an increasingly neoliberal environment. The political stakes, of course, complicated this moment even further: State legislators were weighing in; state-aided budgets were at risk. Intimate practices for these neoliberal times require that we recognize the affective experiences that are inevitably tied to such high stakes—the sense of threat, perhaps unexpected, as a student embarks on their first effort at political work involving recruiting other students and facing resistance; the sense of threat experienced by an individual instructor faced with an organization such as TPUSA that publishes a "professor watch list" designed to intimidate; the sense of political threat to the autonomy of the post-secondary institution as legislators publicly (mis)represent the experience of students on campus and call for reduced public support of the campus; the disappointment of a governing body denied insight into the dispensation of a case that *feels like* the disciplining of a teacher who exercised her right to free speech in a public space that happened to be on campus (despite its characterization by the institution as an issue of safety).

Among the events that played out in the wake of the graduate student/lecturer's removal from the classroom in 2017 was a meeting between university administrators and three state senators who had called for the lecturer's termination. One of the senators asked the university to consult with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), assuming (presumably) that the organization would identify the lecturer's speech as intimidating or silencing by its intensity. In a letter to the university's chancellor, Adam Steinbaugh, a senior program officer with the organization, instead argued for the reinstatement of the lecturer, writing in defense of speech protected by the first amendment: "'Words,'" he wrote, quoting from the case of *Cohen v. California*, "'are often chosen as much for their emotive as their cognitive force'" (7). He went on to note, "The university can ask, but it cannot *require*, students and faculty to be polite when confronted with expression they find to be morally repugnant" (7).

Interestingly, only a few days earlier, another letter was also in circulation. Posted to the Nebraska Chapter of the AAUP's website and delivered to the University of Nebraska Board of Regents, the letter begins with the following lines:

> We are concerned that at the highest levels of the University of Nebraska system, decisions involving the future of the University are being made without transparency or proper governance and under improper exertions of influence by the

> legislative and executive branches of the state government. We fear that financial hostage-taking by members of the state government will result in changes by the administration in the intellectual offerings of the University and opportunities for our students. We believe it is imperative to express our alarm now, before irrevocable damage is done to the mission of the university and the value it contributes to the state of Nebraska. (Schleck et al.)

Here, too, the tone carries an emotional charge in terms of "fear" and "alarm" that is sustained throughout the letter. This tone helps to amplify the convictions the letter writers seek to convey—that the work of a university and the free-speech rights of campus community members are settled law and norms that should not be violated. The cultural work of the letter, though, allowed the faculty from across the University of Nebraska system's four campuses (including the campus at the center of the controversy) to identify collectively with the shared principles expressed in the letter and with each other. More than three hundred signatures were collected in the three weeks between the removal of the lecturer from the classroom and the December 2017 Board of Regents meeting where the letter was read aloud.

In one way, the letter might be seen as a failure in the sense that the lecturer was not reinstated and the administration gave no ground on allowing any kind of peer review of this decision to remove a teacher from the classroom (Monnier et al. sec. 4). That said, the letter codified the commitments of the signers and, as it circulated, drew attention to the principles at stake in this decision. It also helped to clarify, for faculty on UNL's campus, needed changes to the bylaws which would make clear that reassignment to non-teaching duties through the end of one's contract amounts to a suspension from teaching and, thus, should be grounds for filing a due-process grievance on campus. (Administrators had argued that the graduate student/lecturer wasn't hurt by this employment action because she continued to be employed. She had only been reassigned to non-teaching duties.)

Ultimately the administration and a subset of faculty did work together to revise the bylaws concerning major reassignments through the end of one's contract. This change to the bylaws was significant in the AAUP's decision to remove the institution from censure in 2021. In addition, the chancellor and members of his senior leadership team participated in a professionally-moderated retreat with members of the faculty senate executive committee that was focused on clarifying shared commitments to principles of due process and shared governance—a retreat in which one of the co-authors participated.

A LITERATE ACT OF LEADERSHIP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN-DEARBORN

While the prior example explores efforts at and deferments of collective reflection on a very public moment involving the University of Nebraska faculty senate and other constituents on campus, the next scenario considers a literate action taken by the faculty senate of the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D) in response to a top-down (classically neoliberal) administrative decision which significantly undermined trust between the chancellor's office and the faculty while also threatening the principles of shared governance. This literate response arguably fostered "intimacy among [faculty] members," and had "political as well as personal dimensions" (Gere 13) that contributed (along with other factors) to changes in the campus culture.

In early June of 2021 the faculty senate of the UM-D campus sent a letter signed by 160 faculty members to the campus' chancellor, Domenico Grasso, protesting his sudden firing of the campus' provost, Susan Alcock (UM-Dearborn). Alcock had served less than two years on the job and was fired without cause or faculty consultation. Grasso's brief email announcement of a "Provost Transition" in May of 2021, subsequently posted online, came as a shock to most faculty. It offered no details about why the change in leadership was happening, noting simply that Alcock was "stepping down" and that the university was "grateful for her leadership" (Grasso). Nevertheless, this administrative decision was widely understood among faculty and staff as resulting from a relatively minor disagreement between the two leaders about a small campus initiative.

Some important background: a regional commuter campus of about nine thousand students in the Detroit metropolitan area, UM-D for years before the pandemic had been under significant economic strain due to dwindling overall enrollments, while at the same time it was serving an increasingly diverse (and strained itself) student body. These multiple stressors not surprisingly weighed heavily on faculty, whose teaching loads are much higher than those on the flagship campus in Ann Arbor and who often also identify teaching as not only a professional priority but a political commitment. Faculty teach many non-traditional students who themselves balance family and full-time work responsibilities along with their college coursework. Students are refugees from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria (the city of Dearborn having the highest proportion of Arab Americans in the US) and include others who have served as English-Arabic translators for the U.S. military or who are veterans of the U.S. military themselves. Many students are recent immigrants, the children of immigrants, or international students hailing from dozens of nations within the Middle East (especially Lebanon and Palestine), from Europe (especially eastern Europe),

Asia, Africa, and South America. And a large number of students are L2 and 1.5 Generation language learners and first-generation college students. Approximately 40% of the university's undergraduates are first-generation (Tuxbury).

Not surprisingly, such demographic, socio-political, and linguistic complexities in the student body lead to significant challenges—both professionally and pedagogically—especially for faculty who have high teaching loads. In the spring of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic added to these existing pressures, as both students and faculty transitioned to required remote and hybrid options while also safeguarding their own and others' well-being. The personal and professional stakes for faculty during this time increased exponentially, as they did for faculty across the country.

Alcock, an archaeologist and past MacArthur fellow who was tenured at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and previously had served as interim provost on UM's Flint campus, was hired at Dearborn in 2019 just prior to the onset of the pandemic. Very early on Alcock's leadership style emphasized offering frequent (optional) meetings with faculty and staff, which one of the co-authors often attended. These "listening sessions" became more frequent with the pandemic: With no preset agenda and an open question-and-answer format, the sessions centered on listening to and "closing the loop" on faculty's questions and concerns, striking an unusually personal tone in word and visual effect (e.g., including in view of her camera during one Zoom session a dog she had adopted mid-pandemic).

During her time on campus she garnered rave reviews from faculty and staff for her interpersonal style, and especially for her handling of the pandemic and its impact on teaching and learning (Alcock). The faculty senate letter in reaction to her dismissal therefore expressed surprise, dismay, and—in contrast to past correspondences—a pointed challenge to the chancellor to explain his decision and address the mistrust it had engendered. The letter began:

> The abrupt departure of Provost Alcock has come as a shock to many of our faculty and raised a number of questions about why she has left after such a short tenure, and what the next steps are for the university. It is highly unusual for a provost to leave on such short notice, with so little warning and explanation. The Faculty Senate asks that Chancellor Grasso uphold his commitment to shared governance and provide an explanation for this action, as well as offer a clearer statement on its implications for our future direction.
>
> Of particular concern is the striking discrepancy between Provost Alcock's sudden departure and the support Provost Alcock has gained among the faculty in this crisis year.

> During her short tenure here, Provost Alcock has successfully built a relationship of trust with the faculty. Her distinct leadership style, pairing direct and clear statements about her own perspectives with a strong emphasis on listening and participatory involvement to gather others' perspectives, allowed for numerous initiatives (including through the strategic planning and implementation process) that many faculty perceived as promoting and developing our strengths as a campus. Provost Alcock's efforts have been even more impressive considering that they were accomplished under the unique challenges experienced by all of us during this unprecedented global pandemic. (UM-Dearborn Faculty Senate)

Words such as "striking" and "shock" convey the emotional impact of the provost's firing among faculty, a tenor which was unheard of in previous communications from the Faculty Senate. Historically such communications were assiduously devoid of pathos. The letter's pathos suggesting distrust is furthered by two important points: first, uncertainty among faculty going forward about the integrity of shared governance and, second, wider fears about "the future of our institution." The final two pages of the letter consist of a litany of pointed questions for the chancellor about the lack of transparency in the process of and follow-up to the firing, about the specifics of the provost's removal and implications for "campus initiatives and strategic direction," and about implications for shared governance. On the annual performance evaluation of administrators which shortly followed the faculty senate's letter, an overwhelming majority of faculty members reacted negatively to the chancellor's overall performance and specifically to the firing of the provost (University of Michigan Administration Evaluation). Representative comments included a sense that the "sudden and secretive move" was "confusing" and "disconcerting."[1] One long-time faculty member commented, "I also would like to know why the first Provost that actually listened to the faculty was fired."

Although the chancellor never responded publicly to any of the questions posed in the faculty senate's letter, this letter nevertheless stands out in combining an attention to the practical matter of the administration's decision and the deeper, philosophical and affective impact of these events. Like the clubwomen whose cultural work Gere so elegantly explores, senators composing the

1 Comments originally submitted by faculty are not available for reading at this point on the UM administration's webpage, where a note indicates that "The free-form anonymous advice and confidential remarks included in the survey have been submitted to the appropriate administrators." See https://aec.umich.edu/.

letter—and indeed the wider faculty community, who three and a half years later have organized a union (UM-Dearborn AAUP)—"'looked deeper and recognized another and profounder … need … for substantive intellectual work in an intimate social context'" (Croly qtd. in Gere 11).

CRITICAL AND INTIMATE REFLECTION IN THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

These brief retellings of serious political conflict on campus remind us of the important cultural work that often unfolds in otherwise mundane workplace genres. In letters and meeting minutes the cultural work unfolds—documenting efforts at collaborative problem-solving, outlining competing stakes, holding leaders accountable, clarifying values, and mobilizing faculty across very different campuses. Moreover, these same texts evidence the emotional charge that surrounds institutional conflicts and the efforts to resolve them and that binds individuals to each other and to the institutions of which they are a part.

These examples also point to the power of public and collective—even intimate—reflection in post-secondary institutions in the US, shaped as they increasingly are by fast capitalism and globalization that actively detract from the valuing and visibility of slow processes such as those involved in shared governance. We propose such critical reflection, like writing itself, as a social and rhetorical activity. Our need for connection with others is heightened, not diminished, by fast capitalism and the neoliberal context. This need has only been strengthened and made more visible by the pandemic. We thus propose critical reflection as an important strategy not only for building individual, professional connections and relationships but also for building curricula, administrative processes, and other outcomes which will best serve faculty and students within increasingly neoliberal and corporatized environments.

We acknowledge the challenges to this kind of critical reflection, such as the pressures of mandates from bodies like the Higher Learning Commission to achieve accreditation; the political pressure from state legislatures; and procedural pressures emanating from (extant or threatened) lawsuits. But Stephen Brookfield posits critical reflection as being about the "uncovering of power and hegemony" that characterizes such pressures, with the "critical dimension of reflection to be drawn from critical theory's concern to demonstrate how ideological manipulation forces us to behave in ways that seem to make sense, but that actually keep us powerless" (11). The examples drawn from our professional experiences illustrate aspects of neoliberalism's ideological manipulation and the effects of that manipulation on faculty and student experiences of the educational context. Disrupting neoliberal approaches to administration, in particular

in the context of economically stressed institutions such as ours, is in no way a simple or quick process. Yet a pursuit of critical reflection that is both public and collective, and that takes into account contexts both local and more global, we believe is a first step in such disruption, as it makes clear how the power of neoliberalism is made material. Such critical and intimate reflection may also lead to a more nuanced institutional ethos which takes into account and attempts to address the toll of neoliberalism on the humanistic enterprise.

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