

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Dear Higher Education, I Love You ... Now Stop Leaving People Behind

KATRINA CALDWELL

*Dear Higher Education,*

I have spent more than thirty years inside your buildings, committees, strategic planning retreats, and budget cycles. I sat at your leadership tables and walked your back hallways, where the people who actually keep you running move quietly between tasks that no one will ever name in a Board of Trustees report.

I love you. But I need to tell you something you do not say to yourself often enough: you are failing the people who work for you.

Not the students. You talk about students constantly. Not the faculty, although they have their own legitimate grievances. I am talking about the administrators, the middle managers, the coordinators, the directors, the advisors, the program staff, the department assistants, the professionals who chose higher education because they believed in its mission and wanted to be part of something that mattered.

What happened to them?

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### **What It Used to Feel Like**

I remember when working in higher education felt like a covenant. There was an unspoken agreement: you give us your commitment, your creativity, your late nights, and your loyalty, and we will invest in you. We will send you to conferences. We will create mentorship structures. We will build pathways that allow you to grow within this institution rather than having to leave it to advance. We will treat your professional development as part of our mission, and not a line item to be cut when budgets tighten.

There was a time when department retreats were about more than process. They were about people. When a new administrator joined, senior colleagues made it their business to welcome and orient them, not as a formal program, but as a cultural norm. When someone showed potential, someone else noticed and said so. The institution felt, at its best, like a place that was genuinely invested in the humans inside it.

Middle managers held something essential in those years. They were the connective tissue between institutional vision and daily reality. They knew the students by name and the policies by heart. They translated executive decisions into workable practice and absorbed the friction that happens when institutional change meets human complexity. They were trusted, and they felt it.

## What Changed

Somewhere, that covenant broke. And it broke so gradually that many people did not notice until they were already exhausted.

Professional development budgets were among the first casualties of every budget reduction cycle. Conference travel was eliminated. Tuition benefits were capped or restricted. Internal training programs became compliance exercises rather than genuine investments in growth. The message never stated directly but felt clearly, was this: your development is your own responsibility. We need your performance, but we cannot afford your growth.

Middle managers absorbed more responsibility without corresponding increases in authority, compensation, or support. They were asked to implement decisions they had no voice in shaping. They were expected to manage teams through institutional change while processing that change themselves, often without any coaching or preparation. They became the institution's shock absorbers, and over time, the repeated impact wore them down.

A 2023 Gallup report on employee engagement found that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores, yet organizations routinely under-invest in manager development. In higher education, this pattern is acute (Gallup, 2023). We celebrate our mission of human development while systematically neglecting the humans responsible for delivering it.

Staff employees, those who do not hold faculty appointments and often do not hold senior administrative titles, occupy a particularly invisible position. They are essential to everything and centered in almost nothing. They appear in equity statements but rarely in leadership pipelines. They are invited to diversity celebrations but not always to the planning tables where institutional priorities are set. Their institutional knowledge runs deep, and when they leave, usually for organizations that invest in them, that knowledge walks out with them.

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## The Contradiction We Have Refused to Name

Here is the contradiction that higher education has never fully faced: you cannot build an institution committed to human transformation and simultaneously treat your own workforce as expendable infrastructure.

You teach leadership in your classrooms. You offer executive development programs to external clients and community partners. You incorporate inclusive culture into your strategic plans. And then you ask a mid-level administrator to manage a team of eight people through a reorganization, with no coaching, no transition support, and a calendar so full there is no time to process the change before being asked to champion it.

You espouse student-centered values yet create staff evaluation systems that measure compliance rather than contribution. You say people are your greatest asset and then eliminate the positions dedicated to their development before the ink on the reorganization chart is dry.

The American Institutes for Research found that staff turnover in higher education has accelerated significantly in the post-pandemic period, with many institutions losing experienced professionals to industries that offer clearer advancement pathways, more competitive compensation, and cultures that explicitly value employee well-being (American Institutes for Research, 2022). What is leaving with those employees is not just productivity. Instead, it is institutional memory, relational trust, and the accumulated wisdom that no onboarding checklist can replace.

## **What I Know from the Inside**

I have been the senior leader making decisions about what gets funded and what gets cut. I know how hard those conversations are. I know that enrollment pressures are real and that governing boards ask tough questions about efficiency and return on investment.

But I also know that the framing is wrong. Investing in people is not a cost. It is infrastructure. When a middle manager has access to coaching, she becomes better at the conversations no one taught her to have. When a staff professional has a clear pathway for growth, she stays, and her retention saves the institution far more than the cost of any development program. When employees feel genuinely valued, not managed, not processed, not surveyed about engagement, and then ignored, they bring discretionary effort to their work. They innovate. They stay late not out of fear but because they care.

Higher education used to know this. Now, it needs to remember before it's too late.

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## **A Different Kind of Love Letter**

So, this is my challenge to you, offered with the frustration of someone who has loved you long enough to tell you the truth: look at who is holding this institution together.

Look at the registrar's office coordinator who has memorized policy exceptions so that students do not fall through the cracks. Look at the financial aid advisor who absorbs the anxiety of families in crisis without adequate support structures for her own. Look at the assistant director who has been in the same position for seven years, not because he lacks ambition, but because no one ever opened a door or named his potential out loud.

These people chose you. In a labor market that offered them alternatives, they chose higher education because they believed in what you said you stood for. Honor that choice.

Build real development pathways for non-faculty employees. Create mentorship cultures that do not depend on individual managers to invent from scratch. Invest in coaching for your middle managers, who carry more institutional weight than your organizational charts suggest. And when you write your next strategic plan, put your employees in it, not as human capital to be managed, but as people whose growth and flourishing are part of the institution's mission.

You believe in the transformative power of education. Your employees believed in it enough to build their careers around it. The least you can do is demonstrate that you genuinely believe in them, too.

*With love, accountability, and hard-won hope,  
Someone Who Has Seen What You Are Capable Of*

## References

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## About the author

**Dr. Katrina Caldwell** is the CEO and Founder of All In Consulting Group, LLC, a leadership development and executive coaching firm committed to elite service, strategic intelligence, and inclusive design. With more than 30 years of executive leadership experience in higher education, she has served in senior roles at Johns Hopkins University, the University of Mississippi, and Northern Illinois University, among others. Dr. Caldwell holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Illinois at Chicago and executive leadership certifications from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and MIT's Sloan School of Management. A White House Presidential Award recipient and Baltimore Sun's "25 Black Marylanders to Watch" honoree, she is a nationally recognized thought leader in inclusive leadership, organizational transformation, and strategic planning. Through All In Consulting Group, Dr. Caldwell partners with executives and organizations to build high-performing, inclusive cultures that drive sustainable impact.