



## Taken for Granted: Improving the Culture of Celebration, Appreciation, and Recognition in Higher Education

Adrianna Kezar & Susan Elrod

To cite this article: Adrianna Kezar & Susan Elrod (2020) Taken for Granted: Improving the Culture of Celebration, Appreciation, and Recognition in Higher Education, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 52:5, 29-36, DOI: [10.1080/00091383.2020.1807880](https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2020.1807880)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2020.1807880>



Published online: 28 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 132



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Taken for Granted:



By Adrianna Kezar  
and Susan Elrod

## Improving the Culture of Celebration, Appreciation, and Recognition in Higher Education



*Adrianna Kezar is Professor for Higher Education, University of Southern California, and Director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education. Dr. Kezar is a national expert of student success, equity and diversity, the changing faculty, and change, governance, and leadership in higher education.*



*Susan Elrod, Chancellor of Indiana University South Bend, is a national leader in undergraduate STEM education reform and higher education change leadership. She regularly publishes on topics at the intersection of these interests and her experiences as an administrative leader in higher education.*

### In Short

- Many recent sets of data, including from Gallup and the Higher Education Research Institute, demonstrate that campuses lack a robust climate of recognition, appreciation, and recognition (CAR).
- There is a vast body of research that demonstrates that CAR improves motivation, morale, and performance within organizations.
- Campus climates of critiquing, incivility, and bullying seriously impede and diminish CAR.
- Leaders can create an environment supportive of CAR by conducting regular climate surveys, engaging in appreciative inquiry, using strength-based assessment and evaluation processes, providing more systematic professional development, and actively calling out bullying and incivility.

**A**fter 11 years as a faculty member, Seth closes the door of his office for the last time at “uncaring University.” Seth is a well-known mentor, and dozens of students have sung his praises over the years. He carries a box down in the elevator, and no one says anything to him. He gets in his car and heads home for the last time from the university. While in the throes of packing and thinking about starting his new position at another university in the fall, he reflects on all the students that he has worked with and the various faculty members and staff he got to know; he has had a very meaningful time. It feels really odd to be leaving, yet there is no marker that he is going—no party or gathering, no farewell memo or email.

Elsa is a staff member in advising and is graduating after being in her associate’s degree program part time for 8 years. It’s been a real struggle bringing up her children, working, and trying to go to school. In fact, it’s her children who pushed her to consider going back to school after many years. Everyone at the college where Elsa works knows she has been working toward this goal for a long time. But after she finishes, she feels sort of empty. No one at work acknowledges this major accomplishment. It gets exceedingly hard to come to work each day, and she starts to wonder if she matters at all.

Raul, a long-serving faculty member at his university, was asked to chair a curriculum redesign committee. This committee met regularly across an entire academic year, interfacing with every dean, virtually every department chair, and hundreds of students, alumni, and business leaders. The committee issued several key recommendations, which the university’s faculty unanimously adopted and began implementing. Raul’s expert leadership of this committee made the process enjoyable and productive for all involved, and the results of the committee’s work stood to transform the undergraduate curriculum in fundamental and much-needed ways. Yet, at the end of his assignment, only cursory thanks were offered by the provost, and most did not show any appreciation for Raul’s leadership, failed to recognize the work of the other committee members, or celebrate the milestone that the committee’s redesign efforts represented for the institution’s long-term vitality.

In this article, we explore the experiences of people like Seth, Elsa, and Raul who diligently work for colleges and universities but feel their hard work is not acknowledged. We know some campuses—often smaller campuses—can have a very different feel, and people do feel celebrated, appreciated, recognized, and rewarded. Although some environments may make this easier, size and bureaucracy accounts for only some of the experiences of the three individuals above. We suggest aspects of academia’s culture are responsible for why celebration, appreciation, and recognition are so hard to come by in higher education, and we offer suggestions for ways college and university leaders can create a culture where positive affirmation is more commonplace.

## WHAT IS CELEBRATION, APPRECIATION, OR RECOGNITION?

What do we mean by celebration, appreciation, or recognition (CAR)? In organizations, a common cultural practice is to recognize individuals who have contributed to the overall mission and goals, particularly those that have been consistently excellent. In addition to recognition, organizations engage in the work of appreciation, acknowledging that people play a central role in the work of the enterprise. Appreciation is a more everyday occurrence involving thanking people for the kind of work they do that facilitates the ongoing functioning of the organization. We are more likely to be aware of recognition, as it holds up individuals for meritorious or more unusual contributions, while appreciation is often overlooked, as it involves thanking people for showing up and trying their best each day.

Celebration is about acknowledging special moments in people’s lives—both personal and

**“Celebration is about acknowledging special moments in people’s lives—both personal and professional—that are important to them.”**



professional—that are important to them. Celebration is important, as people have fewer special moments—having a child, graduating from a professional degree program, getting married, achieving a major career milestone or promotion, or retiring. These events are episodic but very significant in the lives of people at these moments. Organizations that celebrate these events help connect people more to the workplace and create social bonds that tighten relationships within organizations. Recognition, celebration, and appreciation all lead to more functional and effective workplaces, as people feel their work is being noticed and experience stronger relationships with coworkers.

There is a vast body of research that demonstrates that CAR, specifically programs that involve no financial reward, improves motivation, morale, and performance. Kovach's (1987) meta-analysis of literature from 1946 to 1986 across thousands of studies found that when employees were asked to rank the top 10 job reward factors, employees consistently ranked appreciation in their job over other items researchers expected would rank higher, such as good wages or job security. Follow-up studies of Kovach's work continued to find the same results (Milne, 2007).

These long-standing findings are being buttressed by a resurgence in positive organizational behavior

and scholarship. Cameron and Dutton (2003) and Seligman et al. (2005) have been among the champions of this movement, which focuses on how workplaces can encourage hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and organizational citizenship. In exploring these areas, scholars have also “rediscovered” concepts around CAR. One example is the work on appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017) in which studies focus on what is working well—assets or strengths—within an organization. AI challenged traditional notions of action research that generally focused on an organizational problem to be solved. Another is the strengths-based movement that has resulted in surveys that help employees and students to understand and work from their strengths (see Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011).

## HIGHER EDUCATION'S CAR CULTURE GAP

As noted above, many studies of workplace climate that focus on these issues of CAR in business and industry consistently document the importance of recognition programs and leadership strategies and approaches that focus on appreciation and celebration. Yet, in higher education discussion or implementation among campus

“Work environments can enable bullying when there are imbalances of power. . . and little accountability.”

leaders, CAR activities often take a backseat to more urgent priorities or are an afterthought when working through strategic goals and plans.

A recent Gallup (2017) poll looked at factors related to appreciation in the college environment through a composite variable—engagement. Engagement is defined as a positive and humanistic work environment, supportive management, opportunities for growth, trust in supervisors, and an environment that is fair. The study found higher education to have the least engaging workplace of all sectors out of dozens worldwide. They note that colleges “are failing to maximize the potential of their biggest asset—their faculty and staff.” The survey found that 52 percent of higher education faculty are not engaged in their work, and 14 percent are actively disengaged; only 34 percent of faculty and staff were found to be engaged in their work. These results, taken together with other results on disengagement, low morale, and dissatisfaction of faculty in the Higher Education Research Institute faculty survey (Bara et al., 2019) suggest poor working conditions and relationships on campus.

### WHY IS A CULTURE OF CAR NOT MORE COMMONPLACE?

If CAR are common practices in other organizations, why are the results for higher education so low? While there is no research to provide insights, we point to three aspects of campus culture that we think lead to this environment. The first is a culture of critique and incivility. Anyone who has spent time on campus has felt the sting of faculty colleagues critiquing an idea, a proposal, a service—really anything. This critical thinking is ideal when focused on research, teaching, and other scholarly pursuits, but when it is applied to other aspects of campus processes or operations it can be troubling.

A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by Amy Olderding (2018) noted higher education’s appetite for aggressive debate and argument, noting that when leaving meetings she is typically demoralized by the propensity for critique that is dysfunctional and sometimes abusive. This critiquing relates to another condition that is commonly found in higher education—incivility. Clark and Springer (2007) noted how the academy has a culture in which being rude, disrespectful, and insulting is considered normative. This critical approach can be insightful to leadership—probing new angles on policy and practice or ensuring appropriate justification for important decisions, which is essential to good planning. But that same style often translates into not being able to appreciate and see the good—particularly in coworkers.

Second, critiquing can sometimes become bullying. Bullying is also a part of academic culture as a form of interpersonal aggression; it is characterized by frequent and intense abusive acts of power. Verbal abuse, threatening, intimidating conduct, constant criticism, undermining work performance, exclusion, marginalization, overloading of work, and taunting are all forms of bullying. Bullying is gendered and racialized, as women and racial minorities are more likely to experience bullying. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* provided evidence of faculty mobbing found in studies in recent years—hostile and unethical communication directed in a systematic manner that pushes another individual into feeling helpless.

Over a dozen books have been published on bullying in academic settings, including Hollis’ (2012) *Bully in the Ivory Tower*, Lester’s (2013) *Workplace Bullying in Higher Education*, and Twale and De Luca’s (2008) *Faculty Incivility*. There is now a *Bullying of Academics in Higher Education* blog for people to report and get support after being bullied in the workplace. State policy centers created to support those experiencing bullying in the workplace identify that 20 percent of reported incidents come from higher education—more than any other sector (Cassell, 2011).

Work environments can enable bullying when there are imbalances of power (tenure and nontenured positions and ranking of assistant to full, as well as hierarchy within administrative ranks) and little accountability; high degree of autonomy and decentralization of units also make it difficult for

individuals to feel comfortable reporting or to know to whom they should report problems. This may be particularly relevant for adjunct faculty, assistant professors, or racialized minority faculty and staff. The perception that the costs of bullying are low make it more rampant. Combined with the critical/incivility culture noted earlier, the environment is ripe for bullying.

The third factor is a culture that is built on recognizing individual contributions, particularly for faculty, rather than work on behalf of the good of the institution. Achieving tenure, promotion, and other academic recognition is based in large part on the contributions that faculty make to their disciplines and scholarly fields. However, the contributions that faculty make to advancing institutional goals and initiatives may go under-recognized, under-appreciated, and under-celebrated. While service is one of the categories of faculty work included in promotion and tenure dossiers, contributions to student success initiatives, assessment efforts, or major change projects may not be adequately recognized.

## CREATING A CULTURE OF CAR

There are many ways to create opportunities for CAR within the culture of higher education. We recognize that many institutions already have some of these in place, but there is always room for improvement.

A good way to start is to implement a survey of employee satisfaction and workplace climate. These can be tailored to faculty or staff and provide useful information regarding what areas of the workplace where implementing CAR programs might be most effective. For example, employees may indicate a low rate of receiving recognition or praise for doing good work in the last 7 days. Making survey results public also creates a culture of engagement and accountability for the institution through making a commitment to improve workplace climate. Documenting progress on satisfaction indicators will also contribute to positive morale.

There can be programmatic responses as well. Departments could be challenged to develop their own CAR plans. CAR plans may include activities like implementing an “appreciation wall” or online recognition submission site where peers and managers can post positive comments about

employees. Department meeting agendas can include a “kudos” section where people are recognized for their contributions. These recognitions can be taken to the next level by creating department or university-wide awards that are linked to key goals or initiatives. For example, if the college is developing a culture of increased student service in offices across the campus, an award for an individual or a department that goes above and beyond could be created and announced at a university-wide event.

Ensuring that regular performance reviews are conducted is also an important mechanism for recognition, particularly in the context of job expectations and performance. While they take time to conduct, they are important feedback mechanisms. Even if positive performance is not associated with an increase in salary, the discussion with a supervisor followed by written documentation can be a validating one. Starting performance reviews from an appreciative inquiry perspective (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017; Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011) is a good way to create a positive experience. For example, the opening conversation could be to ask what has gone well since the last review or what the employee is proud of in their past performance. By framing reflective pre-review prompts through an appreciative inquiry lens, employees and their supervisors can use strengths, positive contributions, upcoming workplace opportunities, and aspirations to develop concrete plans to maximize performance and boost morale even in the context of critical feedback. Employees may have very good ideas on how they can improve their own performance when asked to come up with plans to do so.

Using strengths-based surveys can augment the performance review process by helping employees focus on what they bring to the workplace from their cache of skills and experiences. One of the authors (Elrod) has used this approach with leadership teams to not only help leaders identify and use their strengths, but to also understand how to maximize the diversity of strengths of those around them. Creating an environment where team members know about and capitalize on the strengths of others on their team may not only create more effective teams but lead to increased appreciation of the strengths of others.



**Higher education's mission should reinforce campuses taking a development approach to leading and creating an environment in which CAR thrives.**

Professional development programs for staff and faculty, including adjunct or part-time instructors, is another way that colleges and universities can promote a positive climate. These programs should be widely available and can include both online as well as face-to-face offerings. The programs can range from quick skill-building sessions or access to timely productivity tips to workshops that bring people together around more complex issues, such as conflict resolution or budget management.

Tailoring opportunities to specific groups of employees may also be useful. For example, department chairs are often the most challenged group of managers. They are often new to their positions and frequently do not receive the training needed to be effective leaders. Sending employees to off-site workshops or programs is also a good investment and demonstrates that the employee is valued enough to be selected for the opportunity. While none of the above are novel suggestions, they can serve as part of CAR programming.

While formal processes of surveys, reviews, and professional development build in and institutionalize these practices, CAR is also embodied in people and their philosophy of interaction. Kezar's (2013) research demonstrated that faculty and staff on campus model the behavior they see, and modeling is not a source of change is often underestimated among leaders. For example, administrators can consider a regular practice of reviewing their interactions monthly in terms of CAR and reviewing and reflecting on ways they might build in more opportunities or interactions. They can also foster this among the staff and faculty with whom they work to encourage it more broadly

within the culture of an institution. Enacting more of these institutional practices may also help employees thrive as opposed to just survive (Elrod & Whitehead, 2018).

It is not enough though just to model and enact CAR practices; existing bullying and uncivil behaviors need to be challenged. Leaders need to emphasize that bullying will not be tolerated and that not only respect (which is often emphasized) needs to be part of our campus cultures, but also CAR. And we need to name bullying and incivility more often. Leaders on campus too rarely talk about the way we should interact as a community.

Revising a strategic plan and reexamining campus values statements provide a distinct opportunity to articulate hoped for values to guide behavior. Yet, these 5-year rituals do not create a new culture without modeling and accountability among leadership. Finding ways to recognize faculty contributions to institutional priorities may also be helpful. For example, Elrod et al. (2020) described a new form of scholarship—the scholarship of mission—that may provide a mechanism for enhancing CAR in support of important campus-wide goals.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF CAR FOR HIGHER EDUCATION'S MISSION**

Although we think naming, understanding, and addressing the non-CAR culture in higher education is important for faculty and staff who feel undervalued in these environments, we feel it is also important because of the implicit message it sends to students about the institution and its values. Organizational functioning is seen through a dehumanized lens rather than recognition. Employees are implicitly cogs in a machine, and their work is largely unimportant in the larger scheme of things. As students watch faculty and staff be unappreciated, ignored, and dismissed, they may come to believe this is how they should treat other people and bring this lack of appreciation and recognition into their future workplaces. We may be modeling behavior that is ineffective and unethical and will produce exploitative workplaces.

Higher education's mission should reinforce campuses taking a developmental approach to

leading and creating an environment in which CAR thrives. We believe that if leaders became more aware of the implicit messages that are being communicated, they might rethink our current culture. To too many leaders, this non-CAR culture is embedded and long-standing; it is like air or water—hard to see or comprehend. But we hope this article serves as a provocation to others to examine these questions:

1. Do we appreciate staff and faculty for their work? When, how, and how often?
2. Do we recognize faculty and staff for their work? When, how, and how often?

3. Do we celebrate staff and faculty for their work and personal successes? When, how, and how often?

We think academe is past due for acknowledging the value of CAR and fostering it with actions and results. Other work environments have developed robust systems for CAR. Given higher education's mission and societal goals, it is time for leaders to rethink the campus workplace environment as one that provides CAR on a more regular and widespread basis. In keeping with higher education's role as a leader in our society, let's work together to make CAR another proud leadership moment for higher education. ☐

## REFERENCES

- Bara, S., Eagan, K., Zimmerman, H. B., Berdan, L., Cesar-David, N., Aragon, M. C., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2019). *Undergraduate teaching faculty: The HERI faculty survey 2016–2017*. HERI.
- Cameron, K., & Dutton, J. (Eds.). (2003). Dutton, J. (Eds.). *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline*. Berrett-Koehler.
- Cassell, M. A. (2011). Bullying in academe: Prevalent, significant, and incessant. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 4(5), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v4i5.4236>
- Clark, C. M., & Springer, P. J. (2007). Incivility in nursing education: A descriptive study of definitions and prevalence. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 46(1), 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20070101-03>
- Cooperrider, D., & Srivastva, S. (2017). The gift of new eyes: Personal reflections after 30 years of appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In A. B. Shani & D. A. Noumair (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development*, Vol. 25. (pp. 81–142). Emerald Publishing.
- Elrod, S., & Whitehead, L. (2018, March 7). *Turning on the thrive channel to accelerate change in higher education*. <https://ascnhighered.org/ASCN/posts/201117.html>
- Elrod, S., Whitehead, L., & Huber, M. (2020). The scholarship of mission: A new concept for promoting scholarly work advancing institutional goals. *Change Magazine*, 52(1), 8–14.
- Gallup, Inc (2017). *The engaged university*. <https://www.gallup.com/education/194321/higher-education-employee-engagement.aspx>
- Hollis, L. P. (2012). *Bully in the ivory tower: How aggression and incivility erode American higher education*. Patricial Berkly LLC.
- Kezar, A. (2013). *How colleges change: Understanding, leading, and enacting change*. Routledge.
- Kovach, K. A. (1987). What motivates employees? Workers and supervisors give different answers. *Business Horizons*, 30(5), 58–65. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0007-6813\(87\)90082-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0007-6813(87)90082-6)
- Lester, J. (Ed.). (2013). *Workplace bullying in higher education*. Routledge
- Milne, P. (2007). Motivation, incentives and organisational culture. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 11(6), 28–38. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13673270710832145>

## REFERENCES (CONT'D)

- Olderding, A. (2018, October 21). When argument becomes bloodsport. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/when-argument-becomes-bloodsport/>
- Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410–421. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410>
- Twale, D. J., & De Luca, B. M. (2008). *Faculty incivility: The rise of the academic bully culture and what to do about it*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Whitney, D., & Cooperrider, D. (2011). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. <https://www.readhowyouwant.com/>