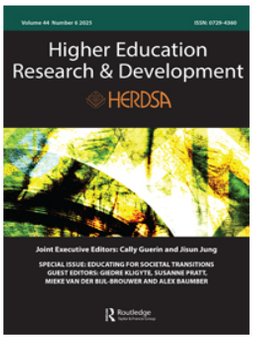

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Deepening relational capacity to confront the polycrisis in higher education and beyond

Sharon Stein [a], Vanessa Andreotti [b], Jean-Paul Restoule [b], Rose Vukovic [b], Catherine McGregor[b], Leslee Francis Pelton[b], Sandra Hundza[b], Todd Milford [b], Wendy Seager[b], Jasdeep Randhawa[b], Lisa Brunner [a] and Aida Mohajeri[a]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the multifaceted challenges confronting Canadian higher education, situating these against a backdrop of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) and the poly-/meta-/perma-crisis. We examine 10 specific challenges, including uncertain finances; affordability crisis; complexities of equity, diversity, inclusion, decolonization, and Indigenization; intergenerational dissonance; public (ir)relevance; ecological destabilization; ambivalent AI; mental health epidemic; hyper-polarization; and lack of capacity for coordination. While these challenges threaten the stability of our institutions, they also offer opportunities for higher education to catalyze institutional, societal, and systemic transformations that prioritize intergenerational and interspecies responsibility. We suggest moving in this direction will require staff and faculty to deepen our relational capacities and offer a case study to illustrate this possibility.

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Polycrisis; intergenerational responsibility; relational accountability; complexity; higher education

In Canadian higher education, a system-wide crisis is brewing. For years, colleges and universities have been precariously balancing their budgets, often while expanding the scope of their missions. Many institutions have made up for flatlining or declining public funding relative to their costs with international student tuition. Now, as a higher education consultant recently observed, 'the bill is coming due' (Usher, 2023) and 'no one is coming to save us' (Usher, 2024a). The most visible shock to the system came in 2024 with a new cap on international student visas, but some institutions were already facing budget crises. Yet this is not just about finances. As a group of education scholars from white, racialized, and Indigenous backgrounds who work in different roles at public universities in what is currently known as British Columbia (BC), we have identified several system-wide stressors that threaten the future viability of the Canadian higher education sector (see Figure 1). We also note that these current and coming challenges resonate with those faced by higher education systems in many other countries.

These challenges are not unique to higher education but rather reflect the contemporary landscape of 'VUCA' – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – and the

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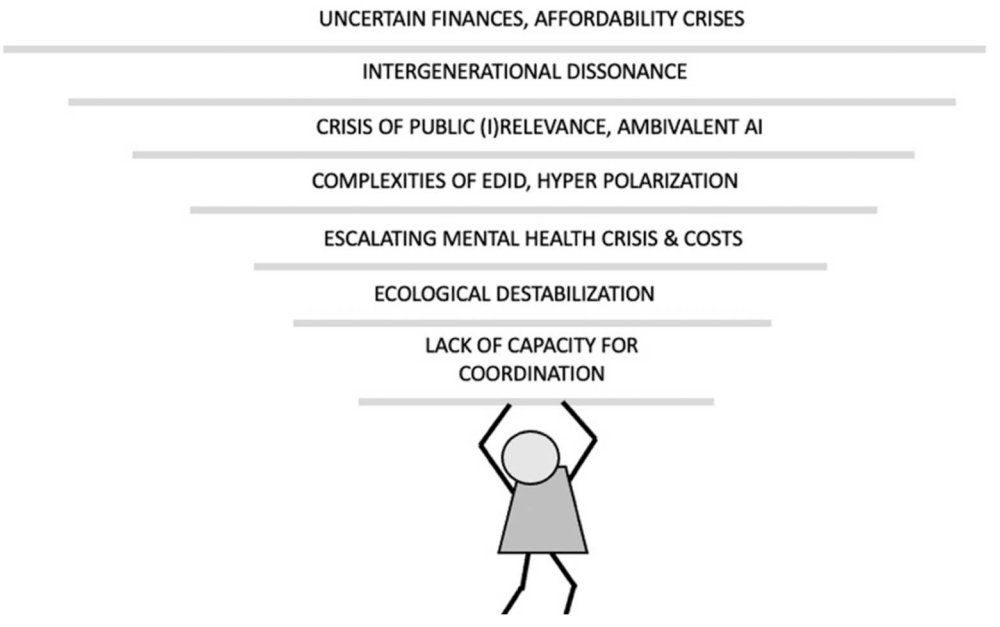

Figure 1. Summary of challenges facing Canadian higher education.

multiple crises affecting all realms of society (Stein, 2021) (see Figure 2). Some have described this confluence of crises as a polycrisis, metacrisis, and/or permacrisis. Despite their differences, each of these terms emphasizes the interrelated social, ecological, economic, political, and psychological destabilizations that undermine the stability of existing systems and institutions.

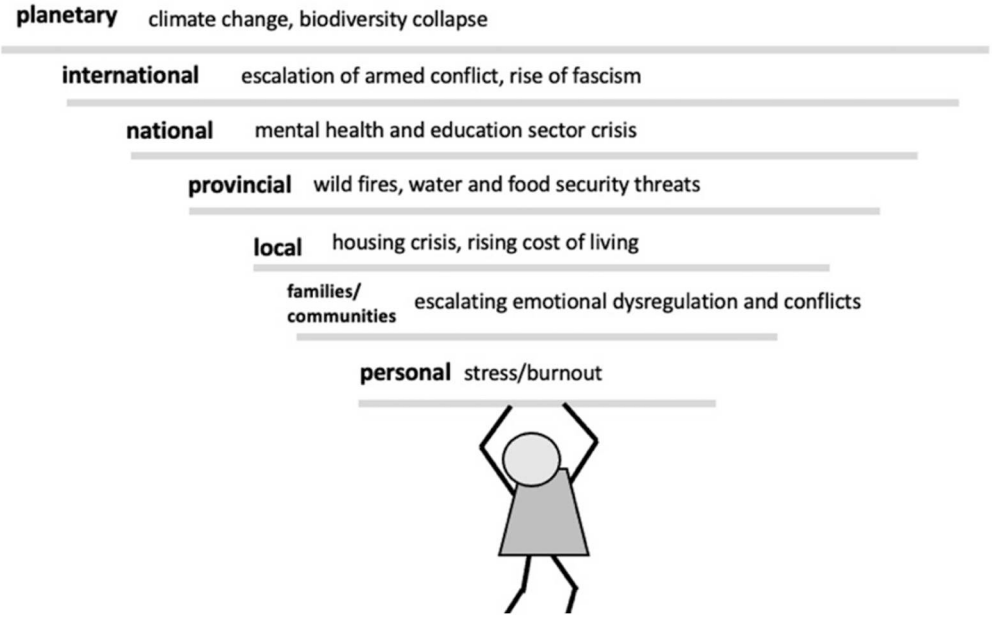

Figure 2. Summary of societal crises (as experienced in the BC context).

Together, these challenges and the poly-/meta-/perma-crisis suggest 'higher education as we know it' will be unrecognizable within a generation (or less). While change is often understood as a threat, it also presents opportunities to re-examine the purpose, responsibilities, and future directions of higher education. In particular, higher education has long been organized and funded in ways that reproduce exploitative, extractive, and transactional relationships, contributing to many of the social and ecological challenges we face today. These ingrained relational practices tend to shape responses to current challenges as well – meaning that our lack of capacity to collectively *respond* to these challenges in generative ways is part of the poly-/meta-/perma-crisis itself.

Academics, administrators, and students have been incentivized to prioritize our self-interest and discount the long-term impacts of our decisions, particularly impacts on systemically marginalized communities, future generations, and distant ecosystems. While some may attribute this abdication of responsibility to decades of neoliberalism, we find deeper origins in the colonial foundations of our institutions. From their beginning, universities in Canada were premised on dispossessing Indigenous Peoples' lands and producing knowledge that prioritizes economic growth over collective well-being (Daigle, 2019; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Thus, if we aspire to a future that does not simply sustain 'business as usual', we would need to address how higher education has contributed to current challenges and recalibrate how we approach these challenges.

By contextualizing institutional and societal challenges within longer timescales and developing deeper forms of relational maturity, intellectual discernment, and emotional stability, we will be better prepared to navigate these turbulent times. Rather than asking how we can merely *survive* this turbulence, in this paper, we ask how we might repurpose higher education to *support* wider societal transitions in alignment with our responsibilities to future generations. This is not about universities offering a blueprint for transitioning existing societies and institutions into predefined alternatives but rather about developing the capacities and stamina to navigate this transition in ways that prioritize the quality of our relationships and the rigour of our un/learning along the way. We begin by reviewing 10 challenges facing Canadian higher education. We then offer a case study from the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria to illustrate how a compass of intergenerational and interspecies responsibility can enable our responses to these and other challenges to serve societal transitions toward more livable futures for all.

10 Challenges confronting Canadian higher education

Many of these challenges are recent iterations of long-standing tensions and complexities of a higher education system that operates within an enduring context of settler colonialism, global capitalism, and epistemic Eurocentrism. Some of these challenges have been addressed within existing literature. Nonetheless, we summarize them here to emphasize more recent developments. Furthermore, we bring these challenges together in one place to illustrate that their convergence within a wider context of crisis suggests we are entering a new phase of higher education that brings both peril and potential. We also pose questions that invite staff and faculty to reframe these challenges, hold them collectively, and gesture toward reparative and regenerative possibilities without expecting quick fixes or consensus. Thus, when we say 'we' throughout this text, we are inviting readers into a

shared inquiry, recognizing that each person and context has its specificities but that we all face similar systemic challenges.

1) Uncertain finances

Financial uncertainty is perhaps the most visible challenge faced by Canadian higher education. The biggest contributor to this challenge is public defunding. Over the last 50 years, Canada has moved from being a *publicly-funded* to a *publicly-aided* higher education system. Since the 1970s, public funds have made up a declining proportion of institutional income, today constituting on average less than 50% of revenues. For instance, in the province of British Columbia, in 1979, nearly 90% of universities' operating budgets came from the government (Ivanova, 2012); 45 years later, in 2023/2024, less than 40% of the University of British Columbia's revenues came from the government (UBC, 2023).

To make up for declining public funding, Canadian institutions have increasingly relied on tuition fees as a proportion of total revenue (Statistics Canada, 2022). Because domestic tuition is often regulated, and due to declining numbers of college-aged Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2022), international student tuition had until recently been framed as an ideal 'revenue stream'. Between 2010 and 2024, international students increased nearly 10-fold, especially in colleges. Depending on the institution and program, they pay up to 10 times more than their domestic peers. The future of international recruitment is increasingly uncertain, however, due to Canada's goal of reducing its temporary resident population, which includes international students, and growing options for non-Canadians to study in their home and nearby countries (Nuwer, 2023). As well, this shift reflects rising anti-immigrant sentiment within the country. Geopolitical tensions can also abruptly halt international student flows (Scherer, 2023).

Apart from raising tuition, institutions have sought other sources of private revenue. This includes seeking donations, although generally these cannot be used for operating costs, and expanding their non-degree/continuing education offerings, including micro-credentials and certificates, many of which are offered partially or fully online. For institutions that hold land in metropolitan areas, real estate has also become another realm of income generation.

Yet just as public funding is unlikely to be restored to previous levels, institutions likely cannot raise private revenues indefinitely and will move to increase efficiencies and cut costs (including staff and faculty layoffs). What relational and affective capacities could enable us to have difficult, dissensus-based conversations about how to balance our budgets while protecting the integrity of our educational offerings and knowledge production? How can we mitigate the ways these cuts may strain relationships and create a heightened sense of vulnerability and mistrust as individuals and departments compete for limited resources?

2) Affordability crisis

Parallel to institutional financial crises are the financial challenges faced by individual students. Since the 1980s, tuition fees have made up a growing proportion of institutional income in Canada, especially over the last 15 years. In 2023/24, some expected income

from tuition to exceed income from government funding (Usher, 2024b). The era of the proverbial possibility of paying for school with a summer job is long gone, as around 60% of Canadian students graduate with debt (Yaya, 2023). International tuition rose even more dramatically, with an average increase across Canada of over 150% between 2006 and 2021 (Wang & Goldenz, 2022).

In addition to tuition, both domestic and international students face the rising cost of living, including housing, food, and transportation. This is particularly challenging in the context of inflation, rising rents, and stagnating wages. In 2017, Entz and colleagues found that over 30% of students experienced some form of food insecurity; those numbers are likely higher today. Financial pressures are more likely to be experienced by students already experiencing systemic marginalization, and these pressures negatively impact both academic performance and psychological well-being (Hattangadi et al., 2019) (see Challenge #8).

For now, students still believe higher education is worth these costs, but this calculation could shift – particularly as many of the same students already feel higher education is a waste of time (Parkin, 2023). How can our institutions remain attentive to these financial pressures, providing additional support where possible and ensuring our educational offerings are relevant to our students and the challenges they will face across their lifetimes?

3) Complexities of EDI(DI)

Over the past decade, there has been growing acknowledgement by colleges and universities across Canada that racism and colonialism are part of their institutional legacies. This was accelerated with the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the Indian Residential School System in 2015 and movements for racial justice in 2020. In this context, institutions that have not committed to addressing these issues are widely considered out of touch. While scholars point to the need to distinguish between equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) as an umbrella term for various efforts to address systemic inequities, and decolonization and Indigenization efforts that specifically address the impacts of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012), many institutions combine these efforts as 'EDI(DI)'.

Responses to institutional EDI(DI) efforts vary. While many people simply accept them, for others, these efforts don't go far enough, and for others, they go too far. Even those who broadly agree EDI(DI) is important have varied perspectives on what it should entail (Andreotti et al., 2015). Those who suggest EDI(DI) does not go far enough often draw attention to the conditions of inclusion imposed on racialized and Indigenous people and the focus on 'good optics' rather than meaningful shifts in power, resources, and relationships (Ahenakew & Naepi, 2015). There is also growing backlash against EDI(DI). For instance, the University of Alberta recently announced it was moving away from EDI and instead focusing on 'access, community, and belonging'. Particularly as we enter an era of austerity, this backlash could intensify, resulting in the scapegoating of racialized and Indigenous communities and slashed funding and institutional support for EDI(DI), as is unfolding in the US, Canada's neighbour to the south. This backlash reflects how (white) settler futurity continues to orient Canadian higher education (Daigle, 2019; Mitchell & Chaudhury, 2020). In general, only EDI(DI) efforts perceived to converge with white settler interests are permitted (Yao & Viggiano, 2019).

Even institutions that have made commitments to EDI(DI) have generally failed to create the conditions for honestly reckoning with the many historical and ongoing layers of inequity, exclusion, exploitation, expropriation, dispossession, and injustice that shape everyday life on their campuses. The range of perspectives on these issues is also becoming more complex and heterogeneous, including within systemically marginalized communities.

How can we resist the temptation to implement quick, feel-good solutions and instead commit to the long-term work of interrupting and redressing enduring systemic harm? How can our institutions ensure the safety of marginalized communities if backlash intensifies?

4) Intergenerational dissonance

Most Canadian colleges and universities were founded decades ago, if not centuries. Built for another world, they are increasingly ill-suited for the world we inhabit, and even more so for the worlds that are coming (Bauman, 2001). Senior faculty members are three generations removed from the undergraduate students raised with smartphones, social media, and the near-term threat of climate breakdown. How can educators prepare students for a world most of us cannot even imagine? We will need to find ways to support students to develop the intellectual, affective, and relational capacities to responsibly navigate complex emerging challenges.

There is also a significant gap between different generations of faculty members – between those who attended graduate school when public funding was still plush and those who have never known anything but a fully neoliberalized university. There are often tensions between more senior faculty who want to pass on their institutional memory and the wisdom of their experience and early-career faculty members who feel constrained by the weight of tradition and frustrated that new ideas are not welcome. These generational tensions are compounded by the fact that higher education faculty and senior leaders overall are less diverse than their students, and among faculty, there is greater representation of racialized and Indigenous faculty among younger scholars (Universities Canada, 2019).

In many ways, different generations are experiencing different realities. It is difficult to bridge this divide, yet if we do not find ways, it will become increasingly challenging to have meaningful conversations across it. Intergenerational learning is not unidirectional but rather flows in both directions. There is much that older generations can teach younger generations, but it is not always what younger generations want to learn; similarly, there is much that younger generations can teach older generations, but it is not always what older generations want to learn. How can faculty and staff de-universalize our generational perspectives so that we can engage other generations with more humility and curiosity? How can we create intergenerational learning opportunities oriented by commitments to learn from other generations and from our own mistakes, as well as the mistakes of those who came before us?

5) Public (ir)relevance

Relevance is not merely an issue across different generations; it also relates to the public perception of higher education and its value to society. This crisis of relevance is

particularly acute given that, as Bauman (2001) observes, academia has lost its monopoly over knowledge and people look to other sources, 'many of which are more skillful in "getting their message across" and much more in tune with the cravings and fears of contemporary consumers' (p. 130).

In response, institutions could recommit to ensuring their relevance, repairing their past mistakes and omissions, and developing genuinely collaborative and reciprocal relationships with different communities. Researchers might heed the call for transdisciplinarity that brings together collaborators within *and* beyond the academy to ensure the expertise and priorities of community knowledge keepers, rights-holders, and various sectors of society meaningfully shape research about collective problems (Mauser et al., 2013). This could entail supporting community-led research rather than assuming academics must lead.

Understandably, faculty want to resist political influence and the push to instrumentalize instruction and research by proving its 'market value' and meeting 'consumer demand'. In response to feeling like we are being pushed to treat our institutions like shopping malls, it is tempting to turn inward. However, if we respond by fortifying the classical 'ivory tower' model of higher education, we will likely be perceived as insufficiently responsive to pressing social and ecological crises. Further, in this defensive mode, we tend to romanticize universities of the past and thereby fail to consider how they have contributed to these crises by naturalizing colonialism, capitalism, and individualism (Stein & Andreotti, 2025).

How can we enhance public relevance without compromising the integrity of instruction, research, and academic freedom? How can we serve 'the public good' in creative, adaptive, and collaborative ways at a time when 'the public' is highly fragmented and there is little consensus around what constitutes 'the good' (see Challenge # 9)? How might we shift from the university as an ivory tower standing apart from the rest of society to the university as a nurse log that is part of the reality on the ground, composting harmful patterns and fostering new growth?

6) Ecological destabilization

Thus far, higher education institutions have primarily responded to the climate and nature emergency – an umbrella term for climate change, biodiversity loss, and the breaching of planetary boundaries – by positioning themselves as leading producers of sustainable solutions to this emergency (especially technical ones) and pledging to 'green' campus operations.

However, critics have challenged the 'greenwashing' (Facer, 2020) through which institutions offer a guise of sustainability while pursuing 'business as usual, but greener' (Baskin, 2019). In addition to elisions of the social, cultural, and economic root causes of the climate and nature emergency, many treat this emergency in narrow and oversimplified ways, for instance, reducing it to an issue of carbon emissions (known as 'carbon tunnel vision' [Deivanayagam & Osborne, 2023]). As a result, few institutions are prepared to face the direct impacts of ecological crises or secondary impacts like social conflict, intensified mental health crises, and disrupted supply chains for food and medicine. How these impacts will shape our institutions is not something we can prepare for and predict in familiar ways.

Returning to the question of relevance, the education we currently offer is largely geared toward preparing graduates for a climate-stable world, but this is no longer the world we inhabit. Educating students to inherit an ecologically unstable future requires going beyond either climate solutionism or climate doomism and instead preparing them to live with ecological crises without becoming overwhelmed, immobilized, or seeking quick fixes (Stein et al., 2023). This is not just about including more climate-related content in courses but preparing students to responsibly inhabit a climate-destabilized VUCA world amidst wider societal transitions.

We have a choice to make: will we continue producing and teaching knowledge that presumes the continuity of a system that is 'undermining the conditions of possibility for our biophysical survival' (Prádanos, 2020) or focus on confronting the limits and repairing the harms of that system? If we choose the latter, how can we recalibrate our relational practices toward trust, respect, reciprocity, accountability, consent, and compassion (Whyte, 2020)?

7) Ambivalent AI

Higher education has been adapting to digital innovations for decades, yet changes in generative artificial intelligence (AI) are happening faster than institutions can keep up with. Recognizing that AI poses existential uncertainties to higher education and humanity in general, colleges and universities are weighing the risks and benefits of AI in teaching, research, and administration (Watermayer et al., 2024).

Nearly 40% of students worldwide use AI for their studies, and many are seeking support in learning how to do so in more ethical and effective ways (MacGregor, 2023). Institutions and individual faculty and staff take on a range of positions on AI, ranging from techno-pessimism, emphasizing its negative impacts and potential to harm or even destroy humanity, to techno-optimism, emphasizing its benefits to human thriving. Others suggest the importance of engaging AI with both curiosity and caution about the risks and possibilities (Cao & Dede, 2023).

For instance, there are many ways AI can be part of research. However, if not undertaken in discerning ways, this could lead to a situation 'in which we produce more [knowledge] but understand less' (Messeri & Crockett, 2024, p. 49). Within current funding models and profit incentives, AI is poised to amplify the harms of existing systems (e.g., Brunner & Tao, 2024). Yet, while in many ways AI is a mirror of the humans that created it, it is possible to co-steward and collaborate with it in ways that interrupt colonial hierarchies of knowledge and authority and generate new possibilities for collaboration between humans and technology (Andreotti, 2023).

How can colleges and universities support faculty, staff, and students to engage with AI in ways that support rather than diminish collective flourishing? How can we learn to ethically coordinate and collaborate across multiple intelligences, including human intelligences, machine intelligences, and the intelligence of other living beings (Lewis et al., 2018)?

8) Mental health epidemic

More young people are struggling with their mental health. A review of recent research found that 'depression and anxiety, as well as psychological distress, suicidal thoughts

and self-harm, and fatal suicide, are considerably increasing in adolescent populations across many countries' (Keyes & Platt, 2024, p. 384). According to some estimates, 'globally, one in three to five children or adolescents have an anxiety disorder at some point' (Lancet Editorial Board, 2022, p. 539). Canada has seen a rise in youth mental illness and the use of mood-stabilizing and anxiety medication among young people (Wiens et al., 2020), and suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadians aged 15–24 (Government of Canada, 2023).

Although not all young people enroll in higher education, this has significant implications for our institutions. One study found an increased 'proportion of students self-reporting mental health-related challenges, including stress, psychological distress, and diagnosed mental illnesses' between 2013 and 2019 (Linden et al., 2021, p. 1). Colleges and universities report increasing requests for mental health services and academic accommodations (Condra et al., 2015), yet few have the resources to keep up with rising demands. Ensuring these services are culturally relevant is another challenge (Chatoor et al., 2023).

Growing mental health challenges may be due to the uncertainties experienced by young people (Lancet Editorial Board, 2022), climate anxiety (Hickman et al., 2021), social isolation (Government of Canada, 2021), higher levels of reporting and diagnosis, or a combination of these and other things. Recent research also finds that smartphones and social media contribute to 'mental distress, self-injurious behavior, and suicidality among youth' (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020) and young adults (Daniyal et al., 2022). These technologies rewire our nervous systems, with heightened impacts for young people whose brains are still developing. At the same time, AI can offer mental health support, for instance, in the form of 'chatbot therapy'.

What might shift if higher education accepted mental health challenges as 'the new normal', and adapted accordingly? How can we support students in processing the complex and heavy emotions that are already present and likely to intensify with growing uncertainty and instability? To do this well, faculty and staff would need to deepen our capacity to do this processing ourselves as we deal with our own mental health challenges (Halat et al., 2023).

9) Hyper-polarization

While conflict and disagreement are inevitable in human relations, in our current VUCA context, extreme polarization has resulted in narrowed spaces for intellectually and relationally rigorous dialogues about collective challenges (Stein, 2021). A generalized lack of capacity to have difficult conversations and move through conflict often leads to a desire to shut down the other side(s) of an issue – or, in some cases, shut down the conversation entirely. However, colleges and universities have a responsibility to create the conditions for respectful dissent and generative dissensus rather than imposing false consensus through coercion or censorship.

It is not merely polarization that makes such conversations difficult, but also an intensified context of competition for epistemic rightness and moral/political righteousness (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). This competition can lead us to reduce reality to a single totalizing narrative, collapsing complexities and asserting our narrative as the 'right' one. Even when we can intellectually understand perspectives different from our own,

many of us have lost the capacity to hold space for these other perspectives, and for our discomfort with them, without becoming emotionally dysregulated (e.g., 'fight, flight, freeze, or fawn' responses). Once this happens, we more firmly police the borders of our positions and thus meaningful and respectful exchanges become difficult. When we are affectively activated, we generally have a diminished capacity to address conflict from a space of self-reflexive intellectual discernment.

In the midst of all this, how can higher education institutions uphold their responsibility to protect academic freedom while supporting campus communities to develop intellectual, affective, and relational capacities and practices that can prepare us to have difficult conversations about complex issues, including conversations about the future of our institutions and wider social crises, without relationships falling apart (Stein, 2021)? What practices of de-escalation, conflict resolution, and self- and co-regulation already exist, or could be developed, that could enable us to collectively move through tense disagreements instead of running away and seeking the comfort and certainty of our rightness or righteousness?

10) Lack of capacities for coordination

At the outset of this piece, we noted that how we generally respond to crises in higher education presents a challenge in and of itself. As Bauman (2001) observed, 'Whenever they are in crisis and well before the nature of the crisis has been fathomed and understood, [education] institutions tend to resort instinctively to their repertory of tried and thus habitualized responses' (p. 137). However, problem-solving approaches from a previous era are likely insufficient for today's challenges, especially as these approaches have contributed to these challenges in the first place. If we want to keep our institutions afloat in these choppy waters, we will need to develop collective responses that meet the specificities of our new context and recognize we are also implicated in the problems we seek to address.

The challenge is that we are out of practice. Many engagements are transactional and reactive, rather than focused on collaboratively and proactively developing social and ecologically accountable approaches to research and pedagogy. Having been steeped for so long in an individualistic institutional culture that encourages us to maximize self-interest and protect our authority and autonomy, we have lost our capacity for coordination. Rosenberg (2023) sheds light on elements of university cultures that impede institutional adaptability and collaboration. He contends we often find ourselves entrenched in egocentric, oppositional-defiant stances that undermine trust and hinder our ability to address challenges collectively. To navigate this impasse, we need to relearn how to work together to meet shared challenges with courage, integrity, collegiality, creativity, and transparency.

Paradoxically, to create these conditions for collaboration, we will also need to look inward. Apart from feeling alienated from each other, many of us also feel alienated from ourselves, saturated by information, emotions, and internal complexity (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Many of us lack practices for holding the multiple, moving layers of complexity within and around us with emotional stability. In some cases, this lack of practice comes from our positions of privilege; generally, those with more privilege have not been compelled to attend to these layers, while many with less privilege have learned to do so out of necessity.

How can institutions support more people to address complex challenges in nuanced ways without flattening different perspectives, ignoring power differentials, or seeking consensus and definitive solutions? How can we learn to step back from the presumed universalization of our worldviews to hold space for different analyses about how we arrived here and develop intellectually and relationally rigorous approaches to the next steps? How might we cultivate the stamina and patience to continually return to and collectively revise provisional and imperfect answers to the question, 'What is the next, most responsible small thing (within reach) we can do to support the well-being of future generations within and beyond our institutions?'

The generational bowl

Having reviewed some of the challenges facing Canadian higher education, we now offer an example of an effort to address them that was oriented by intergenerational responsibilities.

This example comes from the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. Given growing financial pressures, all faculties and units were tasked with implementing budget reductions. Recognizing that this could prompt feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and inequity, the Faculty of Education approached the reductions through a process that forefronted complexity and relational rigour. In consultation with several Indigenous knowledge keepers from Canada, Brazil, and Peru who work with members of the Faculty leadership team, the team, led by Dean Vanessa Andreotti, identified the importance of developing an ethical compass to guide decision-making and consultation processes around the budget cuts. The compass would remind the Faculty that their decisions should be oriented by their responsibilities to current and future generations of human and non-human beings. This compass was symbolized by 'The Generational Bowl', which was introduced at the first budget-focused leadership meeting.

A bowl was placed at the center of the room, and leadership team members were invited to write the names of the children under 17 they knew personally and say their names out loud. The group then added young people they felt connected to or who were underserved – including Indigenous children, non-binary youth, children in conflict zones, children with disabilities and mental health challenges, and children in care. The third round addressed children not already in the bowl, children coming after the children in the bowl, and other-than-human children (who are also integral to the life-support systems that the children in the bowl depend upon), broadening the perspective on whom the Faculty's budget decisions would impact.

Next, the bowl was covered with flower petals, symbolizing a blanket of protection, compassion, and healing, and reflecting responsibility toward the future. The invitation was to consider the children in the bowl as 'witnesses' to the budget conversations. This approach helped unify the leadership team, encouraging a collective vision focused not on preserving the status quo but on serving future generations. Through this shared focus, the leadership team recognized they had an opportunity to contribute to something beyond individual or departmental ambitions: to an educational sector, a broader society and a planet in crisis.

To consult more widely with faculty and staff, the leadership team hosted a 'Faculty Futures' session and introduced the bowl. The leadership team recounted its creation and encouraged faculty and staff participants to mentally add more names of children

and groups they felt an affinity with, extending the bowl's symbolic reach. Members of the leadership team then took turns to present the immediate and broader budgetary challenges confronting the faculty. Participants were encouraged to adopt a holistic view to cultivate shared understanding and commitment to facing these challenges systemically and as a community with collective responsibility and compassion rather than as adversaries competing for resources.

At the close of the session, the bowl was placed in the middle of the room and participants were arranged in a fishbowl formation, with early-career faculty and staff seated in an inner circle around the bowl. The circle also included an empty 'ancestral chair'. The remaining participants, including mid-career and senior staff and faculty, were seated in an outer circle and asked to witness the conversations in the inner circle. The early-career group was invited to identify the changes they felt were needed within the Faculty and university – not changes that would serve their career advancement, but that would enable them to fulfill their responsibilities to future generations. The inner circle discussions referenced commitments to human and other-than-human generations already inheriting a world in crisis and those yet to come, and the daunting realities of climate change, biodiversity loss, economic instability, the housing crisis, and increasing destabilization of collective mental health.

The conversation also addressed some of the systemic barriers that hinder early-career faculty and staff and institutional change in general, such as entrenched bureaucratic processes and inflexible disciplinary perspectives, and inherited academic paradigms that do not prioritize regeneration and holistic wellbeing. This included a discussion of how the university has contributed to worsening problems and how it could change to support better health and well-being for all. The circle allowed participants to explore deeper aspects of their roles and the impact of their actions on those coming after them. The conversation also underscored the need for more transformative and transitional approaches to higher education. Participants identified the imperative to ensure that academic and operational practices would enable people to navigate uncertainty and complexity with a sense of internal stability and collective responsibility. Then, those in the outer circle were invited to occupy the ancestral chair on the condition that they speak not as themselves but as representatives of something beyond their identities and interests. Those who spoke brought insights from different viewpoints, including children from the bowl, deceased Elders, and a warming Earth asking us to do better.

Although the initial impetus for creating the bowl was to address the immediate challenge of budget reductions (Challenge #1, uncertain finances), its presence expanded the Faculty's capacity to collectively confront wider crises in higher education and beyond (Challenge #10, capacity for coordination). By symbolizing a call to serve the future rather than protect the past (Challenge #4, intergenerational dissonance), the bowl inspired renewal and made evident the imperative of collaborating in the service of current and coming generations, recognizing the immense challenges that these generations face (including Challenge #8, mental health; Challenge #6, ecological destabilization; and Challenge #2, the affordability crisis), as well as the need to address the systemic inequities that have persisted for multiple generations (Challenge #3, complexities of EDI[DI]). Through its intergenerational focus, the bowl allowed for difficult decisions to be made in non-adversarial ways (Challenge #9, hyper-polarization).

Ultimately, the Generational Bowl illustrates the potential of practices in higher education that address current challenges as symptoms of a deeper relational issue: the denial

of our responsibilities to one another, the Land, and the generations yet to come. In response to this denial, the bowl practice invited participants to develop the trust, mutual respect, and relational maturity needed to navigate cascading institutional and social challenges in ways that interrupt enduring cycles of harm, move beyond human-centred solutions, and acknowledge the interconnectedness of life. This showed that a different form of leadership and community building is possible but requires more time and different intellectual, affective, and relational capacities than those commonly developed and practiced in higher education.

Conclusion

Many challenges we face in our institutions and wider societies are rooted in an extractive, short-term orientation that prioritizes the immediate material abundance of a few over the long-term thriving of the whole. This leads to discounting how our decisions impact children, ecosystems, and collective well-being over time. To move toward intergenerational responsibility, we would need to learn to hold complexity, engage in generative conflict, and resist the temptation of reductive and righteous narratives. We would also need to cultivate the humility and adaptability to learn from diverse knowledge systems, including those outside the academy, and make space for those often marginalized in decision-making processes, whether they are early-career academics, Indigenous and racialized communities, or other-than-human beings.

The world is changing quickly, and higher education has not kept up. Those of us who work in higher education have a potentially important role in enabling social and systems changes that could support the well-being of future generations of all species through material, epistemic, and relational repair and regeneration. We can prepare learners and produce knowledge that catalyzes institutional and wider societal efforts to confront and heal from the legacies of colonialism and unsustainability. However, it will be difficult to support meaningful societal transitions if we remain invested in the status quo, protecting our self-interests, and appeasing our anxieties. As faculty and staff face the challenges reviewed in this article and the wider landscape of systemic crises, we will need to (re)learn, fairly quickly, how to collectively navigate these with patience, maturity, responsibility, and discernment – decentering our individual interests so we can center our intergenerational responsibilities instead.

In a VUCA context, it is tempting to retreat to our respective corners. Yet the challenges we face are collective and must, therefore, be addressed collectively. Developing sufficiently advanced levels of coordination to approach shared challenges and social change in generative ways will not be easy. We will need to interrupt inherited assumptions, enact repair for past mistakes, and recognize we will likely make new mistakes as we enter unfamiliar spaces. As the waters continue to rise, we will either learn how to swim together or we will drown together.

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