

**CATHY N.
DAVIDSON**

**and
JODY
GREENE**

Faculties

**A DIALOGUE ON INCITING
CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE IN
DESTRUCTIVE TIMES**

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*Cathy N. Davidson
and Jody Greene*

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For our colleagues

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When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus or resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture.

—bell hooks, *Teaching Community*

As long as we think of solidarity as saintly, we will not be able to fulfill it. But when our sense of possibility is guided by anticipation of error and contradiction interspersed with great leaps, solidarity becomes at first a realistic possibility and then eventually can be real.

—Sarah Schulman, *The Fantasy and Necessity of Solidarity*

What matters most is how well you walk through the fire.

—Charles Bukowski

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Prologue

We invite you to join a conversation about how we, as faculty members at any college or university, can participate in and even lead change in a meaningful way, even—*especially*—at this dire historical moment when higher education is under attack from multiple directions at once. *Faculties: A Dialogue on Inciting Constructive Change in Destructive Times* is a practical, sometimes philosophical, and often passionate exploration of the many ways faculty members can and even must engage in the delicate balancing act of simultaneously protecting and transforming our institutions, even as we find ourselves under siege. We’ve distilled insights gleaned from myriad histories, theories, guides, and management and leadership books about higher education and many other fields with our own personal experiences and educational values as faculty members who have also held leadership positions of various, often untraditional kinds at our institutions. We’ve also reflected on and drawn extensively from conversations with colleagues at our own institutions and with long-standing collaborators elsewhere. These conversations have more than confirmed our own hard-earned awareness that the realities of making collective, peer-led change can be daunting in the best of times, harrowing in times of scarcity, and seemingly impossible in the chaotic, unpredictable, and embattled times we face in American higher education today. Yet we want to insist that there has never been a more important time to engage vigorously, fearlessly, and collectively at the institutional level, as well as across institutions, even when we are tempted to withdraw in disgust or despair. The question we pose to you, our colleagues, is this: How can we find the will and tenacity to both defend and revitalize our institutions within hierarchical and often intransigent structures of “shared governance” at the most divisive and ideologically corrosive time for American higher education since the McCarthy era?

We hadn’t planned on writing this book. It arose organically from a series of Zoom conversations we began in 2022, at the beginning of our

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lurching and still-incomplete “recovery” from a global pandemic that upended higher education and left it forever changed. The two of us found ourselves in complex faculty leadership positions at our respective institutions, and we began Zooming in order to listen, share ideas, and offer one another advice. We managed to leave our conversations better prepared to address both the mundane and the increasingly severe emerging issues our institutions were facing. When we began, we had no idea these conversations would last for years. In deciding (in part encouraged by conversations with other colleagues) to share some of our discussions with a broader audience, we elected to retain the dialogue form, in the hope that these conversations—the back-and-forth, the thinking together—might prove as much a kind of model in your work life as they have remained for us.

One thing we’ve observed and wanted to draw attention to is the extent to which, even amid the existential challenges coming at and for higher education over the past decade, and especially over the past year, we faculty members are nonetheless still expected to engage regularly in institutional and departmental “change” initiatives at a much more granular and local level than those seismic shifts we read about, listen to, or watch on the national news. Maybe your provost has asked you to chair a committee to redesign the university’s two-year general education requirements in an effort to raise graduation rates while also streamlining the curriculum to keep costs down. That’s a crucial project given that much of the American liberal arts curriculum is a smorgasbord of haphazard introductory courses that students often see as “gut courses” and that aren’t much respected by many members of the faculty either (indeed, at many universities these are the courses assigned to graduate students or adjunct faculty). Administrators, seeking to cut costs, are all too quickly thinking about ending or condensing these courses. “Let’s just make college three years instead of four!” is a lazy, arbitrary, and indefensible way of addressing a crisis if it simply deletes a year of study rather than offering a sane, responsible alternative to faculty and students (in fact, we’ll look at some promising approaches to three-year degree programs in the coming pages). Yet solving the challenges of the liberal arts curriculum in an era of widespread financial austerity is both a Herculean and a delicate task, with the potential to create divisions within the faculty, especially across STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and non-STEM disciplines. Or perhaps, in view of waning numbers of math majors, you’ve been asked to develop a new basic math track that’s useful to those

pursuing degrees in other disciplines, a difficult topic for some of your colleagues who remain wedded to often poorly defined and barely articulated notions of disciplinary rigor. Maybe this term you're serving on a committee tasked with updating antiquated tenure and promotion guidelines and simplifying the time-consuming academic personnel review process, even as faculty workloads are growing and responsibilities changing in the face of new demands from above. Or your college is in the midst of a financial catastrophe and potentially faces closure, and you're on a committee making recommendations for how to merge several smaller departments into a large one. Quite possibly, in the midst of all these ongoing tasks, you're alarmed that your institution's leadership is engaging in what the historian of fascism Timothy Snyder has termed "complying in advance," accepting detrimental conditions based on new federal, state, or local directives, and you are hoping that, collectively, you and your colleagues might be able to propose an alternative, more educationally responsible course of action.¹ These are formidable, necessary tasks of the kind that fail to make headlines but that fall to us all at one time or another and for which few of us have been trained.

In the following pages, we move back and forth between the grand challenges facing higher education and the more local and quotidian ones, revisiting strategies and tactics that we and others have used with some measure of success, including in ambiguous situations with no perfect solutions. This book is designed for all who are working to provide their students with the educational experience they deserve against the backdrop of the polycrises faced by US higher education today, including (but by no means limited to) defunding, falling enrollments, declining public faith in higher ed, student and institutional debt, austerity, precarity, ideological persecution, the dismantling of diversity initiatives, resegregation, censorship, anti-intellectualism and anti-scientism, hostility to expertise, and outright menace.² That's a lot. Within institutions themselves, these "external" challenges manifest in a variety of debilitating forms, including the stifling of academic freedom, ever-changing metrics for measuring productivity, and an all-too-frequent (sometimes defensible, sometimes lamentable, and sometimes somewhere in between) lack of administrative transparency, respect, courage, or consultation. No wonder that many of us are asking, *Where do we go from here?*

Like most colleagues in higher education, we closely, even obsessively, follow the daily unfolding of actions and decisions that together inflict damage on every sector of higher education, whether taking billions of

dollars away from research universities, changing Pell Grant rules in ways that disproportionately harm community colleges and regional campuses, stripping minority-serving institutions of both grant money and other forms of federal recognition, restricting visas for international students, or any number of other destructive actions. But we are struck by the degree to which, even in the face of this onslaught, good, careful, and transformative work is being done on the ground all over the country. Even in these calamitous times, faculty members are dedicating themselves to teaching, mentoring, participating in the collective governance of our institutions, conducting groundbreaking research that contributes to the public good, and working to incite curricular, pedagogical, and structural changes that make their programs and their campuses relevant and consequential. Such work continues to happen on a daily basis, notwithstanding the national emergency (which is itself experienced in different ways at different institutions) and the denunciations of higher education by politicians and in the media, typically by those with little knowledge about what really happens on campus from one day to the next.

Faculties provides a big-picture view of the structural, fiduciary, ideological, and organizational circumstances (both internal and external, historical and new) that impinge on productive and inspiring change, and in particular considers what those circumstances look and feel like from the vantage point of faculty members—a constituency whose perspectives rarely take center stage in the national discussion around higher education today. Yet faculty members are more often than not those who are required to absorb and respond to these rapidly changing circumstances, both in our research and in our educational offerings. Everywhere we go, we meet faculty (now more than ever) who find themselves suddenly thrust into a leadership role, sometimes in concert with other faculty and staff whom they barely know (such as when institutions willy-nilly combine departments or programs), charged with designing, leading, and implementing change with little substantive preparation, training, or experience doing so, at a time when institutional chaos or ideological targeting is often just one executive order or social media swarm away.

Even as we provide plenty of examples of successful faculty-led institutional efforts at change or renewal, *Faculties* resists one-way solutions and top-down didacticism in favor of a discursive, dialogic form. In fact, we see dialogue as one of the most important and key features of constructive change and strongly advocate dialogue as a methodology and a practice essential to collaboration and collectivity among peers. Our goal is less

“dialogue across difference” than an engaged effort at thinking with a colleague/peer with whom one does not always agree but with whom one is engaging in order to create the conditions of possibility for collective action. In business books, writers assume that top-down managers (even when they are middle managers) can tell others what to do and how to proceed. Our method has far more in common with ways that nonprofits, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and community activists rely on persuasion, collectivity, cooperation, collaboration, and dialogue to move closer to implementation of a shared goal. It’s not just getting from point A to point B but bringing one’s colleagues along (and being willing to be brought along), especially in hazardous and even violent conditions where one must still find a way to proceed under duress. The alternative is to yield crucial institutional decision-making entirely to legislators, boards, or senior administrators, without input from those faculty whose entire careers may well have been devoted to building and sustaining the institutions facing these new and, yes, unprecedented times.

The original Zoom conversations that formed the basis for this book took place from 2022 to 2024—a time that seems comparatively benign when compared with 2025 and 2026. We voluntarily gave our scant time to these conversations because each of us felt, in our own way, the urgent need to hear another point of view; to understand our local challenges from a perspective informed by different experiences, institutional locations, and areas of knowledge; and to help one another find and work toward solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems based on the shared understandings at which we arrived. In other books, talks, and articles, each of us, at different times, has offered larger intellectual critiques of higher education and the social and political inequality in which higher education can be implicated. However, in these Zoom dialogues, as in this book, we focused on the core mission and challenge of higher education—and on productive local, faculty-led strategies for responding well and even boldly at difficult times for these institutions.³ We shared insights, gave one another feedback, and traded links to myriad helpful articles and books (as we continue to do almost daily). We also combined resources, data, and collaborative decision-making tactics that we’d each used in workshops, retreats, and professional development sessions we’d led at our own and other institutions and professional meetings, including several designed to aid faculty and administrators who sought to come together to solve common problems—much of which we have included in this book.

One notable feature of our dialogues has been our ability to contribute knowledge from an unusually wide range of higher education's institutions and roles. Between the two of us, we have experience at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, public universities, private universities, research universities, regional universities, and the Ivy League, and in different regions of the country (literally, North, South, East, and West—as well as at universities in a number of other countries). Besides coming up the ranks from adjunct and various other temporary positions through to full and/or chaired professorships, we've each held a number of leadership roles, both as faculty members and in full-time administrative jobs. (We'll say more about our trajectories later, insofar as they inform our approaches to institutional culture and to transformation efforts.) We have each had successes and failures as both faculty members and mid-level administrators. We've found through our conversations that, together, we are often able to understand larger contexts of change than either one of us alone could from our present vantage point. More important, we've found this wide-angle aperture on institutional trends and political movements to be extremely useful in defining the parameters of our particular goals and helping us to develop the specific strategies by which we carry them out. By surveying and analyzing an array of institutional and social structures, we hope to help colleagues succeed in attaining their own goals, regardless of institutional location and type.

While we have worked to retain our original back-and-forth exchanges and conversational style of processing, countering, accumulating, and synthesizing ideas and information, we have also made sure that these dialogues (presented as chapters and arranged by topics) include a significant amount of data, supplemented by extensive resources, citations, and references. We are both higher education information junkies, and we have tried to pass on reliable, usable information wherever we can. There is so much misinformation, so many misconceptions about higher education in the air right now (both inside and outside of these institutions) that we believe knowing the facts and supporting those facts with data can be useful to colleagues making the case for their programs or divisions or for higher education as a whole. We also hope these resources help support colleagues who are thinking through their role as leaders and who are trying to occupy those roles effectively, ethically, and successfully, and maybe sometimes even with the joy that comes from working through an institutional roadblock or creating structures that support one's colleagues in undeniably bleak times. We both got into this profession because we

love teaching, writing, research, and problem-solving. Our dialogues have also had the psychological outcome of helping each of us *remember* that original passion, even when we were most mired in bureaucratic muck, disheartened by cynical responses to the grinding work of institutional change or simple day-to-day maintenance, or overwhelmed by the systemic attack being leveled by state and federal governments at a higher education that's often presented to the public as a soulless caricature of itself.

We also retain the dialogue form in the hope that you will feel included in this conversation and that it might spark more dialogues of your own. We believe, fervently, that higher education is worth fighting for, that the fight can only happen collectively and collaboratively, and that notwithstanding the damage we see inflicted around us every day, we cannot let our disappointment degenerate into despair. We hold close the words of activist Rebecca Solnit, who admonished on November 6, 2024:

They want you to feel powerless and to surrender and to let them trample everything and you are not going to let them. You are not giving up, and neither am I. The fact that we cannot save everything does not mean we cannot save anything and everything we can save is worth saving. You may need to grieve or scream or take time off, but you have a role no matter what, and right now good friends and good principles are worth gathering in. Remember what you love. Remember what loves you. Remember in this tide of hate what love is. The pain you feel is because of what you love.⁴

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This book is not for everyone. Although we discuss tactics and methods that anyone can use in any situation where collective action is required, we write from a set of progressive ethical values, social assumptions, and educational goals that not all of our readers will share. Bottom line: We believe higher education is a public good, is necessary for democracy, and is key to social mobility—and we believe in the importance of the public good, democracy, equality, and social mobility. All of those principles are being relentlessly undermined at this pivotal moment—as they often are, historically, when governments are working to move from democracy (however limited) to autocracy. Between 2023 and the summer of 2025 (when we were finishing this manuscript), over 134 bills were introduced in state legislatures to restrict higher education's efforts to advance equity and inclusion, and fifteen such bills then became state law.⁵ We

consider this a travesty and a tragedy, not only for the individuals whose future prospects will be constrained and careers delayed or ended by these measures but for the nation as a whole, which will lose a vital wellspring of talent and innovation when a generation of promising students and future researchers, artists, innovators, thinkers, and educators loses their recent and hard-won access to higher education.

We are aware that some academics might not agree and will not find everything (or in some cases much of anything) in this book to their liking. Those who wish to see these institutions brought to heel and stripped of their historical independence will surely object to much in these pages, but so will those who see this as a time to vanquish academic administrative overreach and place governance fully in the hands of academic laborers. The tactics we describe and the information we present are specifically geared to aid those still trying to operate within the complex terrain of shared governance (about which much more in what follows), in an effort to serve students and the public good while confronting restrictions being imposed on our institutions around all matters related to what can be taught, written, researched, and said. Fields such as African American studies or women's and gender studies and sometimes entire disciplines in the social sciences and humanities—as well as in those areas of science with a social purpose (from public health to climate change)—are in danger of being dismantled. At the same time, we believe that the threats to the future of higher education in the United States are sufficiently existential that *all* members of the faculty, regardless of their disciplines or political views, should engage in a collective process of considering and actively debating how we want to contribute to ensuring these institutions survive and continue to fulfill their missions.⁶

Our idea of positive change requires extending respect to the perspectives and positionalities of students, faculty, staff, and administrators; a deep awareness of higher education as a social good; and a view of a just society based on many of the concepts currently being excised from the institutional lexicon of higher education institutions, research centers, and funding agencies.⁷ We acknowledge that these values are increasingly difficult to fight for in the current political climate, and yet, as teachers and scholars, we remain committed to making positive institutional change wherever and however we can.⁸ This is by no means the first time in human history (or in American society more specifically) when we have been called on to organize effectively despite new rules, restrictions, and requirements. Collective faculty-led change is more difficult in situations

of political duress, but our larger point is that it's never easy. To put this another way, nearly all of the strategies and practices we propose in this book for inciting positive change came from conversations we were having *before* the second administration of Donald J. Trump, and these strategies and practices have only become more urgent and necessary since.

There aren't many "lesson plans" for us as faculty that are designed to help us succeed in the arduous task of running our institutions as partners in shared academic governance while still responsibly carrying out the equally demanding tasks of teaching and research that brought us into this profession. Service, the third pillar of our jobs as faculty members, is by far the least respected or rewarded and yet is absolutely critical—without the service part of our job, the entire notion of faculty governance loses meaning.

It's always complex and frequently infuriating working to instigate change from a position of faculty participation rather than administrative authority and power—say, as a chair of a small program rather than as a provost or president. Yet much of the work of institutional change—curricular, pedagogical, and beyond—relies on the leadership and authority of faculty members who are not administrators. Maintaining the balance of power between faculty and administrators (many of whom, of course, are also faculty members) is a delicate act from every side. How does one, as a faculty member, respond effectively to (sometimes baffling or infuriating) decisions made by administrators at one's institution—or to federal or state government policies being enforced there—while managing the day-to-day commitment to running one's department or program as well as possible? How do we keep enough faith in our institutions to help them work well even when we feel discouraged by the actions of those with the authority to make major decisions, whether those decisions are coming from our own campus leadership or from the ever-proliferating layers of bureaucratic governance and oversight beyond the campus level? At the same time, how do administrators sustain the will to collaborate effectively with faculty who treat them with corrosive suspicion of their motives? Academic freedom implies a *responsibility* to articulate our judgments when things are going badly. How, then, does one critique an institutional apparatus while also working hard to be an effective and engaged partner in shared governance? And at what point, in the embattled circumstances in which we currently find ourselves, do we set aside our longstanding differences and present a united front to the forces lining up to undermine or even destroy higher education as we know it?⁹

We acknowledge at the outset that this is difficult to balance at the best of times and especially tricky now, when higher education is being attacked and penalized from every possible position, when prominent institutions are capitulating with shocking speed to new federal executive orders, when opinion polls show increasing public distrust of higher education, when fewer high school graduates are choosing to go to college, and when a demographic cliff starting in 2026 means a shrinking population of those of traditional college-going age. We are under assault. We need to govern our institutions effectively and collaboratively, or we will lose them entirely. Courage is essential. Running away is not an option.¹⁰

In this book we'll be addressing numerous examples of faculty leadership under pressure. We assume that anyone taking the time to read this book is immersed in such complex conditions and is looking for positive models and fellow travelers. Our primary audience is faculty leaders or faculty members engaged with any kind of initiative for change as well as those faculty who have moved into official, middle-level leadership roles: those who are directing programs, chairing departments, or chairing or serving on committees charged with envisioning, gaining approval for, and then implementing some revision or improvement. Our goal is to offer useful and, where possible, tested and successful techniques for inciting and implementing change against odds. At the end of the book, we have included a recommended reading list, titled "Useful Books and Articles That Prepare Us to Incite Constructive Change," of books and essays on academic leadership, arranged by topic, compiled and authored by William Edward Arguelles, a doctoral student at the Graduate Center (City University of New York). These are some of the core texts that have informed our own always developing understanding of how to protect what's essential and make change where it's needed in the shifting and increasingly pressure-filled landscape of higher education. We also include a few classic business and management books as well as management books intended specifically for academics, such as the excellent Higher Ed Leadership Essentials series at Johns Hopkins University Press. We single out some particularly insightful opinion pieces from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, as well as helpful publications from professional organizations and higher education think tanks that have been researching and proposing effective responses to the evolving needs, priorities, and trials of higher education institutions for years, if not decades.

We have learned much from the writing and the example of any number of our era's prominent higher education leaders (which is not to say

we always agree with them!), including Michael Crow (Arizona State University), Joseph E. Aoun (Northeastern University), Ana Mari Cauce (University of Washington), and Freeman A. Hrabowski (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), as well as college presidents who have used their privileged institutional and demographic positions to speak out powerfully to a broad public about academic freedom, basic research, or the importance of championing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in these times when, as scholar Geraldine Heng reminds us, so much seems to be geared to privileging the opposite: homogeneity, inequity, and exclusion.¹¹ We thus applaud Michael S. Roth (Wesleyan University), Christopher Ludwig Eisgruber (Princeton), Patricia McGuire (Trinity Washington University), and Gregory Washington (George Mason University). Hopefully, there will be a long list of other inspiring leaders by the time this book goes to press.¹² We have also profited from the rich literature, often by college presidents or deans (current or emeriti), that reflects generally on what it means to be educated, on what college is and should be, on what makes “a student.”¹³ And we have been deeply influenced by the field known as critical university studies, a field that combines scholarship and activism and offers compelling analyses of the role of neoliberalism in corporatizing and privatizing our colleges and universities (in the United States and elsewhere), in ways that have contributed significantly to the exploitation of faculty labor and the rise in student and institutional debt, and have made us vulnerable to the suppression of free speech.¹⁴ At the end of this book, we have included a list of readings selected from all of these kinds of books. We could not have written this book without them.¹⁵

Finally, we have been deeply inspired by a number of writers who are community activists as well as, in some cases, academics: monumental civil rights organizers including Ella Baker, Dolores Huerta, Angela Y. Davis, and Bayard Rustin; long-standing social justice organizer and writer Sarah Schulman; spiritual leaders like Lewis Richmond, Bernie Glassman, and Joanna Macy; feminist organizers like Pauli Murray and bell hooks; and countless others. All emphasize the power of sustained big-tent coalition building as well as the necessity of considered compromises and strategic trade-offs in order to achieve and sustain results. In addition, we’re deeply indebted to theorists and practitioners of higher education administration such as Adrianna Kezar, student success advocates like George Kuh, and the dozens of other writers we’ve included in the recommended reading list of books and articles at the end of this book who offer insights and advice on change in higher education from multiple perspectives.¹⁶

As the array of resources and thinkers addressing change in higher education and society at large attest, there is much to learn, there are no easy solutions, and no one rule book applies in every local situation. We thus invite you into this conversation not just as a reader but as a shared participant in thinking about change, and with a spirit of shared urgency and solidarity. Much of what we learned in our three years of dialogues and in our work to turn those into a book was spurred by discussions (and sometimes even volatile debates) appearing on social media—the old Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, BlueSky—and in the comments sections of blogs and on discussion boards of various kinds. Although we have attempted to list some important contributors to our thinking in the acknowledgments section, to name everyone who influenced us over the course of these conversations is impossible, so we simply note, gratefully, that it is heartening that so many people we have never met have been willing to engage with us in deep, caring, concerned dialogues on both poles we are considering here—constructive change and destructive times.

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Since we began our conversations, the political landscape has darkened. Attacks on higher education have escalated rapidly, and “DEI” has been “banned” in many government agencies, companies, and even many colleges and universities, with far-reaching consequences and a potential for ever-greater resegregating of American society. Some institutions are doing a far better job than others at addressing new edicts from their boards, trustees, or state or federal government. With the explosion of attacks on so-called woke faculty and programs, with the actual firing and arrests of some faculty engaged in nonviolent forms of protest, with cynical, extortionist demands from the federal government for institutions that wish to remain eligible for federal funds of any kind, constructive, productive, creative change can seem out of reach, sometimes even a pipe dream. Nonetheless, we believe that it is urgently necessary for faculty to find ways to unite and work effectively together—including across many different disciplines, perspectives, political views, and levels of academic status and power. So we talked—and learned so much from talking through our ideas that we kept going. We left each exchange feeling energized and kept at it until it became (to use a word key to Jody’s lexicon and life) a practice.

When we began, we’d each taken on positions of academic leadership, not as presidents or provosts, but in relatively specialized administrative

roles nonetheless designed to envision, model, and implement successful change. Cathy had been in various positions like this since 1998, when she became the first vice provost for interdisciplinary studies at Duke (and possibly in the nation). She was charged with working across all of the different schools at that university in order to create new programs and new infrastructures for more successful collaboration. In 2014, wanting to be more engaged in public higher education, she moved to the Graduate Center to create the Futures Initiative. The City University of New York (CUNY) is the nation's largest urban public university—and arguably, simultaneously, its most resource deprived and its most inspiring. She continued to research and write on transformation, even against impossible odds, and eventually was invited, by Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, to be his senior adviser on transformation for the entire system, focusing specifically on career success for students, staff, and faculty across the two- and four-year campuses. Jody came into roles that encouraged rethinking the university and the faculty's role in it nearly two decades later, although, as it happens, they would also end up tasked with thinking holistically about how all populations that make up the university might succeed. In 2016 they agreed to start a teaching center at the University of California (UC), Santa Cruz, where they had been on the faculty since 1998 (so Jody's entire career began when Cathy was already stepping into strategic leadership roles). Jody was surprised to find that they had both interest in and a kind of drive directed toward better understanding as well as acknowledging the changing nature of the faculty role at research universities. In the years that followed, Jody has held a series of roles sitting at the intersection of faculty development and student success, with a particular focus on the labor of faculty at the nation's new minority-serving research universities. Like Cathy, Jody has consistently sought out nontraditional leadership opportunities that entail better understanding and then developing strategy to respond to the accelerating shifts happening across higher education in general, and public higher education in particular, especially as those changes affect faculty roles and faculty labor.

We know each other in part from our original shared field of literary studies, though each of us has ranged widely in our scholarship across varied fields in humanities and cultural studies throughout our careers. We probably met formally first through mutual friends at Duke, when Cathy was teaching in the English Department there and Jody was a visiting faculty member for a semester. Yet our roots and connections run much deeper than that, through any number of shared friends and loved ones,

through a shared love of Japan, through the heyday of Twitter, through a profound curiosity about the past, present, and future of US higher education. We remet more formally after Jody founded the teaching center at Santa Cruz, when Jody invited Cathy out for a residency to help colleagues think through the implications of Cathy's recently published book, *The New Education*, and what that book's findings might mean for the future of teaching, of the humanities, of universities, and of so much more. That visit was a turning point, and a deep and abiding mutual respect and friendship were born. We can no longer remember who invited whom to have these conversations, or what the original intent was—but over the course of the past few years of speaking weekly, we have learned together, read books and articles on academic leadership together, questioned together, sent one another resources and provocations, and talked. And talked some more. And then headed back out into our respective professional lives, both more grounded and more inspired.

In the spring of 2024, we decided to take up the challenge to turn our conversations into a book. We developed an outline of topics and questions that we felt were key to reflecting on and leading institutional change from the unique position, both powerful and yet not determinative, of *faculty*. That is not a perspective we've seen represented very often in books on change in higher education. That is, as faculty—and in particular as tenured faculty, with all the opportunities *and* responsibilities that attend that uniquely privileged role—we have the power and status to suggest, advise, and recommend change. We also, by the terms established for academe in a democracy, have academic freedom (a freedom currently under grave assault and a topic to which we return often in these pages). The American Association of University Professors summarizes all the areas of academic freedom in research and teaching as well as in what is called *intramural speech*, meaning the “freedom from institutional censorship or discipline when addressing matters of institutional policy or action.” Academic freedom also includes *extramural speech*, defined as “freedom from institutional censorship or discipline when speaking or writing as citizens.”¹⁷ Those parameters allow faculty in their professional (or intramural) capacity to promote and advocate for a range of institutional changes, including in pointed and critical ways. This kind of direct criticism of one's superiors would be highly unusual—and might well endanger one's employment status—in many sectors outside of academe.

At the same time, as faculty we do not have the structural administrative power or authority to make the ultimate decisions required to actually

enforce change or to commit financial and personnel resources to support a given change. Almost everything we do in this regard is advisory, a recommendation rather than a mandate. Yet, to complicate matters again, the actual implementation of any new administrative decision or decree typically again rests with the faculty, since senior administrators (presidents, provosts, even deans—notably all also faculty members, though rarely defined as such) do not have the on-the-ground ability to actually enact the particulars required to make the change happen. If this were a business, it would be called a classic middle-manager dilemma, but in academe we add the crucial component of academic freedom (which means colleagues can also criticize one another and their “superiors”). The benefits and drawbacks of that in-between-ness are something we queried, debated, and tried to test in our conversations.¹⁸

It was important that in most of our conversations, we asked one another questions, things we wanted to explore together, in a spirit of inquiry rather than resolution. We volleyed ideas and examples back and forth, always trying to understand the ways in which, despite our lofty mission as educators, many attempts at academic change fall short. Why? What histories, assumptions, fears, structures, and distrust can paralyze us—and how do we overcome those? As much as we spent time discussing policies and programs, our conversations came back again and again to dispositions, mindsets, and culture, to the way faculty culture is produced, reproduced, transformed, and occasionally radically disrupted. Before each session, we outlined five or six “questions within the question” that we wanted to address. We turned on our Zoom cameras and hit the transcription button, and then we talked. Typically, each dialogue was thirty to forty minutes long. Our brilliant doctoral student collaborator, Will Arguelles, did the first edit of the transcriptions, adding questions of his own, pointing out areas where our conversation needed to be more expansive or detailed, to include more examples or be more precise about methods or definitions. We then worked on the manuscript for several months, adding, fleshing out, revising, researching, adding relevant bibliographical citations, and, in general, turning each conversation into a chapter of the book you are reading now, while still working hard to maintain the rhythms of conversational interchange and flow that we see as essential to trust and successful collaboration.

We submitted our heavily edited conversations to the press a few days before the inauguration of the second Trump presidency. As bleak as the landscape looked for higher education before January 2025, as anyone

reading this book can surely attest, our challenges looked far more significant just a few weeks into the year. While academic freedom had already been under significant pressure for reasons we had documented carefully in the book, now we saw an all-out extramural assault the likes of which universities in the United States had never seen before, even in the McCarthy era. We watched everything from the denial of basic services to undocumented students to the removal of a university president under pressure from the Justice Department, and we saw executive orders, lawsuits, and countersuits on a daily basis. We witnessed universities “naming names” of so-called anti-Semitic faculty, sometimes in the Kafkaesque manner (to use Judith Butler’s apt characterization) of simply turning over names and personal data without a clear accusation or even a willingness to tell faculty on what grounds their names were being released.¹⁹ Perhaps most consequentially, we witnessed long-standing threats such as the endowment tax and the capping of indirect costs become reality, while also witnessing the catastrophic defunding of nearly all of the national agencies devoted to supporting research in science, the humanities, the arts, and medicine.

In the face of this unprecedented assault, at least one of us thought that the world of higher education had changed so radically and so rapidly that this book risked seeming irrelevant or inadequate and even wondered if it should be published at all. But the adept, careful, and shrewd readers to whom our editor at Duke University Press, Elizabeth Ault, sent our manuscript surprised us by coming back with both strong (one might be tempted to say *fierce*) suggestions for revisions and a consistent recommendation that the book ought to be published—yet another example of working, dialogic feedback, a key to a successful collaborative process. The problems we saw in 2022, 2023, and 2024 remain. There are, indubitably, gigantic new problems in 2025. There will be yet other problems in the future. Working collectively toward faculty-led solutions has never been more necessary.

Through numerous subsequent revisions, we have tried as much as possible to preserve the flavor of our original exchanges, as well as the spirit of our commitment to remaining constructive amid the mounting destruction. That last part hasn’t been easy. Inevitably, we have each had moments of abandoning this affirmative posture in favor of bitterness, hopelessness, or cynicism, but we have found ways—precisely through dialogue and colleagueship—to turn back from those darker moments. We have also each traveled extensively to and found inspiration from a range of different kinds of institutions (community colleges, state universities, private universities, elite publics and privates) as well as to numerous disciplinary societies and

to professional associations of higher education innovators, administrators, and faculty leaders. Everywhere we have gone, we have seen faculty continuing to work hard and diligently, alone or collectively, against the odds, to maintain the integrity of higher education despite the onslaughts. Everywhere, we have been reassured that now, still, incremental change is possible and necessary—if even more difficult than usual.

The goal of our book is energy, not enervation. So one thing we talk about throughout these dialogues is how we can make use of the plentiful and pointed critiques of higher education and, at the same time, move alongside of and sometimes orthogonal to them, in order to enact the stabilization we need and the change we desire. That's not easy, either. Then again, it's not easy to live a moral and productive life in a flawed (collapsing?) society outside of academe. How do we achieve not just balance but the momentum to move ahead, to continue to work to uphold and improve an institution that we can more easily critique and dismiss? *How do we not give up?*

Jody's April 2025 participation in the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's two-week Humanitarian Response Intensive Course (HRIC) was particularly timely and useful in this way. Multiple sessions by seasoned humanitarian actors noted the catastrophe of the defunding of USAID, the increasing abandonment of the humanitarian principles in conflicts globally (particularly but not exclusively in Gaza and Ukraine), and the dismantling of the existing international system of humanitarian actors coordinated by the United Nations. Yet panel after panel reflected that the humanitarian sector for decades has acknowledged the need to change, to become less bureaucratic, less colonial, more local, and nimbler. Jody came away refreshed and even inspired by the realism of these leaders in humanitarian fields, who, without a speck of Panglossian false optimism, nonetheless recognized that the current upheaval in their sector at minimum forces a reset that is, by their own account, long overdue.²⁰ While we feel both wary and somewhat weary of the oft-repeated quote (attributed to Albert Einstein), "In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity," we nonetheless believe, with our colleagues in the humanitarian sector, that we have no choice, in the face of the assault on our profession, but to participate in and play a role in shaping whatever it is that comes next.

Although we have worked throughout the book to emphasize the importance of faculty leadership and faculty changemakers, we fully recognize the severity of the challenges we face now and the many ways the very concept of faculty as the key constituency in charge of governing higher

education is under attack. The lack of support for faculty who want to create positive institutional change mirrors a tendency we have seen in the past decades as higher education has shifted and redefined the role of faculty in several different directions at once. We point to three areas where the role of faculty has changed demonstrably. First, constant budget crises have shrunk the faculty. The cutbacks to higher ed have made it easy and sometimes necessary to save money by replacing retiring or departing full-time faculty with adjunct faculty. Currently, some 45 percent of those in the faculty ranks are part-time, temporary hires, while another 20 percent are in full-time non-tenure-line roles.²¹ Too often this results in a life of precarity for new instructors and, additionally, presents challenges to the ideal of shared governance on which US universities depend, given that at most institutions adjunct and other non-tenure-line faculty have no voice whatsoever in shared governance. What can be done to address this, and all other aspects, of the adjunct crisis? We don't pretend to have a comprehensive solution to this lamentable transformation of colleges and universities into gig employers, but we will point to workable ideas proposed and implemented at a number of institutions to help mitigate this disaster.²²

Second, those faculty who rise through faculty ranks to become administrators or who are brought in from other fields to be higher education managers spend most of their time among other administrators, making decisions that seem to many of their faculty colleagues to have little to do with either the rigors of traditional research or the day-to-day realities of classroom teaching. At least in part, this is because administrators now have responsibility for a significantly more complex institution than the one that can be directly perceived from the faculty ranks, including sprawling and ever-growing issues of student well-being, enrollment management, donor engagement, liability mitigation, compliance, institutional reputation, towering debt, and shrinking budgetary streams. Leading well is an especially formidable task now. We note that the time in office even for presidents has dropped from 8.5 years to 5.9 years in the past two decades.²³ Nonetheless, we believe that the increasing distance that exists between faculty and administrators, too often bordering on mutual hostility, weakens our institutions and renders shared governance dysfunctional, when it functions at all.

Third, although faculty are trained to be research-centric, the student success movement has shifted the focus even at research universities to pedagogy and undergraduate career preparation—roles for which almost no faculty members have been trained. While many institutions, from

individual colleges to disciplinary societies and national associations, are now putting much more focus on the professionalization of teaching, improving student success is generally still considered the responsibility of the individual faculty member rather than a structural challenge that will require systemic change throughout the higher education sphere. The old metrics and methods for assessing whether (and which) faculty should be hired, tenured, promoted, and rewarded are increasingly replaced by metrics such as graduation rates or (most recently) earned income in a first career. Faculty implicitly are being held accountable—without training, without any real research on what faculty can and cannot do to influence student outcomes, and with no significant change in the research expectations or the reward systems to match the new standards for advancement.

In the face of these and other challenges, which we never seek to minimize, our ideal reader is the faculty member who takes to heart the bell hooks quote from *Teaching Community* with which this book begins: “When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus or resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture.”²⁴ We hope, more than anything, that this book offers a “constructive focus” and perhaps even some “resolution” to those faculty leaders seeking both.

In chapter 1, “Why Are We Having This Conversation Now?,” we lay out the motivation for and the parameters of our dialogues, the areas we will be addressing and why. We situate ourselves both professionally and personally, as a way of framing some of the histories, dispositions, and commitments that we bring to these conversations. Then we offer an overview of issues we analyze at greater length in other chapters, including the relationship between *accountability* (a term with many meanings that we parse throughout the book) and *academic freedom* (another complex term).²⁵ The terms have changed—and keep changing—and not always to the benefit of faculty and students, but in our analysis, the new focus on accountability covers everything from the defunding of entire research fields for political reasons to what Frank Bruni calls a federal funding model in which “ye shall be judged by the salaries of your alums.”²⁶ At base, this constitutes a shift such that the self-governing nature of academic institutions, in which the faculty use their expertise to assess the quality of the research and teaching offered, is being systematically eroded. Similarly, threats to academic freedom are occurring on every level, from the very president of the United States down to hotlines set up on campuses

and nationally where students can report professors who they feel are not representing all points of view, who are too liberal, or who are expressing opinions they feel constitute anti-Semitism, a serious and real threat that is also, in this moment, a “floating signifier” being mobilized to silence and repress campus speech.²⁷

Chapter 2, “What’s Working in Higher Ed Today?,” examines the mission of higher education and the values worth sustaining and fighting for. It offers a counterpoint to the anticollege rhetoric by addressing economic and social mobility, basic research for the public good rather than for profit, creative and critical interdisciplinary thinking, increased emphasis on effective teaching and active learning, and the preservation (as well as the creation) of knowledge, especially important as state and federal agencies (including museums and archives) are expunging histories that include factual information about minority groups or women or that mention topics critical of American policy or past actions, including well-researched, historical accounts of slavery. Chapter 3, “Who Inspires Us?,” is a tribute to faculty, administrative, and civic leaders who have done something admirable, even courageous, that has influenced and emboldened us to aim higher and that we hope will offer you the same galvanizing spark toward empowerment. Chapter 4, “Meeting External Challenges,” looks at myriad forces impinging on higher education today. This is the section of the book that has required the most rethinking and discussing and rewriting since January 20, 2025, amid the constant, deliberate, sustained, and devastating attacks on higher education being waged by this US presidential administration. By contrast, chapter 5, “Facing Internal Challenges,” was unquestionably the most difficult for us, since it looks at our own tendency, as faculty, to too often fight over relatively small stakes when the consequences of disunity and, in the worst situations, dysfunction can be disastrous not only for overall institutional interests but also for our own interests as faculty members. We explore the stakes of rethinking some of the ways we work together to stabilize institutions facing challenges from all directions—and identify institutions and people who are already excelling in this area. Chapter 6, “Academic Freedom and Accountability,” looks at the ways higher education has seen some of its foundational rights and privileges systematically disrupted over the past five decades and, more recently, aggressively dismantled. We offer ways of rethinking our prerogatives and responsibilities as faculty within a new order that is unquestionably reevaluating some of the “freedoms” academics have taken for granted for the past half century. Chapter 7, “Shared

Governance and Coalition Building,” addresses with candor and, we hope, with compassion the nearly impossible contradictions inherent in the system of shared governance, a system that also is structured on the disempowerment of faculty who, proportionally, are increasingly in part-time, adjunct, or otherwise temporary (and often institutionally invisible) roles. While the forces chipping away at faculty governance are unquestionably accelerating in this historical moment, we also chronicle some of the ways in which the sharing of governance has rarely or never delivered on its original promise for reasons that are structural as well as political and ideological.

Faculties concludes with a chapter that steps away from the dialogue form, “Ten Moves to Jump-Start Your Revolution,” offering a series of practical tips and methods that anyone can use in their role as faculty leaders and changemakers. That, along with the topical reading list of works that have informed and sustained us, “Useful Books and Articles That Prepare Us to Incite Constructive Change,” is offered as a pragmatic guide for individuals or even small groups of faculty to take this book and put it to use in their own contexts and circumstances.

Many of our examples, though by no means all, come from our own institutions, and this is by design. We want to encourage you to look around *your* own institutions and derive encouragement and even inspiration from good things happening close to home. We don’t believe that the genuinely creative and transformative things happening around us are anomalous, and we challenge you to look for the ones happening all around you, as well. As Cathy often says, all solutions are local, and as Jody often says, we have to train the mind to look for what is working well and not only for what is broken.

Still, as we complete our final edits in the fall of 2025, the deliberate destruction of our universities is unfolding, day after day after day, presidential executive order by presidential executive order, congressional interrogation by congressional interrogation. There are the perpetual crises of academe—and then there’s *this*, the president of a nation taking aim and dismantling programs and funding in every field and in every direction, working hard to decimate what is hailed, worldwide, as America’s greatest export: higher education. Nonetheless, taking inspiration in part from our humanitarian colleagues, our title and subtitle remain as they did in the first draft. We have become even more committed to the possibility of constructive change in the face of the pointed, purposive attempts to destroy higher ed, and we believe such change is accomplished

only through collectivity and commitment. We concur with the adage attributed (probably spuriously) to Benjamin Franklin during the signing of the Declaration of Independence: “We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

We thus dedicate this book to our colleagues, in the hope that we can find the best ways to hang together. Higher education is crucial in a democracy and necessary to a healthy future for the generation coming of age now, in these tumultuous times. Our society needs the important forms of research that we produce. Our students—*all* students—deserve the very best, most inspiring education we can give them, whether they are working toward an associate’s degree on the way to becoming a registered nurse or earning a PhD in Black and Latinx studies. This is our mission—and our challenge. Higher education needs all of our faculties if it is to survive and even thrive in the decades ahead.

September 2025

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Prologue

- 1 Snyder, *On Tyranny*.
- 2 It's important to emphasize from the outset that the perilous economic crises faced by colleges and universities have been building for decades. See, for example, Alexander, *Peak Higher Ed*; Ando, "Crisis of the University"; and Ando, "Reorg 101."
- 3 For an excellent resource guide and casebook focusing on solidarity and organizing in response to external pressures and restrictions on campus, see Di Bartolomeo and Gannon, *Campus Crisis Toolkit*. We are also encouraged by efforts of the American Association of University Professors as well as independent coalitions such as Stand Together for Higher Ed, which is "building collective power to uphold the core values of higher education." See Stand Together for Higher Ed, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://www.standtogetherhighered.org>.
- 4 Rebecca Solnit, "They want you to feel powerless . . .," Facebook, November 6, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1FARcbAQeL/>.
- 5 J. Harper et al., *Shared Equity Leadership*.
- 6 To take only the most obvious index of this existential threat, in the four months between January 20 and May 20, 2025, an estimated \$11 billion in federal funding for higher education has been frozen. See Nadworny, "What Losing Billions."
- 7 Yourish et al., "These Words Are Disappearing."
- 8 Although the 2023 Supreme Court decision (*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181) ruled that both Harvard and the University of North Carolina had admissions policies in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, several state and private institutions have taken this specific and narrow decision further and dissolved African American studies programs, women's and gender studies programs, and so forth. Since January 20, 2025, executive orders by President Donald Trump have consistently targeted these areas.
- 9 One intriguing example of such a shift could be glimpsed in July 2025, when the University of Denver faculty voted no confidence in their chancellor, Jeremy

- Haefner. In advance of the vote, Faculty Senate President Dean Saitta resigned, saying, “Given current attacks on the autonomy of universities by external forces I believe that we should be rallying with the chancellor and not organizing against him.” Quoted in Swanson, “University of Denver Faculty Votes.”
- 10 See Freshwater, “Reclaiming Higher Education Demands.”
 - 11 In a thoughtful video that has gone viral on social media, the distinguished global medievalist Geraldine Heng insists, “Don’t let people say DEI like it’s a bad word. Make them spell it out,” and then ask them, “If you are against diversity, equity, and inclusion, are you then saying you are for—in support of—homogeneity, inequity, and exclusion?” See Geraldine Heng, “Don’t let people say ‘DEI’ like it’s a bad word,” Instagram, September 5, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/acmrs_asu/reel/DOOs3vqj6gM/.
 - 12 For stirring, personal, and informative comparisons of McCarthyism to the current situation, see J. Scott, “General Air of Anxiety”; and Butler, “When Universities Become Informants.”
 - 13 The Johns Hopkins series already mentioned covers topics ranging from university budgets to marketing; see, e.g., Justice, *How to Be a Dean*.
 - 14 One of the first essays to define critical university studies as a field is Williams, “Emerging Field Deconstructs Academe.” See also Jaschik, “Critical University Studies”; Kaufman-Osborn, *Autocratic Academy*; Newfield, “Humanities Decline in Darkness”; Newfield, “University’s False Economy”; and Newfield, “Grotesque Inequity.” We are especially grateful to our colleague and friend Chris Newfield, who in *The Great Mistake, Unmaking the Public University*, and numerous articles and countless posts to his blog, *Remaking the University*, now titled *Remaking II: Long Revolution*, has been tireless in tracking the defunding of the University of California system and equally persistent in pointing out the ways the university shortchanges many of its own faculty members and students. For parallels at the City University of New York, see Fabricant and Brier, *Austerity Blues*. See also Noble, “Digital Diploma Mills”; Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism*; and Ginsburg, *Fall of the Faculty*.
 - 15 In the past months (and no doubt in the coming ones), we recognize a range of voices addressing many of the same issues we’ve been talking about for years, and with the added urgency of a full-frontal assault on higher education. For instance, Kevin McClure’s writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has focused on real-time strategies for gathering ourselves to respond to the ongoing and emerging threats. See, as just one example, McClure, “5 Steps.”
 - 16 See Kezar, *How Colleges Change*; and Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices*.
 - 17 American Association of University Professors, “FAQs on Academic Freedom.”
 - 18 A classic business book that discusses and offers tools for managing from the middle is Wilkins, *Managing from the Middle*.
 - 19 J. Scott, “General Air of Anxiety”; and Butler, “Kafka-Land at UC Berkeley.”
 - 20 Fletcher, “Humanitarian Reset.”
 - 21 Syed, “Brief Note.”

- 22 Kezar and Culver, “Employee Value Proposition.”
- 23 Jesse, “Portrait of the Presidency.” See also Chessman et al., *American College President*.
- 24 hooks, *Teaching Community*, xiv.
- 25 Carpenter, “Art of Faculty Accountability.”
- 26 Bruni, “I’m Watching the Sacrifice.”
- 27 See Heal and Sundar, “Professors Talk Academic Freedom.”

1. Why Are We Having This Conversation Now?

- 1 See Davidson and Katopodis, *New College Classroom*.
- 2 Decaille, “Tracee Ellis Ross.”
- 3 For two different analyses of the far-reaching implications of defunding higher education for cities, students, and society as a whole, see Baldwin, *In the Shadow*; and Goldrick-Rab, *Paying the Price*. For a concise overview of the research cut-backs, see Nadworny, “What Losing Billions.”
- 4 C. Brown, “Cost vs. Value Paradox.”
- 5 Ziker, “Long, Lonely Job.” See also Allen et al., “Faculty Time Expenditure.”
- 6 J. Greene, “Research University.”
- 7 Owen-Smith, “Why Universities Are So Powerless.”
- 8 D. Roberts, “What Critics.”
- 9 HASTAC, “History of HASTAC.”
- 10 For a fuller discussion of collaboration by difference, see the sixth section of chapter 8, “Ten Moves to Jump-Start Your Revolution.”
- 11 One might think, for instance, of Dan Berret’s “The Day the Purpose of College Changed,” which traces the purported exact moment when the liberal arts took a backseat to college as a vocational enterprise—a challenge many see as particular to the twenty-first-century assault on higher education—to a speech by Ronald Reagan in 1967. Yet even within the piece, Berret notes in passing that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were already at loggerheads in the eighteenth century about whether higher education’s purpose should be to shape character or to prepare one for a career.
- 12 Pettit, “Faculty Hiring.”
- 13 Wiktionary, *the Free Dictionary*, “faculty,” last revised May 20, 2025, <https://en.wiktionary.org/w/index.php?title=faculty&oldid=84884318>.

2. What’s Working in Higher Ed Today?

- 1 Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, “How Does.”
- 2 Statista Research Department, “Wealth Distribution.”
- 3 This history is discussed at length in Davidson, *New Education*.

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