

**LETTER****Response to Smith et al Letter RE: Evolving Priorities Commentary**

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*To the Editor:* I appreciate the thoughts provided in the letter by Smith and colleagues in relation to my previously published commentary entitled, “The Challenge of Coming to Terms with Evolving Priorities.”<sup>1</sup> I agree with both the spirit of the sentiments expressed as well as the specifics presented related to how educators, leaders, and mentors can assist colleagues and learners in achieving their goals and maintaining their values despite setbacks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on the sentiments I expressed in the commentary and hope to further clarify and elucidate both my intention in writing as well as the issues presented.

My aim was not to prescribe a certain type of strategy or pathway for resolution of challenges presented for members of the Academy, but instead to encourage leaders and those in positions of authority to allow the mental and emotional space for such discussions, deliberations, and conversations about priorities to occur. Too often, the pressure to continue down a path set long ago, perhaps in the form of a tenure-track position with a clock or a rigid five- or ten-year development plan, intersects with reality or changed circumstances (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) and the individual is left with a plan that may have been initiated by a different person entirely than the one they are today. While the authors should rightfully be lauded for their encouragement of long-term goal setting and working to actualize plans and achieve pre-pandemic goals through variation in strategies, my position was to encourage normalization of the full constellation of possibilities present when such a potentially existential evaluation occurs. I would submit that there is room for both the possibility of evolving priorities in what is considered important to an individual over time as well as the reaffirmation of those previously set priorities and matching them with evolving strategies to achieve one’s goals. There truly is no right or wrong way to handle these types of issues, but only the person-centered way, showing compassion and empathy and truly listening to the feelings and experiences of those around us.

My experience as department chair over the past year in working with faculty members who were stretched to well past their limits in terms of time and workload (both personal and professional) taught me that crises and situations like the COVID-19 pandemic can help us to reconsider what we view to be most important in life. In some situations, faculty members found that the increased time with their families was enjoyable and gave them newfound energy and passion for life, which may have led them to consider alternative employment where they can work fully from home. In other circumstances, the pressures of being at home and forced without notice or preparation to become an elementary school teacher, daycare worker, and camp counselor or activities coordinator all rolled into one in addition to the full-time job as a faculty member both gave the individual a refreshed sincere appreciation for the services these institutions and individuals provide as well as a newfound appreciation for the quiet and peace of the faculty member’s office at the college. This process of allowing oneself the mental and emotional permission to truly re-evaluate how we allocate our time (and by proxy, leaders and persons in authority allowing such processes as well) is what was meant by “evolving priorities.” Those around us (as well as ourselves) are first people before faculty members, educators, or any other role we play in the world. It is vital that we recognize that humanity in our interactions and encounters and focus on the emotions and ensuring that people feel supported, valued, as well as seen and heard.

I welcome the debate around this very important issue that is only now beginning to crest as faculty members emerge from the immediate crisis and attempt to determine how lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the remainder of our lives and careers. I hope this dialogue continues, and we can move towards a more empathetic, compassionate, and person-centered future together.

**REFERENCES**

1. Malcom DR. The challenge of coming to terms with evolving priorities. *Am J Pharm Educ*. 2021. Published ahead-of-print. April 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8664>.