

Research Article

Motivation, Well-Being, and Resilience: The Case of World Language Educators at West Virginia University

Amy S. Thompson, *Florida State University, USA*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4505-1755>

ast24d@fsu.edu

Cynthia Chalupa, *James Madison University, USA*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7316-5995>

chalupcs@jmu.edu

Sandra Stjepanovic, *West Virginia University, USA*

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5395-9889>

sastjepanovic@mail.wvu.edu

ABSTRACT

Educator well-being and motivation have become popular topics in educational research, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Well-being and motivation are often derived from positive interactions with students and colleagues as well as feelings of affirmation in the classroom and workplace. While a supportive workplace environment can reinforce an educator's sense of well-being, job stressors, including job precarity, can undermine this well-being and accompanying sense of self. If stressors become too great, educators may choose to leave a particular position or the profession altogether. This study examines the negative impact on motivation and well-being caused specifically by the threat of job loss. The case study is centered around world language educators during an *academic transformation* process at a large, state university in the United States. Given the widespread language program cuts taking place across the country at present, it is imperative to understand the impacts that such cuts have on the motivation, identity, and the physical and mental well-being of those affected as well as the role their resilience plays in such cases. Despite challenges to their sense of self, their motivation, and their well-being, the faculty who were affected by the *academic transformation* process demonstrated resilience by continuing their work, supporting their students, and engaging in research and advocacy.

Keywords: well-being, motivation, L2MSS, identity, world language faculty, program elimination

INTRODUCTION

Educator well-being and motivation have recently become important areas of research, particularly because of high attrition rates and a shortage in teachers worldwide (Cano et al., 2017). Central to the notion of well-being is the impact it has on classroom instruction, instructor engagement, and relationships in the workplace (McCallum & Price, 2010). It is perhaps not surprising that the sense of well-being, or a lack thereof, has a documented impact on motivation and the ability to engage in effective teaching practices (Collie & Martin, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018); indeed, teacher motivation and well-being are inextricably intertwined (e.g., Cece et al., 2022; Karamushka et al., 2021). While a positive workplace environment can increase educators' sense of well-being, job stressors can significantly decrease motivation and damage their sense of self-efficacy (Klassen et al., 2013). Ultimately, high levels of stress and decreased well-being can result in the decision of a teacher to question their work or even leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Given the relationship between job stressors, low motivation, and a decrease in job satisfaction, it is not surprising that the United States (U.S.) is facing an unprecedented teacher shortage at the secondary level. A similar crisis is evident at U.S. postsecondary institutions. As the fiscal resources that support educators decrease, particularly at public institutions, and the demands for increased enrollment and program changes increase, the sense of job stress and reduced motivation are on the rise.

Typically, studies about educator motivation and well-being have focused on the situation of secondary school teachers. They examine job demands, such as time pressure, conflicts with colleagues, discipline problems, and low student motivation as threats to well-being and damaging for teachers' motivation to remain in the profession (Collie et al., 2012; Fernet et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2018). Fewer studies look specifically at the environment of language educators at the post-secondary level, and more precisely, how the insecurity of a program or the threat of job loss affect teacher motivation and well-being.

As the number of language programs that are reduced or eliminated continues to grow at an alarming rate in the U.S. (Johnson, 2019), the issue of workplace well-being and motivation among language educators is becoming a more pressing topic. With that in mind, this study approaches

teacher motivation and well-being from the perspective of university language educators in the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics (WLLL) at West Virginia University (WVU), which underwent a university budgetary crisis and ensuing program cuts. The authors analyze the impact of job loss on the physical and mental well-being and motivation to teach of the faculty affected, as well as their resilience and decision to continue in the profession. The authors highlight the threats to motivation, well-being, and a sense of self among language educators in higher education and provide ideas for future research on the topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation and Well-Being in the Workplace

The concept of stress as an occupational hazard for educators and a threat to well-being is not new. Over a decade ago, Mark and Smith (2012) described a disturbing level of occupational stress and anxiety among those working in the field of post-secondary education, concluding that, "university staff may suffer from high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress-related illness compared to general population samples" (p. 76). Flaherty (2022) noted that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education has experienced a greater-than-normal rate of turnover, and that faculty are now more mindful than before of the need for a work-life balance. As a result, they are willing to switch institutions or leave academia altogether to find it. The impact of the pandemic on academic workload caused even seasoned educators to experience burnout (Koster & McHenry, 2023). In fact, in 2019, the World Health Organization included burnout in its International Classification of Diseases, describing it as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" (2019, para. 4). With dimensions of physical and emotional exhaustion, mental distancing from one's job, and reduced professional efficacy (WHO, 2019), burnout has a direct impact on teacher well-being and success. McCandless et al. (2023) argued that faculty burnout must be taken seriously as educators leave the profession to seek employment in other sectors in what Anthony Klotz coined "the Great Resignation" (Lodewick, 2022).

The topic of motivation and well-being during stressful times has become a focus of research attention in recent years. Karamushka et al. (2021) examined teacher motivation and well-being at different stages of the pandemic using two types of work motivation, autonomous and controlled (Osin et al., 2017). Autonomous motivation includes concepts, such as intrinsic motivation, integrated motivation, and identified motivation. This is in contrast to controlled motivation, which includes concepts of doing the work to prevent negative consequences or not having a real desire to do the work at all (amotivation) (Karamushka et al., 2021; Osin et al., 2017). In stressful situations, such as during the pandemic, Karamushka et al. found an increased importance of having high levels of autonomous motivation to an improved sense of well-being. Other studies determined that levels of controlled motivation were not related to increased well-being (see also Allen et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2021).

In the book, *Sustainable working lives*, De Witte et al. (2015) described job insecurity as a detrimental workplace situation that can ultimately have devastating mental and physical repercussions. Job insecurity is typically involuntary and reaches beyond the workplace to create a sense of insecurity about the future in general, rendering affected employees unable to act without knowing the outcome of their employment. Most poignantly, job insecurity represents a discrepancy between what the employee desires and what reality delivers – the potential loss of one’s job. This is one of many “psychological hazards” at work that can cause both “physical and psychological harm” (De Witte et al. 2015, p. 112). Research on job insecurity links it to anxiety (Burchell 2009), irritation (Otto et al., 2011), depressive symptoms, and hostility and loneliness (Kalil et al., 2010). Particularly, the uncertainty of job insecurity is devastating; De Witte et al. explained that “job insecurity is actually more problematic for well-being than actual dismissal” (p. 116). It can become a chronic stressor if it is drawn out and also has a cumulative effect on future well-being (De Witte et al., 2015). In the case of university budget cuts and job elimination, the process can be drawn out for months as analyses are completed and administrations make decisions, leaving faculty with a sense of foreboding and insecurity based on “precarious employment” (Breshears, 2019, p. 28). Precarious employment refers to “work that is insecure in one or more ways and can refer to both ‘non-standard’ work,

meaning work that is temporary or part-time, as well as work that is low-paid, and lacking in benefits and collective representation” (Breshears, 2019, p. 28). In the case of the current U.S. higher-education climate, the term can also be applied to positions within programs that are slated for elimination.

Job precarity (i.e., job insecurity¹) in the form of adjunct positions and short-term employment has plagued the language teaching profession for decades. The added threat of program elimination has compounded these longstanding issues and also undermined the security of tenured and tenure-track appointments. Walsh (2019) discusses the links between policy decisions, their link to employment decisions, and the ensuing job precarity. Neoliberal approaches, which drive actions and policy in education systems, have a pronounced negative impact on well-being because they lead to precarity. Precarity and its related stressors, whether brought on by a global pandemic or neoliberal education policies, can have an extremely detrimental effect on work-related motivation and well-being, as evidenced in De Witte et al. (2015).

Although this study is the first to examine in detail the link between mission-driven program cuts, job insecurity, and teacher well-being in the U.S. higher education system, anecdotal evidence suggests that the threat to well-being and a diminished sense of self as a result of job precarity is an issue that is becoming increasingly common in post-secondary language programs nationwide. The lack of job security stems from a demographically linked decrease in enrollment on college campuses in general and shrinking student numbers in language classes, specifically. Although the number of course choices in all disciplines have increased, the support for curricular growth includes a fundamental shift away from humanities education in favor of disciplines that serve as a direct pipeline to jobs. Majorism, a concept linked to neoliberal politics, is the idea that some majors (i.e., the ones that connect to a clear career path, such as nursing) are superior to those with a variety of potential career options (such as many degrees in the humanities) (Carrigan & Bardini, 2021). Particularly prevalent in large public institutions is the political pressure to primarily support degree programs that have a degree connected to the job pipeline. Given that student tuition is the most substantial portion of the operating budget in the U.S. university system (Cannella & Koro-Ljunberg, 2017), recruitment offices must make cogent arguments to parents

and students regarding the value of the cost of attendance, which often amounts to tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars over a four-year period. In addition to infrastructural amenities, like libraries with comfortable study spaces and recreation centers with state-of-the-art equipment, universities recruit students with the promise of employment immediately upon graduation. Given that disciplines in the humanities, in general, and in language studies, specifically, prepare students for many different employment opportunities, it is difficult for recruiters to identify a single job for which the degree prepares students. For more convincing recruitment, they therefore push majors that link directly to job ad descriptions, such as mechanical engineer or IT specialist. Relatedly, enrollments in language majors are shrinking, and the employment of faculty in those disciplines is increasingly threatened.

Language Educator Motivation Under Duress

What happens when internal or intrinsic types of motivation become unsustainable due to contextual variables, such as job precarity or loss? Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) can help us understand the impact that job precarity has on educators, specifically in terms of their concept of self. The L2MSS operationalizes an ideal language learning self, which is the future person a language learner ideally visualizes for themselves in terms of the language user they want to become. This is in opposition to an ought-to self, which is a type of self that is formed by giving in to external pressures (Dörnyei, 2009). Thompson and Vasquez (2015) also proposed an anti-ought-to self, or a self that pushes against external pressures or perceived threats to freedom (Brehm, 1966; see also Thompson, 2017a). This framework has been used to identify ideal language educator selves (often referred to as ideal teacher selves), or the ideal language educator visualized for a specific individual in a specific context. For example, Valmori and De Costa (2016) discuss proficiency standards in terms of ideal teacher selves. Kubanyiova (2015) illustrates an ideal teacher self of a participant, who internalized a strong desire to lead in conjunction with pedagogical competence. Several studies examine the formation of the ideal teacher self in contexts where there are multiple obligations and a heavy workload (Gao & Xu, 2014; Guilloteaux, 2013). Additionally, Guilloteaux (2013) found that the participants in this study place low

importance on motivating students, and Gao and Xu (2014) found a clash between the affordances of the participants' rural context and the English proficiency goals of their ideal teacher selves. Hiver et al. (2018) explore teacher motivation in an overarching way; this study identifies one motivation of going into the teaching profession as job stability and retirement benefits. In the case of language teachers, sometimes the expectations clash with reality.

Many university-level language faculty have a strong ideal self when it comes to their professional lives (Thompson, 2020), in part because of the years of study required for a university faculty position. Thus, when this identity is threatened, the strong ideal self begins to ebb. When faced with department closure and job loss, suddenly the language educator self that was built over a period of many years is called into question. In respect to teacher professional identity, Cece et al. (2022) specifically examined how perceived support from principals affected teacher motivation and well-being. They showed that perceived expertise (both pedagogical and in the subject matter) was significantly associated with perceived principal support. The authors confirmed the "protective role of autonomous motivation on teacher burnout" and the "associations between motivation and professional adjustment in front of school constraints across time" (Cece et al., 2022, p. 11).

Resilience, or the capacity to thrive despite threatening circumstances (Gu & Day, 2013), is a concept that is closely linked to motivation and well-being, which has been the focus of a number of studies. For example, Hascher et al. (2021) discuss well-being in conjunction with resilience using a detailed 10-year review of the literature on these topics. Many of the studies reviewed indicate resilience supporting and maintaining teacher well-being, which in turn, supports motivation. Inspired from the review, Hascher et al. (2021) developed the aligning well-being and resilience in education (AWaRE) model to further explore the connection between well-being and resilience, specifically with educators. In perhaps the most comprehensive overview of resilience in language educators, Hiver (2018) also examines the need for resilience in language teaching and outlines potential avenues for researching the topic, discussing how resilience is the key to maintaining well-being, despite the consistent threats to the profession. He indicates that resilience is also a key factor in maintaining language educator motivation in

difficult times: “teacher resilience (...) may be an indispensable quality for understanding how language teachers manage and sustain their passion, enthusiasm and commitment to making a difference in the L2 classroom” (Hiver, 2018, p. 242). In what follows, we will show how the well-being, motivation, and resilience of language educators at WVU were affected by the process of *academic transformation* and ensuing job loss.

Employment Threats to Jobs in Post-Secondary Language Education in the U.S.

Context is not monolithic (Mercer, 2016; see also Ushioda, 2009), and individuals’ relationships with their specific contexts depend on a multitude of factors. Each person’s sense of self will have a unique interdependence with the context of their own unique personal and professional lives. In the U.S. context, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing budgetary crises and austerity measures at many post-secondary institutions, the number of students studying a world language was already shrinking (Kirchner, 2000). Nevertheless, compared with today, world language enrollments were relatively stable. According to the 2016 Modern Language Association (MLA) report on enrollments in languages other than English (Looney & Lusin, 2019), language programs had experienced “sustained growth” prior to the year 2009 with the exception of 1995, when there was a 3.9% dip (p. 4). The MLA report from the fall of 2021, however, presented a much darker picture of language study in the U.S. Lusin et al. (2023) reported a shocking 16.6% decline in languages other than English at two-year and four-year institutions, with only three of the 15 most commonly taught languages showing increases (American sign language, Biblical Hebrew, and Korean). It should be noted, however, that these data were collected during the global pandemic, when the future of international work-related collaborations and travel were uncertain.

While overall declining student enrollments contribute to the loss of students studying languages, they do not provide a complete picture of the political climate that has contributed to the loss of language programs. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2023) reported that college enrollments still remained below pre-pandemic levels, with 14.2% deficit in associate-degree students and a 3.3% decline in Bachelor-degree students overall. By

comparison, enrollment declines in language classes were 24.2% and 14.7%, respectively (Lusin et al., 2023).

The greater loss in language enrollments suggests a general context-specific and politically-influenced (Thompson et al., in press) devaluing of language and culture instruction at many institutions of higher education in the U.S. Language programs at two-year colleges, which typically offer education to underserved communities, have been disproportionately eliminated, thus sending the message that, “certain subjects are not meant for certain students” (Lusin et al., 2023, p. 9). Additionally, small language programs are at greater risk based on fewer faculty and reduced course selection. Finally, a more restrictive total number of credit hours allowed per undergraduate degree has served as the justification for eliminating required language courses in conjunction with general education requirements; such constrictions often lead to program closures. As part of the neoliberal policies driving educational decision-making processes, all these factors contributed, in part, to the elimination of WVU’s Department of WLLL.

Overview: West Virginia University and the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics in the Context of Appalachia

WVU is the flagship university of the only state in the nation that is situated 100% in Appalachia. In studying rurality in relation to sociolinguistic variables, Hazen (2018) states, “The State of WV does not have truly urban areas” (p. 80), as seen by recent census data; most people in West Virginia live in areas or towns of 2,500 people or fewer. According to the 2010 U.S. census (n.d.), the state capital of Charleston ranked as the largest city with a population of 51,400; Clarksburg was listed 10th in terms of population with 16,578 inhabitants. Morgantown, where WVU is located, was noted to have 29,660 residents (WorldAtlas.com, n.d.), making the local economy dependent on the ever-shrinking student body at WVU. Overall tenacious and resilient, WV residents are often overlooked in terms of funding for physical and technological infrastructure and creatively make do with few resources (Flather, 2024). Many WVU students are Pell-grant eligible² and first-generation³ college students, and have overall very little opportunity to travel, nationally and internationally. The landscape can be harsh,

with hills that are steep (or sideling, in WV vernacular), making building and farming difficult (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Farm in Reedsville, WV, Population ~600 people*



In terms of languages spoken, the Census Bureau (n.d.) data for 2018 indicates that 21.9% (67.3 million) residents in the U.S. have listed a home language or one of the home languages as a language other than English (LOTE). In WV, however, only 2.6% of people speak a LOTE, and this percentage is ranked 50th by state in 2019 (Statista Research Group, 2024). Additionally, WV is one of the states where the smallest number of students learn LOTEs in a post-secondary setting (ranking 41st on the list), according to the MLA (Looney & Lusin, 2019).

Until the fall of 2023, the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences, where WLLL was housed, required the completion of the equivalent of the fourth semester of a LOTE to earn a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. In recent history, approximately 3,000–4,000 students enrolled in at least one class in WLLL each semester, and the eight languages taught were Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish; additionally, linguistics, applied linguistics, and literature/culture classes in English were also taught, along with the courses taught

in the English Language Learning Institute (ELLI). ELLI provided all of the academic programming and academic support services for international students at WVU.

Given the role of WVU as the land-grant, flagship university, it has a responsibility to promote the global aspect of its mission statement and offer experiences with world languages and cultures that many WVU students have not had exposure to growing up:

As a land-grant institution, the faculty, staff and students at West Virginia University commit to creating a diverse and inclusive culture that advances education, healthcare and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity; by advancing high-impact research; and by leading transformation in West Virginia and the world through local, state and global engagement (<https://www.wvu.edu/about-wvu/mission>).

The promotion of multilingualism not only helps universities be more diverse and inclusive, but the

incorporation of LOTEs into the curriculum also enhances global access and engagement (i.e., Simonsen, 2021; Thompson, 2017b). Supporting language instruction also represents the university's commitment to career planning and job placement given the rise in demand for bilingual workers. Research shows that the demand for employees with language proficiency more than doubled between 2010 and 2015 (New American Economy, 2017), that these employees have higher lifetime earnings (Berlin, 2014), and since the COVID-19 pandemic, bilingual remote jobs have increased by 30% (Jaros-White, 2022).

Undermining Motivation and Well-Being: The Dissolution of a Language Department

In an effort to mitigate a 45-million-dollar deficit, WVU hired an external company to evaluate the program offerings at WVU and to identify areas where costs could be saved. The week of July 10th, 2023, WVU deans and department chairs were notified of the “programs of concern” that would require an intensive self-study. In the Department of WLLL, this delineation was applied to all programs and all languages: undergraduate majors in Chinese Studies, German Studies, Russian Studies, French, and Spanish; minors in the above languages in addition to Arabic Studies, Italian Studies, Japanese Studies, Linguistics, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and literature/culture in translation; Master of Arts (MA) programs in TESOL and Linguistics. The department was required to write a self-study document with details about the viability of these programs and submit it to the provost's office by August 1.

On August 10th, the Eberly dean and the WLLL chair received a communication from the provost's office that WVU had made a “mission decision” to discontinue all WLLL BA and MA programs and to reduce the number of faculty in the department to zero (i.e., total elimination of all programs, associated coursework, and faculty). Units were given the opportunity to appeal the decision; the WLLL appeal hearing was scheduled for August 25th. The results of the appeal hearing for WLLL were publicized on August 29th, with the recommendation to eliminate all undergraduate and graduate programs, but to maintain instruction of Chinese and Spanish, taught by five retained faculty. It should be noted that, as part of the *academic transformation* process, the provost's office made the

decision to also eliminate the language requirement for all majors that still required it in the middle of the semester. After the Board of Governors' review, the ultimate decision was to retain seven faculty and four languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish) and to eliminate all undergraduate majors and graduate programs, as well as all German, Japanese, Italian, Russian, and Linguistics/Applied linguistics courses and the faculty who taught them. The reduction in force (RIF) notifications were given to faculty mid-October. Teach-outs for the MA programs were planned through May 2025, and the teach-outs for the German and Russian Studies majors were slated for December 2024. ELLI was also dissolved, and all associated faculty and staff positions were eliminated. The Office of Global Affairs subsequently hired one staff member to take over all of the programs and services offered by ELLI. Numerous media outlets reported on the *academic transformation* process.

Not only the well-being of faculty, but also that of WVU students was affected by the university's decisions. In response to the cuts, there were also a number of student protests. The largest was the multi-campus, student walk-out on Monday, August 21st (Figure 2). Many protesters wore red, to represent the WV mine strikes of the early 20th century, in which the miners donned red bandanas, solidifying the term “redneck” in American English (Todd, 2015).

While an examination of student well-being is beyond the scope of the current study, comments by students in a survey that the WLLL produced during the *academic transformation* process indicate the impact that the inability to study a language had on their well-being and the potential negative impact of the decisions. For example, in the survey one student pointed out that in a state, such as WV, state universities are the only viable options for many students, and indicated the unfortunate result that eliminating language, culture, and linguistics classes would have on student opportunities:

WVU is a land grant state school, this is a school that unfortunately is an only option for many in-state students. Cutting this program will not only cut these in-state students off from the rest of the world, but it also discourages international students to attend WVU. If you cut this program, you rip opportunities from 100s of eager to learn students.

Another student noted the importance of knowing a language in today's global world:

I am taking this course because of my interest in French. I love the language and the culture. The class is beneficial to my further understanding of French, as well as my career. I am currently on track to work for a global corporation and knowing

multiple languages further enhances my ability to work. (...) I am taking this class because it's important to me, to my career, and to the world around me.⁴

Certainly, there is a link between student and faculty well-being. If student well-being is suffering, there is an inevitable negative effect on faculty well-being as a result.

Figure 2. August 21st Student Protest About the WVU Academic Transformation Cuts



The *academic transformation* process at WVU created a sense of job precarity across campus and precipitated the stressors and disturbance to well-being that De Witte et al. (2015) described. Relatedly, the concept of the ideal educator self (Dörnyei, 2009) was threatened in conjunction with job insecurity. Given that the announcement of impending program cuts occurred on March 31, 2023, program elimination recommendations were made on August 10, appeal notifications followed on August 29, and layoff notices were delivered in October of 2023; WLLL members lived with job precarity for seven months in total. Research shows that chronic job insecurity undermines mental health (Warr, 2007), and the months-long process at WVU led to significant burnout among faculty and staff; a phenomenon that is linked to a lack of professional engagement and satisfaction (Awa et al., 2010). Undermining the sense of well-being among faculty ultimately influenced their job satisfaction, their sense of joy in carrying out the daily requirements of their profession,

and their aspiration toward higher educational and institutional goals.

Gregersen et al. (2023) pointed out that teachers are more effective when they enjoy well-being and, therefore, it is not an added luxury, but a “key determinant of good practice” (p. 863). In the case of WLLL, job insecurity and eventual job loss had a detrimental effect on the mental health and well-being of those involved. Additionally, taking into consideration the positive relationship in supervisor (i.e., principal) support to perceived levels of expertise (Cece, 2022), the sudden removal of support for the discipline and its faculty undermined the sense of self of the instructors during *academic transformation*.

ACADEMIC TRANSFORMATION: FACULTY WELL-BEING, MOTIVATION, AND A NEW JOB REALITY

Methods and Participants

In line with the topic of this special issue, understanding the effect on faculty well-being and subsequent motivation during *academic transformation* is an important part of documenting the process holistically. The authors, who were the department chair and the two associate chairs during the *academic transformation* process, approached this section as an autoethnography, with the data collected retrospectively, using “a form of autobiographical narrative that explores the writer’s own experience of life. It is an approach in which the researcher/subject draws upon his or her experience, story and self-narrative to examine and connect with the social context” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 201). Accordingly, each of the three authors responded individually in writing to a series of co-constructed prompts:

- How did the decision to cancel the programs affect your ability to do/feelings towards your job and your well-being?
- Has your approach to doing your job changed after the decision?
- How do you maintain engagement (give examples) at the time?
- How have you been able to keep motivation to continue working?
- How has your focus changed after the decision?

The authors answered the questions in different ways, either responding to the prompts one at a time or writing a reflection as a response to all questions taken together. All of the responses were analyzed using a narrative-based analytic approach that utilizes “the meaning in stories” to see how the three authors “create[d] themselves and reality through narrative” (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 226), and the excerpts of the data are provided anonymously because of the sensitive nature of the information. The responses were analyzed for recurring patterns and revealed several major themes: The significant impact of the decision to cut their programs on the emotional and physical well-being of the affected faculty, the disruption to their professional identities and job performance immediately post-decision, and the long-term consequences for their motivation and future career prospects. The answers were

then categorized according to these themes and evaluated according to positive or negative impact on well-being, motivation, and a sense of security. Results demonstrated a pervasive negative impact of the program cuts on emotional and physical well-being, as well as initial difficulties in maintaining work performance and a sense of professional identity/self. While initial struggles were evident, the data also highlighted the development of increased resilience over time. The results are organized into the following thematic representations: emotional responses to trauma, well-being and motivation, and motivation and resilience.

Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion are combined in this section to highlight the interconnectedness between the data and its interpretation. The analysis is organized around the central themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the narrative data. This approach allows for a better understanding of the participants’ experiences in relation to the implications of the findings.

Emotional Responses to Trauma

The emotional impact and psychological trauma of job insecurity followed by program cuts cannot be understated. All participants reported experiencing decreased motivation and questioned their ideal educator selves (Dörnyei, 2009; Hiver et al., 2018) because of emotional strain, professional disruption, and existential uncertainty. According to the responses, seeing the word “discontinuance” next to each of the undergraduate and graduate programs in the official memo and the retention of zero faculty was devastating, even causing physical reactions to the stress experienced (De Witte et al., 2015). One of the authors powerfully describes the toll the news took on the well-being of faculty in the department:

When I read the e-mail we received, which stated that zero programs in our department would be retained, I experienced a physical reaction. I began to shake all over even as I experienced a feeling of disbelief. That initial response was followed by the need to support the junior colleague I mentored who called me crying.

This initial shock gave way to feelings of sadness, profound disappointment, and anger. The abruptness of the decision, coupled with the perceived lack of logic and empathy, left faculty with a sense of betrayal and disillusionment (Cece et al., 2022). For many, the emotional upheaval directly affected physical and mental health (De Witte et al., 2015), similar to the work-related stress experienced in other high-stress situations, such as the pandemic (MacIntyre et al., 2021). This is demonstrated in the following response by one of the authors:

This experience has changed me and had an overall negative impact on my health and wellness. I suspect that it contributed, in some way, to an injury I sustained ten days after I was laid off and which has persisted for months. I, along with many others, suffered sleepless nights, anxiety, and stress.

These were not surprising reactions, as the members of the department were highly motivated, passionate about, and deeply invested in their programs and had fostered strong educator selves (Guilloteaux, 2013). For years, faculty had been engaged at all levels of instruction, actively involved in extracurricular activities, and contributed to the success of the students. In line with faculty in a research-intensive (R1) institution, they had productive and impactful research agendas and dedicated significant service to the university and their professions. However, the decision to close the language programs triggered a profound sense of demoralization (Hiver et al., 2018). As a result, faculty were overcome with burnout, feelings of depression, a lack of energy, and disinterest in going to class to teach (Mark & Smith, 2021). Nevertheless, all members of the department continued their work, though the attention and focus shifted. One of the authors recounts:

Every day that I would come to the office, I witnessed first-hand the destruction that the decision to cancel programs caused. I saw my colleagues vacillating between disbelief, indignation, frustration, desolation, and desperation. My job changed from creative program building to consistently checking on people's mental health and well-being. As the decision came down right at the beginning of the semester, we had to find a way to gather strength to continue teaching, advising, and otherwise supporting our undergraduate and graduate students, who, although were not in

danger of losing their livelihoods, were similarly devastated by the decisions. Everyone was on edge, and the tension in the air was palpable.

In addition to these feelings, WLLL faculty had to deal with the uncertainty of future employment (Breshears, 2019). At the same time, they had to compartmentalize their anxieties while offering support and guidance to students. Even though they were struggling themselves, the faculty knew they needed to provide stability and direction to the students, which resulted in an experience of emotional dissonance and increased emotional labor (Kariou et al., 2021). A sentiment that was expressed throughout the year was akin to being at a funeral where the faculty represented both the mourners and the comforters. Another comment by one of the authors provides a similar glimpse into this experience:

The timing, just a day before the new graduate teaching assistant (GTA) orientation, added another layer of difficulty. Welcoming the new GTAs – mostly international students – was always a highlight for me. Witnessing their excitement and hope of starting their careers was truly rewarding. Delivering the news that they might be the last generation in the program was incredibly emotional and difficult. Fearing the impact my words might have on their well-being, I had to be positive and reassuring, while at the same time I was suppressing the urge to cry.

In addition to helping students through the grief associated with the loss of programs and professors, the terminated faculty experienced an additional impact on well-being indirectly related to the loss of their jobs (Breshears, 2019). As a result of the dissolution of WLLL's programs, special advising sessions were held to help students determine how to complete their degrees. The faculty advised them on submitting applications to other universities with language and linguistics programs and wrote letters of recommendation for students' acceptance into these programs. These additional activities linked to *academic transformation* ran parallel to the faculty's own job search and relocation planning.

Well-Being and Motivation: The Role of Ideal Educator Selves

Beyond the devastating impact on faculty well-being precipitated first by the fear of losing jobs and then the ultimate loss of those jobs, the decision to cut programs also had a profound effect on the professional identities of the faculty affected. Many faced the possibility of a fundamental career shift, which altered their stabilized ideal educator selves (Dörnyei, 2009) and their teacher professional identity (Cece et al., 2022). The uncertainty surrounding employment was not just about financial security; it was about the very core of their professional identity. Many of the faculty had been in their careers 15 years or longer and had developed their expertise and academic trajectories, as well as a love for the job and institution. The prospect of having to redefine themselves, potentially in a new industry altogether, added another dimension that had a negative impact on well-being. Equally difficult to overcome was the feeling of diminished self-worth caused by the sudden devaluing of expertise. As Cece et al. (2022) found, support (or lack thereof) from those holding higher-level positions affected not only motivation and well-being, but also perceived expertise:

In my leadership roles, I worked with leadership across the university on a number of strategic initiatives. Up until *academic transformation*, my skills and knowledge were trusted and valued by many different sectors on campus. All of this changed with the onset of *academic transformation*; instead of being treated with respect, I was treated by many as a scourge, a problem to be solved. Even so, I had to overcome this trauma to feign the confidence to apply to jobs myself.

While the dedication to their students remained steadfast, the faculty's confidence in the university's values and commitment to academic pursuits wavered. WLL's faculty had always taken pride in and supported the university's mission, which they believed was to serve students in the state, many of whom were from underserved areas and first-generation college attendees. However, the decision to close programs and leave future generations of students from the state of WV without access to language study felt like the university was turning its back on the very students it was supposed to support. This decision irreparably eroded the sense of belonging and loyalty to the

institution, a phenomenon that De Witte et al. (2015) describe. This sentiment was not only harbored by the departments affected but shared by many faculty members across campus, even in the units that did not suffer cuts. The experience is poignantly captured in a narrative by one of the authors:

I remember the first time this really started to sink in – I had just taken a group of students kayaking on the Mon river and decided to go a bit further myself after I dropped them off. As I paddled, the magnitude of the decommissioned barges dwarfed my kayak, and my comparative insignificance was particularly salient. As I turned around to head back to the docking area and saw the WVU campus buildings, Woodburn Hall and others, looming on the horizon, I felt an uncontrollable sense of quiet desperation. The flagship university of West Virginia, which was intended to be a beacon of hope for Appalachia, would no longer be so for so many. The sadness I felt was amplified by the former feeling of hope that I had when I first arrived to campus. The sensation of joy and exhilaration that I felt back then when I looked at Woodburn Hall and our former building, Chitwood, as well as when I sat on our porch, sipping coffee in the early misty mornings as I looked over the Morgantown valley, were no more.

These experiences expose the multifaceted toll program cuts take on faculty well-being, encompassing professional and personal dimensions. The chronic stress (Burchell, 2009) created by job insecurity, job loss (Otto et al., 2011), and a devaluing of professional worth also leaves lasting scars, as reflected in a testimony by one of the authors:

To this day, being on campus comes with a sensation of being uneasy and distracted. I consistently feel a slow churning in my stomach that starts when nearing campus and only dissipates as I begin the drive back home. I do not know how long it will take me to transition back to my cheerful, optimistic self; perhaps that person is gone forever. In her place is a much more cautious person who may always be just a little bit skeptical of humanity.

Motivation and Resilience

While the emotional toll of the program cuts was significant, in the subsequent months, WLLL faculty found resilience (Hiver, 2018) by redirecting their energies towards endeavors that offered a sense of purpose and a path forward. This included a renewed determination to support our students and colleagues, as seen in the following comments by two authors:

My motivation to keep going is the knowledge that perhaps my efforts provide hope and opportunities for my colleagues and our graduate students.

Despite the uncertainty, prioritizing student success remained my top priority. I recognized the students' anxieties and offered additional support and guidance on navigating the uncertainty. Seeing their progress, even during this upheaval, served as a source of motivation and reminded me of the inherent value and fulfillment that my job brings. This was important as the decision to close our department inevitably caused us to feel that our work was not valuable.

Well-being, although still lower than usual, was scaffolded by resilience, or the capacity to continue with work-related tasks, despite challenging circumstances (Gu & Day, 2013; Hascher et al., 2021). In addition, faculty members drew strength from their research endeavors and collaborations with colleagues in the profession, which was also used to maintain the ideal educator self (Hiver et al., 2018), as one of the authors notes:

Working on a book project with co-authors helped me retain a sense of value not tied with the university, which had devalued everything I do. I felt that I still had significant work to contribute to the profession, and the warmth and support provided by colleagues in the field helped me retain a sense of self-confidence.

Adversity also became a catalyst for advocacy work with newfound energy and purpose. In other words, the faculty members' anti-ought-to self (Thompson, 2017a) was strengthened by the shared feeling of trauma and threatened agency. Pushing back against the concept of languages as not being crucial to a well-rounded education in today's global world, WLLL's faculty members emerged as passionate supporters of the indispensable role of language

study in higher education in the U.S. and for the viability and security of the language and linguistics programs. One of the authors shares:

My desire to advocate for our profession fueled my desire to apply for leadership positions in two institutions offering them. It also made me wary of programs at public institutions for which state legislators play an active role in deciding policy at the university. In every meeting with a dean or provost, I asked about the financial health of the university and support of languages. Interestingly, the answer to the latter question was always one of unanimous support.

Ultimately, the constant threat of job loss diminishes the ability of faculty to deliver instruction and carry out student-facing service activities with the degree of motivation that would typically mark their performance. Language faculty, in particular, engage in many such activities, including conversation tables, traditional celebrations and holidays, theater productions, study abroad, language immersion days, high-school visits, and much more as part of recruitment and retention efforts. With the prospect of program growth or maintenance eliminated, the purpose of and motivation for these activities disappears. Thus, the students have fewer opportunities to become exposed to the experiences both in class and beyond that help them develop valuable skills related to communication and global competence. Additionally, faculty have fewer opportunities to engage in these types of activities, which are often a great source of motivation and professional pride. It is difficult, if not impossible, to work efficiently and creatively when all emotional energy is dedicated to self-preservation (De Witte et al., 2015).

The shared struggle forged a strong sense of community among the faculty in the Department. As they leaned on each other for emotional support and encouragement, this camaraderie became a crucial source of strength and self-actualization. At the same time, recognizing the need to chart their own paths, they actively began exploring options for future careers, applying for and finding new jobs. The transition to new jobs was not without challenges, such as the disruption caused by leaving a familiar environment and the uncertainty of what the future might hold for the profession. Despite successes in finding new positions, lingering negative emotions continued to affect them and

added another layer of complexity to reestablishing the feelings of job security, motivation, and well-being.

CONCLUSION

Underscoring the significant challenges faced by faculty during periods of job insecurity, this case study highlights the intricate relationship between emotional well-being, resilience, and motivation. The decision to cut the language programs at WVU had a profound and lasting impact on faculty well-being and motivation. The ideal educator selves for which years are spent visualizing and actualizing can fissure in light of extreme precarity, such as that caused by WVU's *academic transformation*. At the same time, anti-ought-to selves can be created and solidified in the form of advocacy for both language offerings and the people involved with them. Through this process, new ideal educator selves are formed, selves that are determined to promote learning languages and cultures through teaching, research, and advocacy.

Despite challenges to their sense of self, their degree of motivation, and their well-being, the WLLL faculty demonstrated resilience by continuing their work, supporting their students, and engaging in research and advocacy. An avenue for future research would be to examine additional educational contexts in terms of precarity and the effect on educator motivation, well-being, and resilience. Homing in on the multidimensional and sometimes contradictory nature of motivation in specific contexts would also be an area ripe for further study, highlighting how motivation, demotivation, and resilience can exist in tandem and considering what other context-specific features are needed to activate conflicting motivational characteristics. Student perspectives would also be insightful in such contexts, as would longitudinal research on the effects of educator job insecurity over time. The U.S. higher education system is at a moment of reckoning, and a more in-depth examination of the fallout of drastic restructuring in a variety of contexts is imperative

to a healthy outcome; motivation, well-being, and resilience are central themes to these inevitable transitions.

At the time of the writing of this article, many of the WLLL faculty and staff have found other positions (academic and non-academic), and many of the graduate students have transferred to other programs around the country. Determined and resilient, by and large, those in WLLL immediately affected by *academic transformation* have survived and even flourished. However, language educators nationwide cannot be expected to work continuously in unstable conditions, their well-being suffering because of job precarity. As seen by the analysis of the narratives of the three authors, this case study is important in its emphasis on the human cost of program cuts in higher education.

As institutions of higher education (particularly those in the U.S.) become increasingly driven by a neoliberal model, the demands on educators to do more with less will increase, and the sustained threat of being "right-sized" will grow. Given the endemic approach to terminating language programs as a cost-saving measure in the U.S. educational system, the greater impact on faculty, students, and society, broadly construed, must be made clear to the public. It is imperative that the impact of these university-driven job stressors be brought to light and examined both through the lens of diminished employee well-being and motivation, as well as through the impact on students who are served by the faculty under duress. This discussion is even more crucial given the broad issue of precarity in the language teaching profession, as described by Walsh (2019). Understanding the repercussions of budget-driven cuts can help university administrations to develop more sustainable solutions for addressing future challenges in the academic landscape. As Walsh argues, precarity, characterized by insecure work, minimal social protections, and uncertain futures, is a pervasive and pressing issue for language educators across the globe in diverse work contexts. Unless we address these issues proactively, we risk not only the well-being of language educators, but also the quality of education provided to students.

¹ Job insecurity and job precarity are used interchangeably throughout.

² <https://educationdata.org/pell-grant-statistics> and <https://financialaid.wvu.edu/grants/pell>

³ <https://studentsuccess.wvu.edu/reach-for-community/first-generation>

⁴ More details about student perceptions can be found in the self-study and appeal documents that are publicly available at amysthompson.com.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors engaged in all aspects of this project.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

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