

*55th Annual Conference of the College Reading and Learning Association  
Presidential Address*

**Reasserting Our Humanity in the Fight for Equity and Justice: Introducing the New CRLA**

Jeanine L. Williams, PhD

For at least the last decade, we have witnessed a marked shift in our society, in our institutions, and ultimately in our personal lives. Racism, capitalism, patriarchy—inequities and injustice of all varieties appear to be mounting. And in the last couple of years, the world has seemingly gone stark raving mad! But what I truly believe we are witnessing is an exploitive societal system collapsing in on itself. Inequity and injustice are inherently unsustainable. And while the state of our world is troubling to say the least, I believe that we are being presented with a divine opportunity to reconnect with our humanity and to actualize equity and justice.

You see, inequity and injustice are powerful and pervasive forces, but they will never be a match for our authentic and relentless humanity. Inequity and injustice are only as strong as we make them. They depend on our blind obedience, they depend on our neutrality, they depend on our silence, they depend on our indifference to the suffering of others. And they ensure that we behave in these ways by instilling fear, inciting chaos, perpetually stirring up confusion, and keeping us mired down and utterly exhausted. They do everything to ensure that we remain disconnected from our own humanity and blind to the humanity of others.

And while the Pandemic was yet another moment of this fear, chaos, and panic; it was another opportunity for this exploitation—somehow, we slowed down just enough to reconnect with our humanity. In the quiet moments of the Pandemic, we saw ourselves and we saw each other. We had just enough time to breathe and to rest and to come back to who we truly are. We had a moment to remember our birthright—our divine right to be who we are fully and freely and fearlessly; our divine right to exist without restraint and judgement. We had a moment of authenticity and for so many of us, we can never go back!

The so-called Great Resignation or the phenomenon of “quiet quitting” are nothing more than folks reasserting their humanity. These are the folks who are saying no more. This is the revolution happening before our very eyes. And while these folks are being blamed for the supply-chain problems, the long lines in stores, and the inefficiencies we are seeing in virtually every sector of our society, the true culprit has always been our exploitive societal system. And in a desperate attempt to get us all to fall back in line, they gaslight us into blaming those of us who are making a conscious choice to remain in our humanity and to rest in our birthright.

To bring this perhaps a little closer to home, I want to talk about what this looks like in our professional spaces. For past several days, I have talked with Board members and other conference attendees and there is a common theme in all of our chatter. Our institutions are in crisis. The students are needier than ever, our colleagues are leaving never to be replaced, the incompetence of leadership is at an all-time high, and on top of all that, the money is looking really funny. THEY. ARE. WEARNING. US. OUT.

How many of us are doing the jobs of two or three people with absolutely no increase in our pay? How many of us are trying to manage in classrooms where curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are being dictated by folks who haven't the slightest clue about our field? How many of us are running centers that are severely understaffed in large part because we cannot pay tutors and other learning support professionals a respectable wage? How many more ways can we all be expected to do more with less?

Yet here we are. Still in the trenches—doing everything we can to make it work. Here we are picking up the pieces every time the latest policy, budget cut, or staff reduction knocks them all off the table. Here we are committed and making unimaginable sacrifices in terms of our loved ones and our mental and physical health. Here we all are at another CRLA conference looking for another way to make a way out of no way. And why do we do it? We do it for the students.

Now what I am about to say might initially make you clutch your pearls but try and stay with me. Our dedication to students is a problem. Our dedication to students has become toxic. Our dedication to students is at the crux of our current exploitation. Our dedication to students has been weaponized against us. And as counterintuitive as this may sound, we have let go of this unconditional allegiance to “doing it for the students”. This unconditional allegiance is killing us slowly and painfully.

I am going to let that sit with y'all for just a second.

Now I know what you are thinking:

“So, what does all of this mean?”

“What on earth are you suggesting here”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“I knew it; that woman is crazy!”

“Somebody, anybody, get her away from that microphone!”

But before you launch your vote of no confidence against me, let me explain. Just like our exploitive societal system is collapsing, so is our exploitive higher education system. Even a cursory perusal of the Chronicle of Higher Ed or any other educational news outlet makes that very clear. That same moment of connection to our humanity that we experienced during the Pandemic is impacting how we move within our professional spaces. We simply cannot go back to business as usual. But in a desperate attempt to get us to do so, in a desperate attempt to get us to tow the lines of inequity and injustice once again, in a desperate attempt to get us to perpetuate our own exploitation, we are guilted and gaslit into accepting less than we need and less than we deserve all under the guise of “doing it for the students”.

Please be clear: I am not saying that we turn our backs on our students. I am not saying that we walk off the job. I am not saying that we turn to selfishness and indifference. We must always remain committed to students, but we **must** have conditions. We must hold our institutions accountable. This commitment to students is not solely ours to carry. We should not have to kill

ourselves to fulfill the “students-first” mission that our institutions claim that they are so committed to. Yes, we will always serve our students, but not without the resources and the respect that are necessary to do so!

I don’t know about y’all, but they ain’t fitting to wear me out!

That is why for this past year, I have led the members of this Board through the process of making our commitment statement actionable. If we are going to be about the business of equity and justice, we must go hard, or we just need to go on home! We desperately need equity and justice for our students, and we most certainly need equity and justice for ourselves in our work with students. And I am so proud to acknowledge that we have engaged in the tough conversations so that we could position our beloved organization to better meet the needs of our members.

So, you will see, that we have refined our vision and mission to reflect who we say we are. More importantly, we have developed a 3-year strategic plan to actualize this vision and mission. At the heart of our work is a focus on:

- **Strengthening our leadership**—which includes rethinking our Board structure, clarifying pathways to leadership, creating more entry-level leadership opportunities, and better supporting our leaders across all levels.
- **Increasing our influence**—which includes elevating the CRLA brand, creating new and leveraging existing strategic partnerships; and most of all, improving our members’ digital experience with a new, state of the art website that will allow us to better connect with each other and to better serve you all.
- And finally, the area that I am most excited about, **Expanding our advocacy**: this includes proactive engagement in legislative affairs impacting our members, a rapid response system for addressing hot of the press issues related to literacy and learning; an on-demand resource repository from which our members can draw when key decisions are being made at their institutions, and ongoing opportunities to unify the professional perception of literacy, learning assistance, and developmental education

Over the next year and beyond, this will be the focus of the College Reading and Learning Association. This is the New CRLA. This is how we will support you as you hold your institutions accountable. This is how we will continue to serve our students. This is how we will ensure that we never go back. This is how we will retain that connection to our humanity. This is how we will actualize equity and justice!