



Addressing Burnout Takes More Than Faculty Development

Rebecca Pope-Ruark • February 14, 2022

The past two years have been traumatic due to COVID, social unrest, and widespread uncertainty, and 2022 is shaping up to be not much different. The overwhelming pressure caused by shifting course modalities at the drop of a hat, delaying research activities, dealing with student mental health issues as well as one's own, and trying to function through the general stress of living through a global pandemic is enough to affect anyone's well-being.

Many if not most faculty are, simply put, burned out.

The impacts of burnout stretch far beyond the pandemic and are only compounded in its wake. Faculty burnout was at high levels pre-pandemic because the culture of higher education is one of expectation escalation and competition, and the external attacks to higher ed coming from neoliberal government entities add additional stressors. Among faculty whose reputations and mobility depend on their scholarly

reputations or teaching evaluations, burnout can feel like a shameful personal secret to be hidden so as not to damage their careers and lives. And suppressing burnout only makes it worse.

I should know. As a tenured faculty member, I experienced a burnout episode that was so severe I had to take medical leave and, ultimately, leave teaching and my institution. I was depressed, anxious, and ashamed that I couldn't hack it any longer after years of pushing myself over my limits, semester in and semester out. I found myself agonizing over small decisions like what to eat for lunch, became totally detached from my students, and couldn't string two words together to write anything—particularly difficult since being a writer and writing professor was core to my identity. When I could barely get out of bed in the morning and fantasied about canceling every class and never setting foot on campus again, I knew I couldn't put off getting help any longer. But getting that help was a painful process, personally and professionally, because I didn't know what was happening to me or how to find help in a way that felt safe.

So, what exactly is burnout, and what should academic leaders be on the lookout for? The World Health Organization defines burnout as a “syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” (Fraga, 2019). The WHO does not consider burnout to be a mental illness but a syndrome that can exacerbate other issues like depression and anxiety and cause physical health issues as well. Burnout is a workplace phenomenon—not some sort of personal failing on the part of the faculty member but a reality created by the culture of the institution and higher ed more broadly. And burnout is caused by overwhelming stress that continues to compound and cannot be effectively managed without support, support those who suffer from burnout, like me, often don't know how to find.

The WHO further identifies three key features of burnout:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, whether emotional, physical, or intellectual
- Increased mental distance from one's job or negative feelings towards one's career and the people served
- Reduced professional productivity or decreased feelings of self-efficacy

Taken together, these three symptoms can be important identifiers that faculty and leadership can be watching for in order to care for faculty in or headed for burnout.

When I think about my own burnout experience, I realize I was lucky. After I got up the courage to ask for the help I needed, my department chair, dean, and vice provost were more concerned about my well-being than how to cover the courses I couldn't teach or the program leadership work I could no longer do. They advocated for me even when I was sure I had ruined my career by telling them about my burnout. They believed me when I said I needed medical leave to work through it. And they respected my choice when I said I couldn't return.

In my research for my forthcoming book, *Unraveling Faculty Burnout*, I found that others were not as lucky as I. Some faced disbelief, gaslighting, and outright hostility or retribution. Many wanted, even needed, to tell their stories to someone who could empathize and not think less of them for being burned out. Many felt the shame I did, not understanding that what was happening to them was externally driven. And many of the people I interviewed appear in the book, but the majority chose to be anonymous. You can understand why.

Since coming through my burnout, I have spent a good deal of time talking to faculty at a variety of institutions about burnout, through workshops and one-on-one coaching. Of 15 campuses that invited me to speak last year, two included conversations with leadership. These leaders showed care and concern for their faculty, wanting to understand burnout and how they could help. Both sets of leaders asked me how they could address it from their positions. But two out of 15 is a dismayingly low number.

But dealing with burnout is tricky. Most of the interventions those advocating for burnout resilience, myself included, recommend are individual or small group—such as therapy, coaching, and the ubiquitous self-care—or support groups like the one I run for women+ faculty at my new institution. Coping strategies, really, are all we seem to have, thus throwing a systemic problem back on the individual. The definition of burnout ties it directly to workplace culture and stress. Individual interventions don't address those underlying cultural issues that cause the problem of burnout in the first place.

So, what can you do on your campus to effect change?

Create or enhance campus resources for faculty mental health that go beyond those offered through human resources. Most campuses now have units dedicated to student mental health and well-being. Faculty and staff need these supports as well, and employee assistance programs offered through HR are often difficult to access or unhelpful for mental health situations. A survey of faculty might determine what resources are most needed. Also consider that many faculty do not access available mental health resources for fear of “being found out.” Whatever resources developed should have strict anonymity policies and be run by professionals without interference from administration.

Train leaders, department chairs especially, to look for signs of burnout in their colleagues and support those faculty effectively. As part of leadership development training, work with your HR and faculty professional development centers to educate campus leaders on the signs of burnout and how to talk with faculty about their well-being from a place of genuine concern. Working with department chairs should also include additional training about confidentiality and ways to create a safe space for colleagues to talk without fear of it impacting their career or standing in the department. They should also know how to escalate concerns if needed. Doing so can develop more empathetic leaders and foster a culture of care among faculty.

Hire external coaches or train faculty and staff in centers for professional development to work with faculty on the areas of faculty life most likely to cause burnout. Coaching is a growing sector and one appearing on campus more and more regularly. While some might think of “life coaching” derogatorily, coaching as a profession includes governing bodies, standards of practice, accredited training programs, and professional certifications. Certified coaches can work with faculty on professional challenges that can lead to burnout, such as teaching or writing pressures, overwhelming service or research commitments, and toxic workplace situations. Coaches also function under strict confidentiality standards, offering faculty a safe place to work through challenges.

Actively work with faculty leadership to address culture issues in ways that are driven by faculty, not imposed from the top. This might mean creating an advisory committee or standing committee with power to make recommendations that institutional leadership will take seriously and act on when possible. It might also mean working with faculty leadership to create faculty relief programs that provide faculty with the time or funding (or both) to take care of themselves and focus on the aspect of their work that brings them the most joy. Your faculty leaders can work with you to develop strategies and resources that blend top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Burnout is not just something faculty feel at the end of a long semester. It has deep roots in the culture of our institutions that breed overwhelming strain and mental distress. Working together with faculty now, you can make an impact on your culture and create conditions for faculty to foster well-being that will spread to every area of the institution, including how we fulfill our institutional missions through teaching our students and developing valuable research insights.

Reference

Fraga, J. (2019, June 5). Why the WHO's decision to redefine burnout is important. *Healthline*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/burnout-definition-world-health-organization>

Pope-Ruark, R. (2022). *Unraveling faculty burnout: Pathways to reckoning and renewal*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rebecca Pope-Ruark, PhD, is the faculty teaching and learning specialist in the Center for Teaching and Learning at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She is the author of the forthcoming book Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways for Reckoning and Renewal (Johns Hopkins University Press) and hosts the agile academic podcast.
