

Faculty Burnout and The Importance of Renewal

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Abstract

Faculty well-being is foundational to a successful academic community, positively influencing teaching, research, and student engagement. With the ever-increasing demands in academia, prioritizing our own well-being as faculty members becomes paramount for sustained professional and personal growth. A systematic review was conducted to investigate the research literature on university faculty burnout in the United States. The review included a total of 24 peer-reviewed articles and several books. Most of the articles came from publications dated 2020 or later to ensure the inclusion of the most recent research. The themes for faculty burnout were consistent across the literature that included insecurity, frustration, anxiety, and an inability to achieve a good work-life balance. The essential elements of renewal included re-establishing purpose in work, self-care, time management consistent with priorities, and connecting with relationships that foster positive energy and motivation.

Unfortunately, expanding and training young minds has given way to increasing enrollment and more vital job-related disciplines for universities. This new emphasis determines faculty merit performance through student satisfaction, retention, and research. The long unpaid hours to submit to high-impact journals, obtain research funding, and keep students happy are emotionally and physically exhausting. Faculty members' experience working in the current academic climate describes this as the profession's new 'pressure-cooker' demands. In her book, *Unraveling Faculty Burnout*, Pope-Ruark (2022, p 5) found that for herself and her colleagues ' . . . constantly trying to live up to all these ideals (meaningful productivity for faculty) is exhausting, unrealistic, and potentially dangerous. The academic job market is brutal, often leaving highly qualified, wonderful colleagues on the outside struggling to stitch together a living off the tenure track.' These potent words gave voice to the thoughts and feelings of struggling faculty members. These increasing demands have resulted in instructors embracing them like a hamster in a wheel while ignoring the signs and symptoms of their-own declining mental or physical health. Recognizing the need for further inquiry, this researcher systematically reviewed the current literature to summarize faculty burnout and to accentuate the strategies to reduce it, and its ramifications.

Method

A systematic review was conducted to investigate the research literature on university faculty burnout in the United States. The review included a total of 24 peer-reviewed articles and several books. Most of the articles came from publications dated 2020 or later to ensure the inclusion of the most recent research. The comprehensive search included several databases, such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and Academic Search Premier. Keywords used in the search included terms related to "university faculty" and burnout, excluding specific disciplines such as nursing or engineering. The multi-database search was to ensure a broad focus on faculty experience. Each article was screened based on its title and abstract to assess its relevance to the review criteria. Full texts of the potentially relevant articles were then retrieved and further evaluated to confirm their eligibility for inclusion in the study.

A Review of Pre-pandemic Research

The academic environment inherently possesses occupational stressors stemming from the increased work demands and changing or uncertain work environments faced by university faculty. These job security expectations and concerns lead to significant tension, dissatisfaction, and distress among faculty members. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty burnout became increasingly recognized as a critical issue in higher education. In their review of 36 studies, Sabagh, Hall, and Saroyan (2018) found several themes regarding faculty burnout that emerged, including increased job demands, inadequate administrative support, and insufficient resources. The repercussions of burnout were significant, resulting in diminished motivation, loss of optimism, and negative impacts on both physical and mental health. Additionally, the compromised work-life balance, adversely affected family relationships

A unique factor of faculty burnout noted in the pre-pandemic literature was the collective perception of burnout among faculty at the same educational institution. Gonzalez-Morales, Peiro, Rodriguez, and Bliese (2012) found that individual burnout affects emotional health with increased feelings of cynicism, lack of motivation, and exhaustion. Perceived collective burnout seems to increase these feelings while having a more significant demoralizing effect. ". . . burnout can spread out in an organization without direct, close, and continuous contact with burnout employees . . . there can be "burnout in the organizational air," breathed and shared by all the employees who are susceptible to being affected by it. (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2012, p 56)" Interestingly, this collective awareness did not appear in all schools.

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported in their survey of 1,122 faculty members in the US in 2020, "the overall stress experienced by faculty increased from 32% in 2019 to 70% in 2020, with 75% of female

faculty experiencing higher levels of stress compared to 59% for men DSI Clear (n.d.) citing *The Chronicle of Higher Education & Fidelity Investments, 2020.*”

Current Symptoms of Burnout

After reviewing the current literature, several themes reflected this change. One of the first was workload demands. Institutions had increased expenses with the required purchases of technology for remote learning. Furthermore, with reduced student enrollment after 2020, faculty felt pressured to provide greater student satisfaction while learning the new pedagogy. Additionally, there was in immediate demand for the implementation of this new modality of teaching. Faculty found themselves frustrated and anxious as they tried to teach their course content (O'Brien & Bodenlos, 2022; Turner & Garvis S., 2023; Blair et al., 2024; Ross et al., 2023).

Since the pandemic, rather than a return to the classroom, more students wanted the option to take some of their coursework virtually. Unfortunately, student satisfaction seemed to decrease ~~with this option~~, and their need for constant support via e-mails or requests for virtual office appointments increased. Part of this support went beyond helping the students with the required course material; it included them sharing their personal struggles or family situations. Cordaro (2023) recognized this new level of student support resulted in compassion fatigue. It often manifests with emotional or physical exhaustion or detachment with robotic responses to students' communications. Students quickly sense this and feel even more isolated in their situation. Faculty dealing with compassion fatigue often neglected or postponed addressing their life challenges. (Goode. 2022; Cordova, 2023; Fakhruddin, et al., 2023; Sidekli, Altıntaş, & Göçen Kabaran, 2022).

For some students, expressing their resentment and dissatisfaction during this post-pandemic reality was made more accessible via the virtual learning environments of Blackboard or CANVAS (Garrosa et al., 2022; Pope-Ruark, 2022; Cornes et al., 2023); *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020*). Unfortunately, incivility was not limited to students but was increasingly part of instructor's interactions with their colleagues (Garrosa et al., 2022). Rather than the formerly collegial atmosphere in faculty hallways, tension and discord became all too frequent, making the strained atmosphere palpable.

One of the continued factors of burnout was the competing role demands and the inclusion of new ones. Faculty found themselves facing higher expectations for merit pay, including publishing, developing new pedagogy to increase student satisfaction, serving on committees, and participating in student activities or performances (De Sawal, Peck, & Rosch, 2022; Jiandong, Fan, & Haitian, 2022; Nicholls et al., 2022). The growing list of these increasing demands resulted in the emotional uncertainty of being able to fulfill them and the concern at what cost.

Fear and insecurity were also significant contributing sources in faculty burnout. Frequent change of management with the differing expectations increased insecurity among faculty (Ezzeddine, et al., 2023). Additionally, programs that have limited enrollment were being considered for elimination, especially among private institutions. "Anthropology and other small disciplines enjoyed a period of growth in the late twentieth century and now face reduction and reconfiguration in a ferociously competitive economic and enrollment context." (Paris, 2023, introduction). Paris (2022) also mentions disciplines outside the behavioral sciences, such as English, history, and philosophy. She notes that while these disciplines contribute to a greater understanding of society and critical thinking skills, there is no direct path to a specific career for parents and students. Within the roar of the current social climate, this disconnection to a known occupation negates other choices. Faculty members become silent voices about the value of their disciplines and the contributions they make. Emotionally, the mental alarms are continually ringing that their jobs in these redefined obsolete disciplines may end and future employment opportunities in their career limited.

Perseverance, Wellbeing, and Resilience

There is beginning to be a significant response to the awareness of faculty burnout and finding ways to mitigate its impact. Pope-Ruark (2022), in her book *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal*, found what she labeled as the four elements of managing and reducing faculty burnout. The first was one's sense of purpose of work. Pope-Ruark challenges faculty to write down their mission based on the values that motivate them. Writing one's mission or goals has been a well-known component of successful employees outside academia. Hopkins (2018) notes that one must first take the time to define success or one's goal to achieve it. Rather than passive agents (in this case, in the realm of academia), faculty have choices. Agency or having choice requires active participation in resolving the challenges. "Experience is not what happens to you. It is what you do with what happens to you" (Warren, 2015, p. 21).

The second element for overcoming burnout was compassion. Pope-Ruark mentions that first, one must have self-compassion. Self-care includes being available for oneself and setting priorities, especially when defining goals, values, and missions. Five of the studies reviewed suggested specific ways of practicing self-compassion recognizing that even short 15-minute breaks to do what energizes or relaxes the individual are beneficial. Rather than a prescription of a specific task, it provides a chance to get away from overwhelming feelings. Walking outdoors, reading, meditating, or talking with a friend were a few of the examples given. The suggested lists were simply invitations to think about what might help (O'Brien & Bodenlos, 2022; Cordaro, 2023; Mayo Clinic, 2021; Garrosa et al., 2022; Dewey et al., 2024).

The third element of interventions that reduced faculty burnout was connection. Pope-Ruark (2022) found that cultivating connections that provided energy and encouragement was essential to take time for and maintain. This often means one must disconnect or purposely spend less time with those who drain one's energy. Cordaro (2023), in her article, notes that faculty must learn to "practice what we profess." It is these specific actions of cultivating or disconnecting from individuals that develop resilience. Inner strength comes from action. Developing and implementing programs that provide these opportunities for positive connections are important. Riley et al. (2024) found that a junior faculty development program reduced faculty's self-reported feelings of burnout and increased personal growth, including "improvements in knowledge, scholarly skills, and motivation to continue research (7)." Greiner, et al. (2022) also found this need for institutional supported programs specifically for mental health.

Finally, Pope-Ruark (2022) mentions an all-to-common work balance. There is a unique, relevant physics concept related to this term called counterpoise. To the degree of stress one faces, there needs to be an equal amount of purposeful self-compassion time. Pope-Ruark recognizes this is a privilege, and for most, an equal amount of time commitment to hobbies is not a reality. However, with the purpose, plan, and definition of success, those steps can help to create planning time for pleasurable, relaxing activities or hobbies beyond one's occupation (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2022).

Discussion

The impacts of faculty burnout have had severe ramifications for both faculty and students. It has resulted in a momentous impact on physical and mental health, including feelings of decreased motivation and increased stress, and anxiety. Students had similar challenges that resulted in poor academic performance and expressing their frustration in hurtful rather than constructive ways. The research does show that there have been successful strategies for overcoming burnout through self-compassion, commitment to purpose-motivated action, and doing what is necessary to carve time for work/life balance. The importance of continued development of programs creating opportunities for meaningful, positive relationships among colleagues is an imperative. (Riley et al., 2024) There is a need for future research to demonstrate these types of programs' effectiveness in reducing faculty burnout.

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