

Chapter 26

Burnout Prevention Through Professional Development: Academic Values Enacted Online

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ABSTRACT

Surging enrollment, high levels of student contact, and the professional isolation that can result from teaching remotely combine to increase the risk of burnout for faculty teaching online. Additional risk factors stem from higher education's turn toward a customer service model, its current emphasis on efficiency with the addition of performance metrics, and resulting feelings of loss of agency, efficacy, and belonging. However, the principles of self-determination theory—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—provide a foundation for creating a sustainable, engaging work environment for faculty that also benefits students and the university as a whole. This chapter draws from interdisciplinary research and the insights and experiences of faculty to detail the causes of and solutions for burnout, emphasizing the role institutions play in mitigating the risk factors. Finally, this chapter includes a playbook of concrete practices that departments and institutions can draw from to create opportunities for employees to collaborate, reflect, and flourish.

INTRODUCTION

The online environment has provided multiple advantages for students: expanded access to higher education, a more equitable system, flexibility in scheduling, increased opportunities for contact with instructors, and more affordable options. While these advantages are not always concurrent, online education has opened doors for students who may not have been able to take advantage of higher education in its

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traditional brick-and-mortar settings. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need for online education as an alternative pathway, and it has proven that online education—once faculty, staff, and students feel competent and confident in the environment—can be agile, substantive, and reliable.

However, the explosive growth of online education and the turn toward remote instruction increase demands on instructors' time and energy. Faculty must often innovate on the fly, finding solutions for students participating in the virtual classroom with varying levels of experience with and access to technology. While instructors who teach in the online setting still use more “traditional” methods of communication like email and telephone calls, they now also have access to—and are expected to use—a wide array of other tools, like online discussion boards, recorded lectures or instructional videos, live chat, hotlines, Zoom meetings and/or Webex conferencing, open office hours, and more.

The authors contend that these high levels of contact and demand, paired with growing student enrollment and the professional isolation that can result from teaching remotely, combine to increase the risk of burnout for faculty and staff teaching online. Fortunately, through research and experience, the authors have uncovered several tools that can alleviate the effects of burnout and help faculty turn back toward burnout's opposite: engagement with work. In this chapter, the authors define burnout and discuss common causes and risk factors focusing on the current emphasis on efficiency, the blurred boundaries between home and work for educators working remotely, the increase in contact hours with students, the weight given to performance metrics, and feelings of loss of autonomy and belonging. The authors have drawn from research on burnout in higher education, as well as on research on burnout in call centers—a valuable addition to understanding burnout in online education because of the corporatization of higher education. The authors then turn toward principles that help faculty combat the effects of burnout, drawing from traditional academic values and the tenets of self-determination theory (SDT)—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as outlined by Randelovic and Stojiljkovic (2015). In order to further illuminate the causes of and remediations for burnout, the authors turn to Glassdoor reviews of our institution from current and former employees. While the authors recognize that Glassdoor reviews are subjective, the reviews do offer insights into individual perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and their recommendations underscore the importance of concrete practices to mitigate burnout. Finally, the authors demonstrate how they have put the principles of SDT into practice to improve faculty engagement, satisfaction, and productivity and offer specifics about these practices as a kind of playbook for other departments and institutions. Throughout the chapter, the authors also weave in the voices of colleagues whose insights were gathered through an anonymous survey focused on perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

BURNOUT

The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened urgency for educators because it has vividly exposed and exacerbated the racial, gendered, and socioeconomic inequalities in our society overall (Long et al., 2020) and in our educational systems, in particular (Terada, 2020). After all, remote learning can only take place with reliable internet access and, more fundamentally, a computer that works. It has demonstrated that women are often still working “the second shift,” and so their career goals—and their pursuit of higher education—may be put on hold (Taub, 2020). Further, women comprise a majority of the workforce in the “caring professions,” especially healthcare and education, placing a particular strain on them in this pandemic era (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). In short, COVID-19 has laid institu-

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