Faculty Burnout

Campuses should increase support for today's overburdened faculty

Many of today's faculty at colleges and universities find themselves juggling different roles—educator, student support advocate, learning designer, videographer, educational technologist, graphic designer, and more. While this reality began before 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the shift toward digital learning, increased the need for faculty to wear multiple hats and adapt to changes in how they teach students. As the pandemic took hold, educators had to move their courses online with minimal time to prepare. The aftershocks of that rapid shift are still being felt, with most faculty now teaching in multiple on-site, blended, or online formats. While most educators have heroically endured the challenges and complexities of today's learning environment, they have also been undeniably stretched thin. It is no wonder that half of them report that they feel burnt out and more than half say they lack time to create the kind of learning experiences they want for their students.

In September 2022, Alchemy (formerly O'Donnell Learn + ISG), a learning innovation company that works to support faculty, conducted a survey of 530 full- and part-time faculty who teach across the academic disciplines at four-year and two-year public and private higher education institutions. The survey, Burnt Out and Overburdened: Faculty Experience 2022, explores the current experiences, attitudes, and values of faculty as they seek to engage students in the post-pandemic world of higher ed. While the results of our survey show definite bright spots in how some faculty are navigating the current educational landscape, several trends indicate a need for additional support to help both faculty and students succeed.

—Carrie O’Donnell, CEO and founder of Alchemy, and Brett Christie, vice president for educational innovation and inclusivity at Alchemy, and Brett Christie, vice president for educational innovation and inclusivity at Alchemy.
Teaching tools
Nearly half of faculty need better support to capitalize on the benefits of online courses. Learning in virtual environments is much different than for on-site courses, yet 46% of faculty simply mirror the on-site experience for online courses. This has disadvantages. For example, unless they know the tools for doing so, faculty will not see how students react to the lesson in the moment. And many newer online instructors simply post lecture recordings, failing to keep students’ attention.

Missed connections
When it came to fostering student success, faculty understood what was important but possibly lacked comfort in achieving that success. They felt more confident in their expertise in developing course content. Most faculty said they value the flexibility and autonomy of online teaching, but they struggle to feel connected to students, particularly when teaching in multiple formats. When asked what they liked about online courses, faculty most often selected the ability to teach from anywhere. Relatively few identified student learning benefits. Engaging deeply with students across multiple course formats is exhausting—even for an educator with extensive experience.

6 to 9 minutes: time before most students begin to tune out long recordings
To better engage students:
→ Chunk and sequence content into modules with interspersed active learning and formative assessments.
→ Utilize online tools to enable the students to better function as a community of learners.
When asked where most of their time was spent developing and teaching courses, faculty’s top five responses were grading, creating content, developing assessments, curating materials, and lecture prep.

But …
Asked what was most important for an effective student experience, faculty said engagement, collaboration, and clear expectations.

More helping hands
67% of faculty reported that their institution has NOT asked about their well-being.
Only 1 in 3 faculty reported that their institution has inquired about their health or well-being in the past twelve months, and just 28% said they were satisfied with and use related campus resources. 52% said they were somewhat or very satisfied with their campus support resources for designing and delivering courses. Many faculty reported that the support did not always meet their specific needs or was not provided in a timely manner. They felt support staff to be qualified but overextended.

How often do you use campus resources that support faculty well-being?
Whatever type of self-care you practice, realize that it is a positive step toward being a healthier person and professional who can fully serve students, successfully perform other duties, and be an effective colleague.

Faculty tend to blame themselves for burnout, so a faculty member who is burnt out is really self-critical. But workplace stress is often systemic—we need to make the teaching and learning experience a humanized one.

How can administrators help?
→ Let faculty know you care by asking about their well-being—and then follow up.
→ Invest in the faculty experience holistically through a circle of care that proactively meets them where they are, rather than generalized professional development programming.

What can faculty do for themselves?
The first step to functioning in a healthier capacity is for faculty to recognize whether burnout is affecting them. If so, they must prioritize self-care.
→ Dedicate time to activities that bring you joy.
→ Set better boundaries between your work and your personal life.
→ Be realistic with what you expect to accomplish on the job.
→ Prioritize tasks and learn to say “no” or “I won’t be able to take that on right now.”
→ Take regular breaks that allow for a mental pause. They can be introspective, meditative, or involve physical activity. Think of the breaks as a wellness release and not a task, even though you might want to set it as a recurring calendar event.
→ Maintain connections with colleagues or mentors with whom you enjoy having professional and personal conversations. This can combat isolation and be a source for talking through what you are experiencing and sharing ideas to move forward with greater self-care.
→ Seek professional support, such as from a counselor. This can provide a neutral-context, noncolleague safe space for talking through how you are feeling. Some institutions offer such support services, or they may at least be part of your benefits.

What faculty stated as most important to student success

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Resources
“Engaged Faculty, Engaged Students: Planning for FY24’’ panel discussion aacu.org/engaged-fy24