

Moving from Silos and Burnout to Community and Engagement

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“Do more with less.” Wherever this phrase is expressed—at a private liberal arts school facing declining enrollments, a large research institute facing decreased support from state budget appropriations, a large corporation facing decreasing fourth quarter profits, or a government entity facing budgetary cutbacks—in each case, the underlying force is tightening fiscal resources. What invariably follows is that employees are asked to be more creative or productive in the face of those declining resources, causing an increase in demand on one’s time and, often, feelings of burnout. While increasing workload is one factor that exacerbates the prevalence of burnout, there are several others.

During my session at the 2017 Teaching Professor Conference, Moving from Silos and Burnout to Community and Engagement: Leveraging Faculty Learning Communities for Professional Development, those in attendance explored themes and structures at their own institutions of higher education that led toward burnout and isolation as well as those that promoted creativity and engagement. My goal was for us as academics to become more aware of the patterns in our communities that lead to faculty burnout and begin to engage in practices that promote engaged, vibrant, and creative campus communities. Toward that goal, I will summarize below what promotes burnout and then address how we can foster an engaged academic community. I invite you to reflect about your own institutions and identify how you might be able to contribute to creating a more engaged and creative academic community.

Burnout: What causes it? The term burnout was coined in the 1970s by two independent lines of study looking at those in the helping professions and the accompanying emotional exhaustion that frequently came with their jobs. In a summary of the arc this line of research has taken over the last several decades, Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach (2009) outline some of the prominent risk factors that lead to burnout in any profession. Certainly, as mentioned above, when there is not enough time for the perceived or real demands of one’s job, that imbalance leads to feelings of burnout.

While lack of time can be one trigger, the lack of any resource (money, support, or personnel) necessary for accomplishing one’s work duties can also lead down a path to burnout. Surprisingly though, lack of resources is not the primary driver of workplace burnout. The misalignment of values is, for many, a larger factor. This misalignment most frequently occurs in two different ways: either the individual’s values do not align well with the institutional mission, or, more significantly, when what the institution says about its mission or values does not align well with the decisions of the institution in practice. These instances result in faculty or other employees becoming increasingly disengaged with the institution, and often, it moves them toward burnout. In the same way, when situations arise that are perceived as someone being unfairly rewarded or punished, this unequal application of the institution’s rules or values significantly pushes one toward dissatisfaction and disengagement within one’s community.

What I found helpful in my review of the literature on burnout was that it resonated with my experience, and while none of the factors were surprising to me, it was helpful to understand that others have observed these patterns and structures in numerous professional settings.

So, given this backdrop, how can we encourage engagement? I think the first step is to be aware of what practices promote disengagement, which is why the above paragraphs are important to reflect upon. However, for some of these issues, faculty cannot effect change directly or quickly. For example, increasing budget allotments so that resources are not so constrained or changing how to implement the mission and values within the institution are primarily outside the purview of our job descriptions. As a result, this sometimes leads to feelings of resignation and powerlessness—two emotions in the opposite direction of what we are trying to accomplish, engagement. In her 2011 paper on how to promote engagement in the workplace, Maslach notes that there are numerous ways to measure engagement. She points out the argument that looking longitudinally at data would be useful for institutions as they make decisions about how to improve their organizations and use their resources wisely. Perhaps after becoming aware and well versed on this issue, the second step could be helping others in your institution see how and to what degree burnout exists on your campus by using one of the validated instruments that measures burnout or engagement.

A second suggestion is to find ways to connect with your colleagues both within your department and across the university. This is where I have spent a considerable amount of energy and have found it to be rewarding. At Viterbo, a Franciscan University that values hospitality, we have started doing more to encourage the social connection that weaves all of us together. With decreasing resources, it is natural, yet counterproductive, to turn inward and look out just for yourself or your department as the perception spreads that there are not enough resources to go around. We have created funds to foster interdisciplinary collaborations in teaching or research. We also have campus-wide celebrations of our faculty's teaching and scholarship products. In addition, we have learning communities that collaboratively explore new technology and approaches to teaching. While the components of these efforts are not groundbreaking, the cumulative effect of creating a shared space where conversation across departments can flourish, new research directions can arise, and new energy for teaching can be seeded has been significant for our community. I invite you to consider what changes could help encourage your community to become a place of engagement and creativity while also working to decrease faculty burnout.

References

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