



Seven Ways to Help Burned-Out Faculty

Shazia Ahmed and Claire L. Sahlin ▪ June 6, 2022

Faculty burnout was present in higher education long before COVID-19 because of the high emotional investment teaching requires of faculty. The pandemic has [further exacerbated faculty exhaustion and stress](#).

There's plenty of advice available for faculty about what they can do to help themselves. Helpful articles by Kerry Ann Rockquomore, president of the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity, on [“radical” self-care](#), [setting boundaries with students](#), and [avoiding overinvestment in one's job](#) are prime examples. There's also a plethora of webinars available to faculty who seek training on how to

manage their diverse responsibilities, including how to respond effectively students with mental health issues. Unfortunately, there's no training on how to create more hours in a day.

Academic leaders, though, can offer help in various forms. While we'd love to increase compensation, our hands are usually tied, and financial concerns are increasing with the [foreseeable decrease](#) in [enrollment](#). Here, we present seven financially reasonable actions that can help academic leaders address faculty burnout.

1. Enhance recognition.

In the absence of monetary compensation, developing new recognition and award programs can increase faculty members' feelings of being valued. These awards may be for teaching, scholarly achievements, or even contributions to diversity initiatives. While faculty always welcome monetary awards, simply the pride of recognition and the attendant sense of being valued by the institution are the principal drivers of motivation. It's also important for award programs to recognize adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty in these stressful times. Often woefully overlooked, contingent faculty enhance our institutions through their expertise and should be recognized for their good work.

2. Find ways to provide course releases and leadership training.

Developing programs for faculty advancement into leadership positions can provide faculty with encouragement and show them that you care. Participating in leadership training will not only point out potential choices for future leadership opportunities but also show that you are ready to encourage and train faculty to join administration. This provides a path of advancement even for full professors.

Such programs will also encourage faculty and train them to recognize others' potential. A taste of admiration will make a trained cohort of faculty leaders more empathetic to your future decisions (hopefully), and their individual projects may help you accomplish tasks that have idled on the back burner for a while.

3. Make time in the workday to provide stress management training.

Training in stress management and related topics, like work-life balance, is common in industry but rare in academia, where faculty are focused on their fields of scholarly expertise. We must find time to make such training available for faculty within their working days, perhaps in lieu of regular meetings or as part of seminars that departments and colleges normally schedule. There are third-party professionals that can be hired to offer meaningful on-campus training sessions related to faculty and staff well-being.

4. Provide resources for mental, health, and financial well-being.

As universities work toward enhancing students' mental, healthy, and financial well-being, we think it is time to extend these resources to faculty as fully as possible. Academic leaders can compile the resources available to faculty into a newsletter and send it out at the beginning of each term. Leaders can also seek feedback about what resources would make the faculty feel valued, while being upfront about their inability to change workload policies and compensation. And leaders can then act on the feedback to establish sincerity with faculty and staff.

5. Model a culture of support.

With the speed and ease of communication technologies and the blurring of work and family responsibilities, demands on faculty time have expanded. Do you expect a faculty member to immediately

answer student emails at two or three in the morning? While most of us don't expect faculty to answer students at that hour, do we question why we sometimes receive emails from faculty members in the middle of the night or on weekends, or do we instead applaud these faculty for their strong work ethic? Academic leaders need to create a culture in which sleep, recreation, and personal time become the norm. Otherwise, faculty too often think it is shameful to slow down and worry that others will think less of them if they are not working to exhaustion.

6. Mindfully resist the urge to drain your most useful colleagues.

This suggestion for helping burned-out faculty is the trickiest. All of us have teams of people who work well with us and with everyone else. These individuals do a great job and get the work done and on time. It's a normal impulse to lean on these people more and more. As a result, these conscientious people end up working even more. We must be mindful not to exhaust these human resources, even if that means either not getting one more feather in our caps or getting it with more patience by teaming up with people who are more difficult to work with.

7. Recognize your faculty with handwritten notes.

Last but not least is this simple suggestion. Praise your faculty for a job well done by sending handwritten notes to them. Even one small phrase on the yearly contract—"Great job!" "I appreciate you!" or simply, "Thank you for your work!"—goes a long way in motivating exhausted and burned-out faculty. Remember, the higher up you are in the organizational hierarchy, the more your words weigh. Give praise generously but mindfully.

The COVID-19 years have been branded as the years of [the Great Resignation](#), and not surprisingly many of the resignations have come from the field of education. It is imperative for academic leaders to support, sustain, and retain our already drained faculty, despite the financial constraints. After all, productive faculty are an institution's biggest asset.

Shazia Ahmed, PhD, is a clinical professor of biology at Texas Woman's University and senior fellow of Higher Education Academy, and Claire L. Sahlin, PhD, is associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of multicultural women's and gender studies at Texas Woman's University.
