

# ACADEMIC Leader



## Burnout Is a Cultural Problem

Rebecca Pope-Ruark • March 6, 2023

Over the past three years, I have given upwards of 30 workshops on burnout to different groups of faculty, whether through invitations to a campus (in-person and virtual), conferences, or retreats. I've talked to thousands of faculty, and the invitations keep coming. The issue is obviously resonating in higher education institutions around the country.

The sum total of those institutions who've also invited me to speak with leadership? Three. One president and cabinet, one provost's leadership team, and a provost.

There are, of course, many reasons why this number is small, just given the sheer busyness of leadership and, perhaps, the nature of relationships between them and which unit invited me to speak. On a few

occasions those invitations have come from campus leaders directly. I actively discourage administrators from attending the actual burnout workshops so that faculty and staff attending feel comfortable being honest and vulnerable should they wish to.

While the number is small, the conversations I was able to have with those leaders were deep and caring. They wanted to know more about burnout—what it is, how to identify it. They were concerned about the impacts burnout might be having on faculty and staff and, therefore, students. They were often honest about where they perceived disconnects between leadership’s knowledge and decision-making and the everyday experience of faculty. And, of course, they wanted specific strategies for supporting those experiencing burnout.

In that last sense, though, they are asking the wrong question. The [World Health Organization defines burnout](#) as a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and
- reduced professional efficacy.”

The keyword in that definition is “workplace.” Burnout is a workplace phenomenon, a cultural problem that creates an environment of unrelenting stress for those working in the organization. It’s much easier to assume that burnout is a personal failing or individual weakness. If it’s a personal problem, we can focus on the individual’s mental health, offer them coping strategies, or even allow (or encourage) them to walk away. But if it’s a culture problem, whether at an institution or throughout higher ed in general, that’s orders of magnitude more complicated.

In their recent book *The Burnout Challenge*, burnout researchers Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter use the metaphor of a canary in a coal mine to illustrate the difference. They explain that were miners to take a canary into a mine shaft and that bird were to fall ill or die, the miners wouldn’t tell the bird to be more resilient or go looking for a stronger bird. They would realize there was a serious problem in the environment, the mine shaft itself, and that their own lives were in danger. They would then, hopefully, work to address the conditions in the mine to make it safe for workers.

So, if burnout is a serious problem among faculty and staff in higher education, which phenomena like [The Great Disengagement](#) and [The Big Quit](#) as well as my own work signal, we should be turning our attention to the culture of our institutions and higher education broadly rather than looking to individuals to heal themselves.

## Questions I wish administrators would ask

Campus leaders need to be talking about faculty and staff burnout as a real threat to our campuses now, but what kinds of questions should we be asking? What should we be talking about? Here are a set of questions I wish administrators would ask to learn more and act purposefully about campus burnout.

### ***How can we better understand whether burnout is a problem on our campus?***

Having spoken with thousands of faculty over the past three years, I would wager that burnout is at least somewhat of a problem on your campus. Of course, to know for sure, some form of institutional research

is necessary. This might look like a few different strategies. You might conduct an institutional survey, perhaps using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), the most validated research instrument we have for assessing burnout levels. As inventory designers [Maslach and Leiter say](#), “When the MBI is used correctly, and in strategic combination with other relevant information, the findings can help leaders design effective ways to build engagement and establish healthier workplaces in which employees will thrive.” Another useful survey for understanding faculty satisfaction specifically is the Harvard University [Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education \(COACHE\) survey](#).

***What features of our campus culture cause faculty and staff the most stress, and what can we do about it?***

While the COACHE survey might get at some of this question from the faculty side, a task force of faculty and staff members can conduct interviews or focus groups with their peers to better understand how the institution’s culture and climate of are affecting employees. Consider questions such as

- What is the culture of the institution? Does the culture align with the institution’s stated mission and purpose?
- What are the institutional values—both stated and perceived?
- How does the institution motivate people to succeed? What are the paths for advancement and professional development?
- How does the institution treat or deal with failure?
- How does the institution promote work-life balance? Support well-being?
- How are decisions made, and who makes them? Whose voices are heard?
- Do leaders act consistently with the institution’s values and mission?
- Would you recommend working at the institution to a friend? Why or why not?

If you seek the answers to these first two questions, be sure to share the collected data with those who provided it. Allow that data to be used across the institution for change initiatives related to culture, climate, and burnout as well as anything else that crops up in the studies.

***How can we empower faculty and staff leaders, especially grassroots leaders, to make change in the campus culture around issues of burnout?***

This question may be tricky because of the nature of power on campuses and the fact that administrative support for ground-up initiatives is often both necessary and fraught. Your approach will depend on your campus climate. Engage human resources and faculty governance structures to develop programming and resources to support burned-out faculty and staff. Increase options for flexible work schedules. Consider small grant programs for faculty who have programming or initiatives they want to test out on the problem. Create avenues for faculty and staff to share their perspectives, and really listen and act on their advice.

***How can we support faculty and staff experiencing burnout?***

Yes, I still want administrators to ask this question. While I’ve argued that burnout is a culture problem, it remains one that most directly affects faculty and staff and, therefore, students. When faculty and staff are burned out, they are less likely to be their best, most compassionate, or most creative selves.

Exploring ways to support people through burnout is just as important as addressing the conditions that cause it in the first place, at least until those conditions are rectified, if possible. I wrote about strategies you can consider in a [previous article](#), ranging from increased mental health services on campus to hiring faculty coaches and training department chairs to recognize signs of burnout.

Burnout is a serious culture problem affecting higher education institutions today. The more we can understand the problem, the more we can address the damaging cultural conditions and create more functional spaces for learning and working.

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