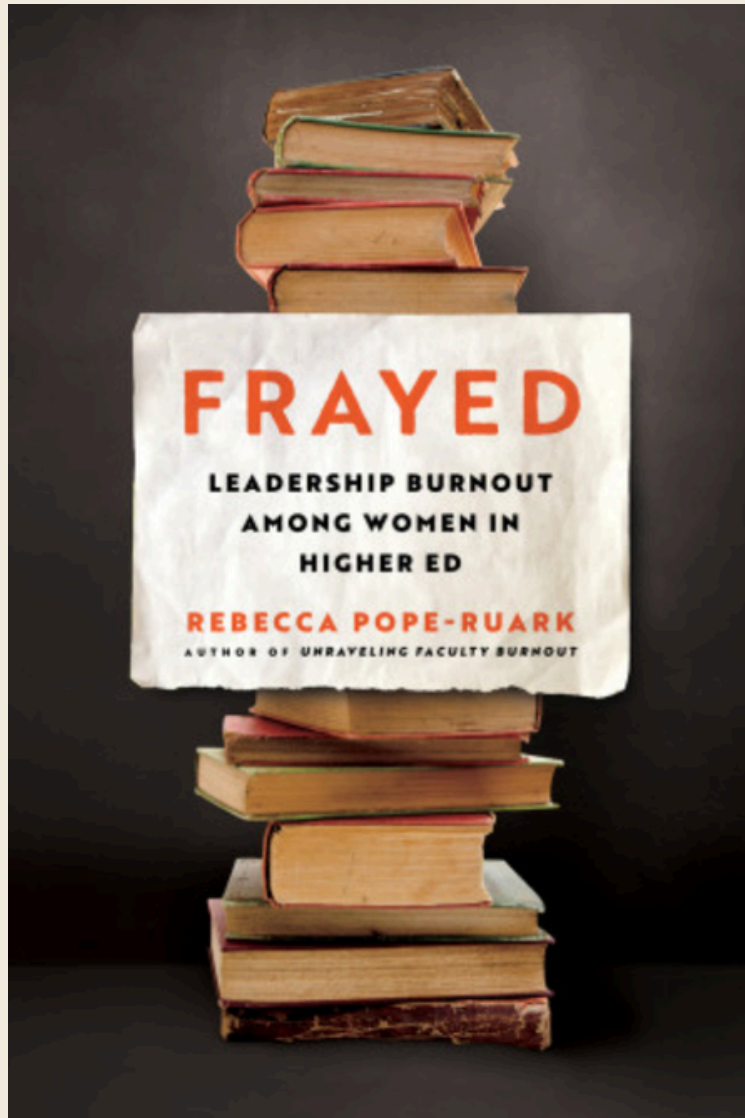


FRAYED

A Book Club Guide



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Welcome

THE BOOK GROUP GUIDE

Hello, and welcome to this discussion guide for *Frayed: Leadership Burnout among Women in Higher Ed*. I'm glad you're here embarking on discovery and discussion with colleagues.

Frayed brings forward the lived experiences of women navigating leadership roles that are often structurally impossible — roles marked by overwhelming workload, limited control, depleted community, inconsistent rewards, and deep fairness and values misalignments. Through interviews with women leaders across institution types, the book reveals how burnout is not an individual failure but rather an unfortunately predictable outcome of cultural, structural, and gendered conditions in higher education. The stories in *Frayed* illuminate both the emotional realities of leadership and the systemic forces that shape and often strain women's ability to thrive.

This guide is meant to help you move through *Frayed* in community, slowly, honestly, and with enough space to notice what resonates. Each session offers a few grounding themes, questions to spark conversation, and opportunities to connect your own experiences to the broader patterns women leaders face in higher education. My hope is that these conversations create room for reflection, recognition, and repair, for naming the impossible jobs we've carried, the misalignments we've navigated, and the possibilities we still imagine for ourselves and our institutions.





Session 1

INTRO & CHAPTER 1

The introduction and Chapter 1 of *Frayed* highlight the lived realities of women leaders navigating roles that are structurally impossible. Through stories of women like Abby, Bridgit, Gillian, and Shannon, these chapters show how work overload, gendered expectations, mistrust, and identity erosion converge to create burnout conditions that are cultural, not just personal. Use your first book club session to explore the emotional and structural landscape of women's leadership today and to reflect on where you see these patterns in your own institutions.

Personal Experience

- When have you felt like Abby, carrying multiple roles or responsibilities that no one else sees?
- Which gendered norms or expectations resonate with Bridgit's experience of microaggressions and emotional labor?
- Gillian describes women leaders validating each other's experiences in real time. Where have you found solidarity that helped you survive?

Interpersonal Dynamics

- Shannon felt trapped between faculty and administration, trusted by neither. Where do you see similar dynamics in your institution?
- What forms of invisible labor do you carry that others may not recognize?

Institutional Culture

- How does your institution normalize overwork or understaffing?
- What myths about women's leadership persist in your institution?

Other Questions?



Session 1

INTRO & CHAPTER 1

Reflection Prompts

- Where do you feel frayed? Identify one area of your work where you feel stretched beyond capacity.
- Abby says, “something is always being neglected.” What’s being neglected in your domain?
- What’s the thing you feel most guilty about not doing?
- What’s the cost? What has overwork cost you emotionally, physically, or relationally?

Leadership Questions

- What makes leadership impossible at your institution? Identify one structural factor.
- Where does mistrust show up? Where do you see mistrust between faculty and administration?
- What gendered patterns persist? What gendered expectations shape who gets asked to do what?

Optional Activity - Map Your Impossible Job

List all visible and invisible responsibilities you carry. Then discuss:

What’s essential? What’s inherited? What’s unsustainable? What needs to be delegated or stopped?

Closing Prompt

What’s one thing you want to reclaim? Name one part of your identity, time, or energy you want to protect moving forward.



Session 2

CHAPTERS 2-4

Chapters 2-4 explore the six misalignments that drive burnout — workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values. Through stories of women leaders navigating overwhelming demands, depleted resources, emotional labor, role ambiguity, inequitable recognition, and values misalignment, these chapters reveal how burnout emerges from structural conditions rather than personal shortcomings. This session invites participants to examine where these misalignments show up in their own leadership roles and institutions — and how they shape well-being, identity, and engagement.

Personal Experience

- Claire described being “an army of one with no admin support.” Where do you feel most stretched or alone in your workload?
- Gillian tried to shield junior faculty during COVID. When have you shielded others at the expense of your own well-being?
- Beverly fought political battles with “no support from any quarter.” Where do you feel your values clash with institutional realities?

Interpersonal Dynamics

- Emma felt she was carrying work others dropped. Where do team dynamics amplify or reduce your workload?
- Who helps buffer your job demands? Where is support missing?

Institutional Culture

- Where do institutional constraints make your work harder?
- Vicki Baker noted higher ed “constantly adding but never taking away.” Where do you see this pattern?
- Where do you see inequities in workload, recognition, or expectations?
- Where does your institution’s stated mission diverge from lived reality?

Other Questions?



Session 2

CHAPTERS 2-4

Reflection Prompts

- Which misalignment hits hardest: workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, or values?
- Identify one job demand that drains you the most.
- What resources help? What job resources buffer your stress, and which ones are missing?

Leadership Questions

- Where do workload inequities show up in your unit?
- Where could recognition practices be strengthened?
- What community supports are missing for leaders?
- Where do fairness gaps or values misalignments show up in your institution?

Optional Activity - Demands, Resources, and Misalignments Mapping

Step 1: Identify job demands (workload, emotional labor, role conflict, etc.)

Step 2: Identify job resources (autonomy, support, feedback, etc.)

Step 3: Identify personal resources (energy, optimism, resilience. etc.)

Step 4: Identify work-home resources (family support, friends group, etc.)

Step 5: Identify misalignments in workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, values

Step 6: Discuss where small repairs are possible.

Closing Prompt

What's one repair you can make? Identify one small change that could reduce demands or increase resources in your role.



Session 3

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 shifts from diagnosis to repair. It acknowledges that burnout is a “wicked problem” — structural, cultural, and deeply embedded in higher education — but also argues that meaningful change is possible through targeted, feasible interventions. Women leaders describe widespread burnout (“everyone I know is burned out”) and a culture where leaders rarely talk about their own exhaustion. This session invites you to imagine what healthier leadership cultures could look like and to identify small, realistic steps toward repair.

Personal Experience

- Maeve noted leaders fear being seen as weak if they admit burnout. Where have you felt pressure to hide exhaustion or struggle?
- Emma said a simple thank-you would have “gone a long way.” Where do you feel unseen or unappreciated?
- Where do your values feel most aligned, or misaligned, with your institution’s leadership culture?

Interpersonal Dynamics

- What spaces exist (or don’t exist) for leaders to talk honestly about burnout?
- How has mentoring shaped your leadership identity or resilience?
- What practices help leaders care for one another in sustainable ways?

Institutional Culture

- How does invisible labor show up in leadership roles?
- What would a culture of appreciation look like in your unit?
- How does your institution prepare (or fail to prepare) future leaders?
- What would it take to normalize burnout conversations at leadership levels?

Other Questions?



Session 3

CHAPTER 5

Leadership Questions

- What data would help your institution understand barriers to sustainable women's leadership?
- Where could a workload or service audit reveal inequities?
- What recognition practices could be implemented immediately?
- What peer groups or communities could support leaders experiencing burnout?
- What development opportunities would help aspiring women leaders?
- How could succession planning become more inclusive and intentional?
- Where could Appreciative Inquiry be used to imagine better futures for women leaders?

Optional Activity - "What If?" Visioning

Choose one "What If?" from Chapter 5 and explore it as a book group.

What would this look like in practice? Who would benefit? What small step could begin this change? What barriers would need to be addressed?

Identify one actionable next step.

Closing Prompt

What's one repair you can make? Identify one small (or large) change — personal, interpersonal, or institutional — that could reduce burnout conditions or increase well-being on your campus.

About REBECCA



I'm Rebecca Pope-Ruark, PhD, author of *Frayed: Leadership Burnout Among Women in Higher Ed* (Johns Hopkins 2026) and *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal* (Johns Hopkins 2022) and a national voice on faculty burnout, compassionate leadership, and culture change in higher education. I partner with institutions that are ready to move toward cultures of alignment, care, and sustainability. I offer

- **Keynotes & Campus Events** Research-informed, story-driven sessions that spark awareness and open space for honest conversation.
- **Leadership Workshops and Retreats** Interactive experiences that help department chairs, deans, and emerging leaders build skills for navigating burnout, culture, and change.
- **Strategic Consulting** A limited number of short-term partnerships focused on aligning values, expectations, and practices across units.

If this workbook surfaced patterns you want to explore more deeply, I encourage you read *Frayed* and reach out to see how we might partner to achieve your goals for faculty and leadership well-being and success.

SCHEDULE A CALL

www.higheredburnout.com