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Building Faculty Vitality: From Burnout to Flourishing

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I spend a lot of time talking to faculty and leaders around the country about burnout in higher education. Having been through burnout myself as a tenured faculty member who had to make some major life changes for my health and well-being, I take my mission seriously–to help institutions build better cultures for a thriving and well faculty and staff population. Levels of burnout certainly increased during the stress of the pandemic, and many of the same workplace conditions that caused burnout then are still present at many institutions.

But I've also noticed a decided shift in the last year or so in how we talk about burnout and building long-term, healthy faculty careers. While I was giving workshops during the pandemic, our focus was very much on understanding what burnout is, where it comes from, and how to cope with it individually. That was necessary work to create conversations on our campuses about this urgent workplace issue. More recently though, faculty developers and leaders who invite me to campuses have started having those conversations about burnout and are looking for the next step. We know what burnout is and where it comes from, they say, but what's on the other side?

We started talking more about faculty vitality as the other end of a spectrum with burnout.

I firmly believe that faculty working conditions are student learning conditions, and taking care of faculty is just good human decency in the workplace. Helping faculty understand both burnout and vitality gives us more control and awareness as we shape our faculty careers and fulfill the missions of our institutions.

In this editorial, I first review what burnout is and how it manifests, then explore a faculty vitality framework I use with my clients to think about creating a context for thriving in our institutions which you can apply to your own career well-being.

What Is Burnout, and What Should You Look For?

We've all said we're feeling burned out at one point or another during the semester, but burnout is a real condition that also has a clinical definition as an "occupational phenomenon" that can impact mental health. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) defines burnout as a "syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." The word "syndrome" in the definition tells us that the WHO is not defining burnout as a mental illness per se, but instead as a collection of symptoms that can impact one's mental health, especially if you are prone to existing mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety, which burnout can exacerbate. This definition limits burnout as a product of "chronic workplace stress." While stress from our personal lives can absolutely impact our professional vitality, the WHO is aligning with 40+ years of research that burnout is specifically an occupational problem caused by workplace stress that is constant and difficult for the typical person to effectively manage.

…faculty working conditions are student learning conditions…

The definition goes on to state that we look for three specific characteristics when diagnosing burnout, aligning with the research of Christina Maslach and colleagues (1976, 1997, 2016). Experiencing feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion is the first characteristic. This is an extended feeling of exhaustion that can be mental, emotional, physical, or all three. When I was experiencing burnout as a faculty member, I had trouble getting out of bed in the morning, convincing myself to go to work, or dealing with the emotions or needs of others, especially students. I would teach my classes and go home as soon as possible with no energy to do anything.

Second is increased mental distance, or negative feelings or cynicism related to one's job. Increased mental distance can also be thought of as depersonalization. In my burnout experience, I began to mentally and even physically distance myself from my students, and I stopped seeing them as individuals with developmentally appropriate personal needs. I instead saw them as a generic group who were bringing to me the same problems I had seen over and over again for 15 years. I had lost empathy for them and became cynical about their intentions and behaviors. Some people who are not naturally cynical might become cynical about the institution and higher education in general, impacting their work and how they engage with others.

And, lastly, the third characteristic is feelings of reduced professional efficacy. This might be experienced as not being able to do your job to your or others' standards or feeling like you cannot do the job well. For example, I felt

like I was not able to do my job well, but my teaching evaluations did not suffer while I was experiencing burnout. On the other hand, I did not write for almost two years–and I'm a writer who taught professional writing and rhetoric–so I was actually not able to do that part of my job.

New research from an independent scholar in New Zealand, Nick Petrie (2022), offers another way of understanding the severity of burnout by outlining three levels and appropriate interventions. Petrie's first level of burnout is a period of intense stress with an end in sight. At this level, he suggests setting boundaries between life and work, unplugging from email, spending time with family or friends, and engaging with hobbies and favored pastimes. The second level of burnout is chronic stress at work, and the research recommends mindset and behavioral changes including detaching one's identity from one's work (a difficult prospect for many academics), setting stronger boundaries between life and work, and possibly having a conversation with your supervisor about workload. And finally, the third level is the most serious, full-blown burnout, requiring a separation from work to take care of one's health, finding a mental health professional to work with, and thinking deeply about the causes of the burnout and if staying in the current role is still feasible.

Burnout can have dramatic consequences for the individual experiencing it as well as the workplace causing the stress to individuals. But many of us hover somewhere between Petrie's first and second levels of burnout - experiencing regular workplace stress with some intense or challenging periods of time. If we think of burnout as one end of a spectrum of workplace stress, the other end could be labeled engagement or, the term I prefer, vitality. What does the other end of this spectrum look like and how can leaning into some of the characteristics of vitality alleviate burnout symptoms?

What Is Vitality, and How Do Faculty Create It?

In the last decade, we've seen a marked increase in the focus on students' vitality, belonging, and flourishing. But what does vitality look like for faculty? Let's look at some definitions. At a basic level, vitality means having life, being strong, active, productive. From a psychological perspective, Ryan and Deci (2008) define it as a "positively toned, energized" state where "people experience a sense of enthusiasm, aliveness, and energy available to the self."

We can think about how vitality emerges from one's work and workplace as well. Regarding clinical faculty in medical institutions, Dankoski and colleagues (2012) explain that faculty vitality is "the synergy between high levels of satisfaction, productivity, and engagement that enables faculty to maximize professional success and achieve goals in concert with institutional goals." Here are some additional definitions captured by Shah and colleagues (2018).

Table 1

Definitions of Faculty Vitality

Individual and organizational variables that distinguish vital faculty from their peers at other institutions (Clark et al., 1985)
A stimulating intellectual environment, the opportunity to be curious and to engage in lifelong learning, is what attracts bright, talented people to academe (Bland & Schmitz, 1988)
Concept that discriminates among professors in meaningful ways; expanding faculty career development options is key (Baldwin, 1990)
An interplay of faculty qualities and institutional factors (Bland et al., 2002)
Synergy between high levels of satisfaction, productivity, and engagement that enables faculty to maximize professional success and achieve goals in concert with institutional goals. Predicted by both individual and institutional factors (Dankoski et al., 2012)
Professional fulfillment, motivation, and commitment to ongoing intellectual and personal growth, full professional engagement, enthusiasm and positive feelings of aliveness, energy, and excitement (Pololi et al., 2015)

Note. This table is modified from "Definitions of *Vitality* as a Freestanding Concept and as Applied to Faculty and Institutions" by Shah et al. (2018).

In this turn toward vitality, I've found one vitality framework to be especially useful for faculty in the context of conversations about burnout. In 2019 and as a result of their work studying highly productive faculty members,

Anne M. DeFelippo and Jay R. Dee (2022) defined faculty vitality as "an affective state that is characterized by high levels of motivation, energy, curiosity, creativity, optimism, and grit. This affective state propels individuals to seek challenges, take risks, collaborate with others, and pursue opportunities for self-improvement."

Vital faculty are forward-looking and hopeful about the future for their students, research, and the institution…. What makes you hopeful for the future of your students or your discipline or your institution?

When faculty start feeling burned out can focus on one or two of these characteristics in their work-life, they can build a positive foundation for mitigating the negative impacts of those higher levels of burnout. I next look at each characteristic briefly and offer questions faculty can consider to add more of that element into your work-life.

Motivation. Big questions connected to their teaching, research, and service often drive vital faculty. They are motivated by helping students learn, creating new knowledge, and helping their institutions accomplish their important missions. What are the big questions that drive your work? What makes the work that you do meaningful and impactful? What sustains you when the going gets hard?

Energy. Vital faculty are able to manage their energy and know what times of the day or week are most appropriate for different types of work. They are able to pace themselves by balancing periods of intense work with periods of rest and recovery. Thinking about your typical week, when are your best times for high-intensity work like writing or working closely with students? When are you less energetic, and what types of work, possibly email or grading, might be better done during those times? How are you building in restorative time during your week to stay vital?

Curiosity. Being curious allows vital faculty to see challenges and problems as opportunities for learning and growth rather than getting angry or stuck. Vital faculty ask all kinds of questions to understand what's going on around them. What are you curious about in your teaching, research, or service? What is interesting to you about how people behave, how research develops, or how the institution works? What do you want to learn about?

Creativity. Creativity allows vital faculty to approach questions and challenges from new and interesting perspectives, whether it's dealing with a difficult personality on a committee or helping students understand a difficult concept, vital faculty get creative in their ways of doing and being. What interesting challenges are you facing that might need some creative approaches or thinking? What aspects of your life and work might inform other areas to yield a creative approach?

Optimism. Vital faculty are forward-looking and hopeful about the future for their students, research, and the institution. They know nothing is perfect, but they are willing to put in the work to make a better future. What makes you hopeful for the future of your students or your discipline or your institution? What vision are you working toward that can guide your work and decisions?

Grit. Vital faculty persist. Their motivation, energy, curiosity, creativity, and optimism merge to give them a solid foundation to work through difficult times and challenging problems for a better future. What vision of the future helps you persevere in the present? Who or what gives you strength to keep going in the face of setbacks or difficulty?

Seeking Challenge. Rather than rest on their laurels, vital faculty actively seek opportunities to push themselves into new areas or explore new questions. Challenge-seeking contributes to their motivation and energy. What might be a new area to explore in your research or teaching? How might you contribute and grow your unique skills to approach an institutional goal or problem?

Taking Risks. Similar to seeking challenge, taking risks allows vital faculty members to try something new, knowing full well that it might fail or have unexpected consequences. By leaning into curiosity and grit, vital faculty members find new ways to look at the work that they care about. When was the last time you tried something new in your research or teaching? In what area of your faculty work might you push yourself to learn something new?

Collaborating. Collaborating with students, colleagues, and other researchers helps vital faculty tap into their creativity and find new sources of energy. Building relationships through collaboration helps to drive further commitment and motivation for the work at hand. What questions might you explore with others who have different perspectives or strengths? Who would you like to learn from or create with, and why?

Pursuing Self-Improvement. Vital faculty know that lifelong learning and an orientation toward personal and professional development keep them active and engaged. They seek opportunities to learn more about themselves and the questions and people they care about. What are some personal or professional growth areas you might explore? What resources are available for you to tap to support your continued development as a successful faculty member?

Taken all at once, the characteristics of vital faculty might feel overwhelming; however, like most faculty are not in full-blown burnout on one end of the spectrum, we do not have to exhibit or focus on all of the vitality

characteristics at the same time to accrue benefits. I recommend choosing one or two aspects of DeFelippo and Dee's (2022) model on which to focus - perhaps you'd like to have more creativity and challenge-seeking in your days. Or more curiosity and risk-taking. Once you have chosen which you'd like to focus on, consider these questions:

- How do you define the characteristics you have chosen, and what do they mean for you?
- How might adding more of these characteristics into your work-life contribute to your professional vitality?
- Where might you add more of these characteristics into your days?
- How will you know you've been successful in including more of these characteristics in your work-life?

By exploring our vitality, we are not ignoring the conditions that lead to burnout in our institutions. Rather, we are taking some time to focus on our own well-being and engagement so that we can have fulfilling faculty careers and be available to make change in our campus working conditions for the good of ourselves and our students.

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