

ACE WOMEN'S Network™ Michigan

Mentoring Mondays
December 14, 2020

“Now professors across the country are treading water, feeling overwhelmed and undersupported, and wondering, like Rutuku, how long they can hang on.”

The Pandemic Is Dragging On. Professors Are Burning Out.

Overwhelmed and undersupported, instructors see no end in sight

By Beth McMurtrie

NOVEMBER 5, 2020

At first, she thought everything would work out if she just got up earlier. So Naomi Rutuku, an associate professor of English at Bakersfield College, began rising at 5 a.m. Her husband would make her coffee, then head out to his job as a wind-turbine technician, leaving her with a few hours of quiet before her kids, ages 2 and 4, demanded attention.

She had a lot to take care of: four composition courses, plus a literature class she took on for extra pay after the public college froze a promised raise in the wake of the pandemic. There were dozens of emails to field from colleagues, discussion posts to review, writing assignments to grade, Flipgrid videos to watch. Then she had her own videos to produce, while managing dozens of check-ins to keep track of nearly 140 students, many of whom remained dark squares on her screen.

She knew the pace was unsustainable. Legions of professors are hitting the wall in their own ways. For some, like Rutuku, the problem has been a crushing workload combined with child-care challenges. For others, it's a feeling that their institution expects them to be counselors and ed-tech experts on top of their regular responsibilities, even if it means working seven days a week. Black and Latino professors are bearing additional burdens, supporting students of color and contributing to the national debate on racism. Meanwhile, adjuncts are barely hanging on, hoping that budget cuts don't end their careers.

For professors of all types, their responsibilities as teachers are causing many of them to feel pressed to meet the needs of the moment. Like many instructors, Rutuku prides herself on her teaching. And she believes that her students, most of whom are lower-income and trying to get a leg up in life, need to know how to write effectively. She couldn't cut back, she feels, or they would be shortchanged.

She has worried about shortchanging her own kids as well, as she tried to be both parent and professor. Yet day care did not seem viable because of Covid-19, and she hesitated to take them outside, where the air was hot and smoky from California wildfires. She felt stuck. Stuck with an enormous workload spawned by a pandemic with no end in sight. Stuck without the presence of coworkers, on whom she relies for camaraderie and support. Stuck trying to live up to the expectations she had set for herself.

As exhaustion sank in, the 5 a.m. rising turned into 6 a.m., to gain an extra hour of sleep. Then one morning she walked into her home office, and her brain simply wouldn't work. She couldn't grade. She just sat there. "To try to jam-pack everything in these three or four morning hours," she says, "it became clear to me I couldn't sustain that kind of work anymore."

She started getting up at 7 a.m., but that didn't fix anything. Even a plea for advice from fellow instructors on Facebook, following that paralyzing morning, resulted only in well-meaning suggestions that would lead to more work.

Finally, she and her husband broke down, and this week sent their kids back to day care.

"It's terrifying and expensive," she says, "but I was just becoming this sort of person I didn't like or even recognize, which wasn't healthy for anyone in the house."

Burnout is a problem in academe even in the best of times. Shrinking budgets, growing workloads, and job insecurity in a profession where self-sufficiency is both expected and prized put many faculty members at risk before Covid-19 placed higher education on even shakier footing.

Now professors across the country are treading water, feeling overwhelmed and undersupported, and wondering, like Rutuku, how long they can hang on.

In a forthcoming survey of more than 1,100 faculty members, more than two-thirds said they had felt “very” or “extremely” stressed or fatigued in the past month. The survey was conducted in late October by *The Chronicle* and underwritten by Fidelity.

And a recent survey by the American Council on Education listed the mental health of faculty and staff members as the third-most-pressing concern for college presidents, behind the mental health of students and their institutions’ long-term financial viability.

Hopelessness and exhaustion are signs of burnout. But they’re also signs of what everyday life feels like now for college professors, says Rebecca Pope-Ruark, a teaching-and-learning specialist at the Georgia Institute of Technology, who is writing a book about faculty burnout. “It’s perhaps one of the first times almost everyone had the exact same problem,” she says.

If the pandemic has stripped teaching of what makes it invigorating, it’s also exacerbated aspects of academic life that were already challenging professors’ mental health, such as the impulse to work hard to meet students’ needs, even at the cost of depleting themselves.

But professors can take a few steps to help themselves stave off burnout, Pope-Ruark says. While hopping on yet another Zoom call may not feel like the most appealing option, she has advised professors that creating virtual networks with colleagues is important.

They could be colleagues on campus, academics in your field, or people with other common interests. Pope-Ruark belongs to several groups, including one for women in academe. They hold coffee hours, talk about career and family issues, and convene writing groups. Administrators could help by creating forums for faculty members to

talk freely — and without administrative oversight — about teaching during the pandemic.

“If we start talking about it, the more we don’t have the shame associated with it and the better we can get together,” she says.

Academic life can be competitive and breed perfectionism, something that Pope-Ruark encourages colleagues to keep in check. “I’m still in that mode of, it’s OK to have lower expectations than you would have in a traditional semester,” she says. “Most faculty members are overachievers in general. But it’s survival mode we’re in.”

Asking professors to simply push through the current moment isn’t sustainable, says Cate Denial, a history professor at Knox College, in Illinois, with an active Twitter presence and a blog where she writes frankly about those struggles. “There seems to be this general sense of business as usual. Like, we’ve got to put our shoulders to the wheel,” she says. “The steadfast commitment to pretending it’s not happening is really damaging.”

Without additional support, such as mental-health counseling and help for caregivers, Denial and other observers fear that some faculty members may fall ill or quit, particularly those with small children. Others could see the quality of their teaching suffer.

At a time when higher education is struggling to convince students and their families that college is worth the cost, and that high-quality teaching is possible despite the pandemic, those are troubling risks.

To Julia Becker, an art professor at the University of Providence, the pandemic has amplified and accelerated pre-existing problems in higher education. Her university, a tiny liberal-arts institution in Montana, closed 11 programs last year, scrapping the art major in the process. Her tenured position was eliminated shortly before Covid-19 hit, and she was moved to part-time status, with a significant cut in pay.

When instruction stayed largely virtual this fall, one of her two remaining art colleagues decided he would retire rather than try to figure out how to teach photography and ceramics online. She is now teaching three courses virtually, with some students in locations so remote it is hard for them to purchase art supplies. She

also spent \$1,400 — “money that I don’t really have” — to set up a video-friendly art studio in her home.

“Much of the work, the worry, and the expense has fallen on us low-paid professors,” she says.

At 63, Becker focuses more on helping her students get through the semester than on rebuilding her career. But she is distressed, she says, by a lack of professional and technical support from the college as she struggles to figure out how to teach her highly tactile and interactive classes from a corner of her bedroom.

“I realize the university was scrambling to help students, and I appreciate that,” she says. “But they were not considering the faculty. They just assumed we would figure it out, and we would make it work. That blanket assumption is difficult and expensive.”

In nearly a dozen interviews with faculty members across the country, many echoed the sense that administrators didn’t fully understand what it meant to be on the front lines, teaching virtually or socially distanced to students facing their own pandemic-generated crises.

“It would be nice to have someone call me or email me,” says one professor, Mary Elliott, who teaches at a small, public liberal-arts college in Nebraska. “How are you doing? How are things going? Just that simple gesture would be great.”

Elliott has been teaching for more than 30 years but has never felt so disregarded as she does now. An associate professor at Wayne State College, where she teaches fashion and merchandising, she has a six-course instructional load this semester.

Her college chose to bring students back to campus this fall, so she is in the classroom every day, she says, often with people spaced less than six feet apart. A collegewide attendance policy allows students to be absent as needed, something she endorses. Yet she also believes that some students are taking advantage of this leniency. At any given time, one-third of her students aren’t there. Some tell her they are in quarantine; others simply don’t show up.

Meanwhile, Elliott says, she arrives on campus every day by 7:30 a.m. She tries to go home by 5 but isn’t always successful. She comes in on Sunday mornings, too. When

not in class, she heads to her office and shuts the door, to stay safe. She was worried at first about catching Covid-19, but now, she says, “I try not to feel because it’s too emotionally depressing.”

Many faculty members are still grappling with the fundamentals of online teaching. They say that technical problems, students’ reticence in online classes, and a host of other issues are wearing them down. While many colleges offered training over the spring and summer, that hasn’t made the experience of teaching online much easier for a lot of professors.

William Sager, a professor of geophysics at the University of Houston, took more than a half-dozen hours of instruction in teaching online over the summer, expecting that it would prepare him for a better experience than he had last spring, which he calls a disaster. He had lost touch with nearly all 250 of his students in an introduction-to-oceanography course after classes went asynchronous, in March. He also had to deal with “massive cheating” on tests.

But his training has proved of little help in his online classroom this fall. Testing software has been glitchy. He can’t seem to get effective discussions going in breakout rooms. And during class time, he sometimes ends up fruitlessly punching buttons as he tries to get the chat functions and PowerPoint displays to work properly.

“How many hours can I spend a day, trying to figure out how to do this or that?” he asks. “I want the answer now, not the thing that tells me I have to listen to an hour’s worth of stuff to find a nugget of information.”

“I needed a motor scooter,” he says, “and they gave me a 747 without an instruction manual.”

The other week he discovered his students could enter a test from Blackboard in four ways, and he wasn’t sure how to connect them from those different entry points to the lockdown browser used to prevent cheating. “I felt like I was on a tightrope,” he says, “hoping it wouldn’t wiggle.”

He has little idea whether his colleagues are facing similar problems because departmental meetings never focus on teaching. Nearly every professor interviewed agreed that little discussion occurs within their departments, or on campus generally,

about teaching challenges, the struggles of their students, or their own feelings of stress and exhaustion.

Instead, as Sager found, people talk about issues like course-scheduling logistics or faculty searches, which were thrown into disarray by hiring freezes. Sager attributes part of that reluctance to speak about teaching difficulties to a sense of disconnect, since people are no longer face to face. But part of it, he believes, has to do with the faculty work ethic. “Most professors work hard, and we all feel lucky to have a job,” he says. “I feel personally like, stop whining. Just get it done.”

Many faculty members find an ally or two with whom they can commiserate or seek help. But that reliance on a small circle of people can also be limiting. As Sager describes it, when talking about the colleagues he turns to for help with teaching, “I don’t want to burden them to do the extra work to hold my hand.”

For many professors, the stresses of teaching online have been compounded by their inability to effectively continue their research. Already, women have seen a relative decline in research productivity compared with men, probably due to their increased caregiving responsibilities.

Several faculty members interviewed, male and female, said they were struggling to focus on research. For some, it is due to mental fatigue.

The pandemic has also thrown logistical barriers in their way. Sager has two labs on campus. One is in a poorly ventilated space, so bringing graduate students in with him is out of the question. In the other, his students would prefer to work from home, so he meets with them over Zoom.

Meanwhile, he finds that he’s forgetting things, like writing letters of recommendation for his graduate students. He even forgot to attend his niece’s wedding, which was live-streamed. “I am mortified,” he says, “and will spend the weekend apologizing to my sister.”

There is no workshop, no teaching video, no manual to help professors thrive during this time. Instead, social media — whether Twitter, Facebook, or blog posts — have proved to be an important release valve for people like Robin Mitchell, an associate professor of history at California State University-Channel Islands.

Early one morning in October, she was having a rough day. “Anybody else wake up feeling hopeless?” she tweeted. Her online friends, she figured, had her back. “Same,” “Totally get this,” “Hang in there!” they responded.

But Mitchell knows that it won’t be long before another wave of exhaustion washes over her. She is teaching four courses this semester, and every time she is about to flip on her camera, she gears up for another high-energy performance.

She signs on early to chat, scans students’ faces for signs of fatigue or disengagement as she speaks, and calls on them regularly so they don’t zone out. “I am a teacher that excels in face-to-face teaching,” she says. “It takes a tremendous amount of energy to be up and excited and push them the way I would do in a regular class.”

Being able to see her students is great, she says, but being invited into their homes also brings worries. Roommates, family members, messy houses — all make an appearance, intentionally or not. And what happens when she teaches fraught topics like Jim Crow? Showing a photo of Emmett Till’s beaten body in a classroom is challenging enough. In an online class she must be mindful of how it might affect students when it is coming into their home.

For many faculty members of color, the invisible labor they normally shoulder has also increased. The pandemic, says Michelle Moyd, an associate professor of history at Indiana University at Bloomington, “has peeled back all of the layers of things that are in some ways masked.”

After the death of George Floyd led to nationwide protests for racial justice this past summer, the Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, where Moyd is associate director, was asked to put together a series of panels, live-streaming seven weeks of events focused on systemic racism. She took on that work on top of caring for her 7-year-old daughter, who was at home because of the pandemic.

“I ended the summer feeling a lot of anger about the way the university asked us to do these things, uses our work, and then at the same time does not seem to have resources to support what we need and want,” she says, “in terms of new faculty hires, retention efforts, funding the things that would allow us to grow the pool of marginalized folks to stay here long term.”

Similarly, for Mitchell, the pandemic, economics, and politics are intertwined in her work and her life.

Her students are mostly Latino, “working-class kids,” she says, holding down full-time jobs to put themselves through college. Her courses on European history also draw white students interested in studying European wars. As one of only four tenured or tenure-track Black professors on campus, she says, her classroom conversations can be complicated, particularly when she gets into the “deeply uncomfortable” history of Europe’s treatment of Black people in other nations. “We are living in a world right now where I’m constantly having to remind them that my life matters,” she says. “Every day.”

She was outraged by the White House’s Columbus Day Proclamation, which criticized “radical activists” who sought to “undermine” Columbus’s legacy. Mitchell decided to talk about it in class, and found strength in the lively discussion that followed. “I love my job. I wouldn’t be doing this job with this kind of pressure attached to it if I didn’t feel like it’s a noble calling,” she says. “And that’s important to say.”

But Mitchell doesn’t find much support from administrators. “I don’t believe they’re evil,” she says. “I believe they don’t know what it’s like to be in the classroom and teach eight times a week, do prep work, do administrative service work, and then do your own research.”

“We seem to be oftentimes the last people that people are thinking about,” she says. “Or what they say to us is, You guys are rock stars. We’re not rock stars; we’re exhausted.”

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where she writes about the future of learning and technology’s influence on teaching.