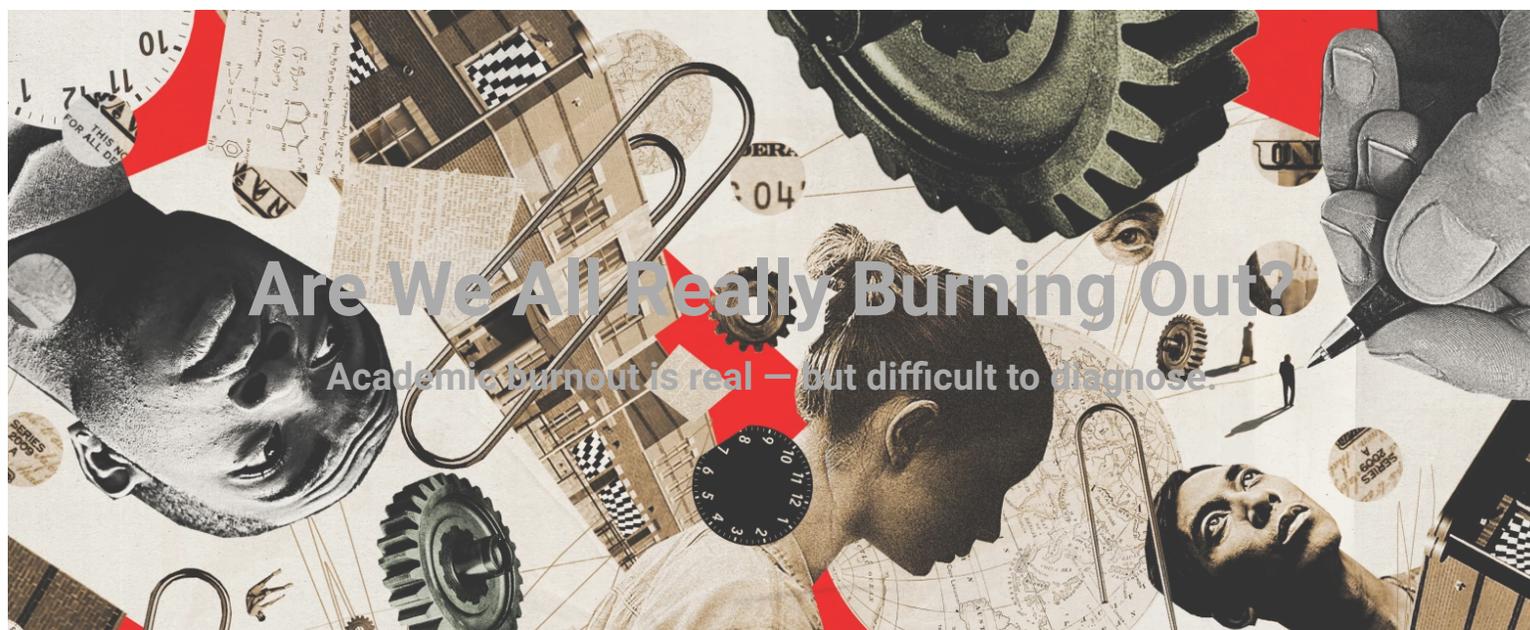


THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Are We All Really Burning Out?

Academic burnout is real — but difficult to diagnose.

LINCOLN AGNEW FOR THE CHRONICLE

THE REVIEW

By *Jonathan Malesic*

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I dreamed of being a college professor almost as soon as I met my own professors. They read strange books by Nietzsche and Annie Dillard, asked challenging questions in class, and wore tweed. One of my favorite professors taught theology and lived on campus. On Friday afternoons he opened his small, cinderblock apartment to students and, over coffee, chatted with us about heady topics like the theological implications of the universe's expansion. He also showed

foreign and art films like *My Dinner With Andre* and *Au Revoir les Enfants*. To my eyes, this man lived for knowledge and art and wisdom, and got paid to pursue his passions and hand them on to eager young people.

Over the next decade, I did the things you needed to do to live that life. I went to graduate school, finished my dissertation, and went on the academic job market. After a few tries, I succeeded: I landed a full-time, tenure-track position teaching theology at a small Roman Catholic college. My girlfriend helped move me from Virginia, where I had gone to grad school, to northeastern Pennsylvania. Then we moved her to Berkeley, Calif., so she could go to grad school, in pursuit of her own dream of being a professor.

Now in a long-distance relationship, I threw myself into the work. I assigned Nietzsche and Dillard, and asked challenging questions in class. I wore tweed. I published. I served on faculty committees. I worked late at the office. I was determined to be inspiring, as my favorite professors were, and not like the dinosaurs who lectured from the same yellowed notes year after year. The biggest problem I faced was students' indifference. They all *had* to take theology, but hardly any *wanted* to take it. So I came up with some techniques — tricks, really — to get students to put a little more effort into learning than they would otherwise. It sort of worked. I even tricked a few students into becoming theology majors.

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After six years, I earned tenure. By this time, my girlfriend had become my wife. She

finished her Ph.D. and got a job in western Massachusetts, and after I spent a sabbatical year with her, we went back to long-distance, driving four and a half hours two or three weekends a month to see each other. I tried to focus on my work, but that was becoming increasingly difficult. Now tenured, I didn't have to impress anyone. Also, my college faced two crises, one pertaining to its finances, the other to its accreditation. People got laid off. Salaries and budgets were frozen. There were concerns about enrollment. Would tuition payments be enough to keep the college out of the red? There was much more work to do to satisfy the accrediting agency. Everyone seemed to walk around the campus in a constant state of worry.

The stress got to me, too, despite my job security. I was working harder than ever — not just teaching and research, but heading up committees and leading the college's center for teaching excellence. Despite this, I felt I was not getting much recognition from the college's leaders. And I wasn't getting affirmation of my work from the students either. It seemed as if they were learning nothing from me. Peers, including my department chair, continued to compliment my teaching. I didn't believe it; I saw my daily failure in the classroom firsthand, in every blank face of every student who wanted to be anywhere but at a desk listening to me.

My temper grew shorter. I started returning students' papers later and later. Class preparation became increasingly difficult. I faced a mental block every night as I tried to remember my pedagogical tricks. I had forgotten everything I knew about good teaching.

Eventually, it all become too much. I decided to quit.

What happened to me, and what is happening now in higher education at large, is burnout. And the pandemic has only made things worse. As Martha Compton, then president of the Association for Student

Conduct Administration told [The Chronicle](#) this year, student-affairs staff members did not go into their line of work so they could enforce social-distancing rules during a pandemic. Meanwhile, senior administrators still wanted them to put on maximally fun activities for locked-down students. Tiffany Beth Mfume, the assistant vice president for student success and retention at Morgan State University, reported regularly working until 1 a.m., sleeping five or six hours, and then starting a new workday at 9 a.m.

An [October 2020 survey](#) of faculty members commissioned by *The Chronicle* and Fidelity Investments found sharp rises in stress, fatigue, and anger compared with a year earlier. It also found that 55 percent of faculty members were considering leaving academe or retiring after the pandemic — an especially notable finding because the survey respondents were disproportionately tenured or tenure-track professors, compared with the professoriate at large. That figure mirrors the 55 percent of U.S. workers overall planning a career change, according to a [survey](#) by Bankrate published in August 2021. A sense of purpose might sustain someone through the challenges of the pandemic, but, paradoxically, it can destroy a career, too. It's not easy to reorient your vocation around a series of tasks you never trained for, on minimal sleep, while months become years, with no relief.

I spent my last, lame-duck semester as a professor swimming through research on burnout, and quickly found the work of Christina Maslach, a psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley. Her 1982 book *Burnout: The Cost of Caring* felt as if it had been written just for me. It focuses on workers in human-service professions: counselors, social workers, police and corrections officers, and teachers. She finds that those who burn out tend to be idealistic. “Noble ideals can pose problems for a provider when ideals are all he or she has to guide the direction of work,” she writes, “because, then, no matter how hard the person works, each day is doomed to be a failure.”



Maslach recognizes the importance of having one's psychological needs met at work: "The person who lacks close relationships with friends or family will be far more dependent on clients and colleagues for signs of appreciation." I certainly was. When my workload was greatest, my wife was living 200 miles away. All my friends were work friends, and when we got together, we often complained about

work. My students' perpetual lack of interest felt like a rebuke to everything that mattered to me.

According to Maslach, burnout has three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness or diminished accomplishment. You're burned out when you are constantly drained of energy (exhaustion), when you see your students as problems rather than people you're meant to help (cynicism), and when you feel that your work accomplishes nothing (ineffectiveness). I felt all of these intensely. My career, as far as I was concerned, was a waste.

I eventually came across the Maslach Burnout Inventory, or MBI, a psychometric test that has become standard in burnout research. I took a version of the test written [specifically for educators](#). It cost \$15 and took five minutes. The 22-question test asked me how often I had various feelings about my job and students, from "I feel emotionally drained from my work" (a measure of exhaustion) to "I don't really care what happens to some students" (a measure of cynicism) to "I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students" (a measure of personal accomplishment).

I scored in the 98th percentile for exhaustion and the 17th percentile for personal accomplishment, which meant that I was among the most emotionally drained educators who have taken the MBI and that I felt less effective than five out of six test-takers. (Personal accomplishment is scored on a reverse scale; the lower your score, the greater your sense of ineffectiveness.) To my surprise, I was only in the 44th percentile for cynicism, a shade below the average but nevertheless at a level some researchers deemed a high score. Still: below average for cynicism? I had been writing long, angry all-faculty emails late at night — what were the *truly* cynical doing?

Regardless, I had scored very high on the key dimension of exhaustion. As someone

who thrives on the validation of standardized tests, I felt proud, just as I did when I got my GRE scores.

According to popular websites, magazines, and trade publications, every profession is susceptible to burnout. I arranged for a daily email from Google notifying me of new articles on burnout. On just one day, there were stories about burnout among physicians, nurses, teachers, parents, dentists, police officers, climate activists, campus-safety officers, lawyers, neurointerventionalists, people with security clearances, tennis players, graduate students, librarians, musicians, freelancers, and volunteers.

Headlines tend to claim a high prevalence of burnout. One [research team](#) says 28 percent of the working public is burned out, as are 44 percent of physicians. [Another](#), 71 percent of college students. Keep reading, and you'll find numbers that strain the limits of plausibility. According to [one survey](#), "77 percent of respondents say they have experienced employee burnout at their current job, with more than half citing more than one occurrence." [Another](#) claims — astonishingly — that 96 percent of millennials are affected by burnout.

These articles often frame burnout as a clear and definitive state, like having strep throat. "A Startling 79% of Primary-Care Physicians Are Burned Out, New Report Finds," reads one typical headline. The precise percentages make it seem as if there is a bright line between healthy and unhealthy workers. When it comes to your job, you're like a light bulb: Either you are burning, or you're burned out, with nothing in between. If you're burned out, it's all you can do to drag yourself through another workday. You're the working dead.

Taken together, however, these articles convey something more complex and less conclusive. Yes, burnout is widespread, but the figures that get cited in making that

point are not compatible. It can't be true that almost all millennials are burned out, while only a quarter of all workers are, because, at the time these surveys were published, millennials were more than a third of all workers.

A look behind the numbers reveals that the researchers who produced them are all working with different definitions of burnout. Few studies rely on the full 22-question Maslach Burnout Inventory. And even researchers who do use the MBI apply it in disparate ways. One [meta-analysis](#) found that out of 156 studies that used the MBI to examine physician burnout, there were 47 different definitions of burnout and at least two dozen definitions each of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. It's no wonder these studies produced widely divergent results. It is as if everyone has been trying to build a house, but no one can agree on how to measure the boards — and they keep on cutting and hammering anyway.

Burnout is a fuzzy concept, and there are different interests at stake in its definition. Undergrads, grad students, professors, staffers, and administrators all use the term to do different things, whether to validate their experience (as I did), argue for less homework and looser deadlines, or identify deadwood in need of culling. The term “burnout” *matters* to us, and yet we cannot settle on what it means.

In that context, the sensationalized research findings don't just report on the condition; they invite readers to participate in it, to claim they're burned out, too. If you read that a huge percentage of people like you — those who share your profession, your gender, your age cohort — are burning out, well, then, might you be likely to say you are as well? And so a paradox emerges: Burnout is both an undesirable condition and a trendy self-diagnosis.

In early 2019, the journalist and former academic Anne Helen Petersen published [an essay](#) in *BuzzFeed News* about burnout as the explanation for why millennials

seemingly couldn't fulfill ordinary tasks, including things as important as registering to vote. It wasn't that they were lazy. In Petersen's account, millennials had been under pressure to perform for their entire lives, were deeply in student-loan debt, and had experienced a precarious job market, leading them to hustle past the point of exhaustion. Burnout, to Petersen, is "not a temporary affliction: It's the millennial condition. It's our base temperature. It's our background music. It's the way things are. It's our lives."

Petersen's essay was a sensation. I suspect it was so popular because it gave a name — and, with it, legitimacy — to what readers had experienced. It told millennials that what they were undergoing was, in fact, a large-scale cultural problem, not an individual failing. That's also why Maslach's definition of burnout resonated so much with me in the final weeks of my academic career — I knew I wasn't alone.

Petersen's essay didn't just name an experience; it elevated those who'd had that experience. It justified their inability to function as the price they had paid for being ideal workers. It raised their status in the moral system of American work culture. Petersen defined burnout as something more than exhaustion: "Exhaustion means going to the point where you can't go any further; burnout means reaching that point and pushing yourself to keep going, whether for days or weeks or years." According to this definition, burnout isn't a failure of productivity but the continuation of productivity despite lacking the strength it takes to produce. The burned-out worker is, in this sense, a kind of hero.

Petersen's essay drew some critiques. The poet and academic Tiana Clark [argued that](#) burnout is nothing new to Black people in the United States, who have endured a "litany of inherited trauma — or should I say inherited burnout?"

Clark's account of her own life, including her "dead Black batteries," does sound like

someone working hard to keep up with both her own ambitions and other people's (possibly racist) expectations of her. She writes of being wiped out at the end of a day of teaching. She writes of bearing a heavier load of committee work than her white colleagues. She enumerates the costs of her labor, borne largely by her body: "I grind my teeth at night. I lose sleep. I stop working out. I work while my head is pounding. I develop PCOS [polycystic ovary syndrome]. I cancel therapy. I can't keep up. I stop reaching out to friends."

But Clark doesn't sound so exhausted that she can't do her job. She doesn't sound cynical about it. ("I hustle. I grind," she writes.) It certainly doesn't sound as if she has lost a sense of accomplishment. She sounds justifiably proud of her considerable professional achievements: a rare tenure-track position in poetry, a couple of published collections, awards, speaking invitations. What I gather from the essay is that she's tired, but she's getting it done.

In fact, Clark's essay reflects a form of Petersen's heroic narrative that's common in academe. A litany of tasks that professors complain about to peers or on Twitter — the overdue paper to write, the teaching innovation to try out, the committee to lead — looks a lot like an enviable CV. Even as she writes about being chronically spent, Clark takes pride in being in demand. Her work "continually feels like both a sprint and a marathon. Why? Because, Jay-Z said it best: *I'm a hustler, baby!*" Petersen's and Clark's accounts tell me that when we say we're burned out, we aren't admitting only to failure. We're also invoking the American and academic ideal of constant work.

The inconsistency and subjectivity in defining burnout invite doubt as to whether burnout is a real condition at all. It has no clinical definition in most countries, which means it has as much medical status as being an artist or a Chicago Cubs fan. And in a society that overvalues work (to say nothing of

work-obsessed subcultures like academe), you can gain status by diagnosing your tireless devotion to labor. You're burned out if you say you're burned out. But should we give credence to unverifiable claims, including my own?

Skepticism about burnout is nearly as old as Maslach's pioneering work, in the 1970s. In a 1981 [essay](#) titled "The Burnout of Almost Everyone," the *Time* magazine columnist Lance Morrow drafted burnout into the culture war, using it to criticize the shallow narcissism that had carried over from the "Me Decade." Morrow wrote that burnout had "become faddish and indiscriminate, an item of psychobabble, the psychic equivalent, in its ubiquitousness, of jogging." He saw widespread claims to burnout as evidence of a softened national psyche. "The era of 'grace under pressure' vanished in the early '60s," he wrote. By the 1980s, "too many people become a little too easily thwarted."

The psychiatrist Richard A. Friedman made a [similar argument](#) in *The New York Times* in 2019, following the World Health Organization's decision to label burnout an "occupational phenomenon" but not a medical condition. Friedman criticized the overly broad diagnostic tests used in workplaces to identify people who are "at risk of burnout." "If almost everyone suffers from burnout, then no one does," he wrote, "and the concept loses all credibility." In Friedman's view, which is informed by his experience counseling medical students, many workers are misinterpreting ordinary, expected stress as a debilitating condition. This leads him to conclude that it would be a mistake to "medicalize everyday stress and discomfort as burnout."

But Friedman's skeptical argument doesn't do what he thinks it does. In fact, he makes a good case for a contrary conclusion. If the problem is overdiagnosis of burnout, and the reason for overdiagnosis is that there are no diagnostic criteria for burnout, then we can fix the problem by establishing criteria — in other words, by medicalizing it. A precise diagnostic checklist for burnout would surely rule many

people out, but it would also rule people in who don't realize their work is grinding them down. And even if we found that a smaller number of people were clinically burned out, we could then mobilize the whole medical apparatus — including prescriptions, insurance, and disability coverage — to help them.

An expansive definition of burnout also would allow commentators to diagnose it in whole populations and then recommend virtually any social or political program as the cure. When that happens, burnout becomes just “what’s wrong with society.” Is burnout the poisoned fruit of racism, patriarchy, or capitalism? Is claiming burnout for a group — for mothers, for women generally, for African Americans, adjuncts, millennials — the same as saying, simply, that this group is disadvantaged? Is “burnout” the appropriate word to use when talking about historic injustice? Or, on a smaller scale, do we use burnout as a placeholder concept for the effect of social marginalization on the individual? If so, then how do we make sense of the fact that doctors or, for that matter, full professors, who by and large are not oppressed, appear to experience burnout at high rates? The one thing we can be sure of, it seems, is that we are a society of burnouts, whatever that means.

My stance toward the term “burnout” is as ambivalent as our culture’s. I am certain that burnout is a real thing, and that I experienced it. I also share the skeptics’ concern that we are too ready to diagnose this ailment in ourselves. When I read about some supposed new scourge like bridesmaid burnout or Burning Man burnout or — heaven help us — TV-binge-watching burnout, I think we have spread the definition too thin. If everything is burnout, then nothing is.

The first step to combating academic burnout, then, must be to insist on a clear, research-based definition. Beyond that, if a college wanted to combat burnout, what would it do? I sometimes imagine this hypothetical college calling a radically honest all-campus meeting at which everyone acknowledges that the institution’s

whole way of operating was harming everyone involved. Everyone would own up to playing a role in a dreary reality: how the students and faculty and staff and administrators were causing each other to burn out, but no one could admit that something was wrong, and everyone felt forced to work hard, to live up to some impossible ideal.

I want to believe that a college, or any organization, could begin building a whole new way of working, once its members recognized that everyone was in this predicament together. They might then realize that even though they all feel powerless, together they *are* the college. And for that reason, they can remake it.

This essay is adapted from the author's forthcoming book, [The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives](#) (University of California Press).

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OPINION

COMMENTARY

FACULTY LIFE

[Jonathan Malesic](#)

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