Hitting the Wall in Academia: How to Handle Faculty Burnout

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Burnout was first studied in the 1970s in the helping professions (i.e., nursing, police, social work, and teaching). In the 1980s, the concept of burnout started to be studied in coaches (e.g., Caccese & Mayerberg, 1984; Dale & Weinberg, 1989). Since that time, a number of studies have been completed on coaches and athletes (e.g., Felder & Wishnietsky, 1990; Harris & Watson, 2014; Holmberg & Sheridan, 2013; Pastore & Judd, 1993). Moving beyond the realm of sport, burnout has been investigated among faculty in higher education (e.g., Tumkaya, 2006; Singh, Dalal, & Mishra, 2004; Singh, Mishra, & Kim, 1998; Pretorius, 1994; Lackritz, 2004; Bartlett, 1994). Many of these studies investigated faculty burnout inclusive of all faculty within a university, with very few studies addressing burnout within particular disciplines. Reviews of the literature and past NASSM conferences reveal that sport management faculty burnout has not been thoroughly addressed.

Many definitions of burnout exist and there does not appear to be a single operational definition for the term (Capel, 1986). The most popular definition for burnout proposed is that of Maslach and Jackson (1986). They propose that burnout is "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment" (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p. 1). Maslach and Jackson developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a scale that measures the three components in the aforementioned definition, which has been utilized to measure burnout in a host of occupations within and outside of academe (Maslach, Leiter, & Jackson, 2012; Bartlett, 1994).

Maslach and Jackson (1981) developed a list of correlates to burnout, including work overload, lack of control, insufficient rewards, breakdown in communication, absence of fairness, and value conflict. Lackritz (2004) used the MBI on faculty at a Carnegie classified comprehensive university and found differences in correlates based on demographic variables, as female faculty members were more prone to emotional exhaustion based on workload, while male faculty were more prone to depersonalization. Additionally, age was found to be inversely related to exhaustion regardless of sex, illustrating that junior faculty are more prone to burnout. Extending this research, Tumkaya (2006) found that burnout in faculty was higher when work demands are high coupled with a lack of adequate resources (i.e. time, money, people). Junior faculty members, particularly in the liberal arts, may have higher burnout rates due to the volume of exertions brought on by the demands placed on them by students (Bartlett, 1994). Service demands such as clinical or administrative work on junior faculty members, particularly at institutions with research expectations may lead to job turnover and job dissatisfaction, which are consequences of burnout (Brown, 1990).

In understanding burnout, motivational factors for individuals must be addressed. Burnout has been conceptualized using the lens of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Singh et. al, 1998; Singh et. al, 2004). For faculty who have received tenure, the drive to continue a scholarly agenda may be lacking when there is a perceived lack of rewards (extrinsic means) unless faculty are driven by intrinsic means, such as “intellectual curiosity and to derive excitement and stimulation from the research process” (Singh et. al, 1998, p. 463). Using self-determination theory, Trepanier, Farnet, and Austin (2012) found employees who seek autonomy in their vocations are less prone to psychological distress than those who do not desire a high level of independence.
Understanding the factors associated with burnout is not only critical for a faculty member to recognize, but equally imperative for department chairs to diagnose and address. For department chairs, it is important to understand first the right balance between teaching, research, and service that is expected from the institution, as well as the level and rank of the faculty member. It is common to grant decreased teaching loads to junior faculty members to allow for adequate time to develop a research agenda. However, due to lack of resources within an institution, junior faculty may be needed to teach a normal if not increased teaching load, coupled with administrative duties for the discipline. Chairs must be creative in ways that eliminate too many obligations early to allow for a junior faculty member to grow into his or her position and delay early onset burnout. For senior faculty members, a reward structure that matches the motivational type is critical to institute. As stated, the desire to aggressively pursue research may become absent after tenure, but recognition programs, bonuses or compensation tied to successes, or other extrinsic or intrinsic reward structures may be of use. Second, adequate mentoring may assist in mitigating the stresses of junior faculty members (Eberman & Kahanov, 2011), while support structures as well as avenues to converse regularly with university leadership for senior faculty members may provide the communication structures desired to avoid faculty burnout. Junior faculty members may need the guidance from a senior faculty member to understand role, while senior faculty members may need to rely on each other as well as have access to and a voice with administration.

The panel for this symposium includes faculty from teaching and research institutions. The purpose of this symposium is to shed light on this important faculty topic. Strategies for handling burnout will be shared from faculty and department chair perspectives.