

Report

From Burnout to Balance: Tools for Sustainable Teaching in Distance and Hybrid Instruction

Callie Victor^{1,*} , Cathy Felmlee Shanholtz² 

¹Division of Occupational Therapy, Shenandoah University, Winchester, United States

²Occupational Therapy Program, McDaniel College, Westminster, United States

Abstract

Faculty stress and burnout are growing concerns in higher education. The implications of stress and burnout are well-known and within educational institutions impact faculty wellness, teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. Administrative responsibilities, scholarship and service expectations, professional roles and career advancement compound the pressures on faculty. Additionally, the influx of technology has further amplified faculty demands to continually learn and adopt new technology. By addressing common burnout pitfalls, faculty can learn to thrive and move from burnout to balance. This report provides strategies and recommendations that foster sustainable teaching practices while maintaining faculty presence and instructional quality. Combining scholarly evidence and faculty experiences, the report highlights strategies for sustainable course design, pedagogical flexibility, and leveraging collaboration and interdisciplinary support. Furthermore, applications to for distance and hybrid education are addressed. Teaching approaches that focus on efficient course design and management, alignment of course objectives and assessment methods, use of technology and shared resources promote faculty balance. Modular course structures, evergreen materials, flexible assignments, and interdisciplinary collaboration allow teaching to be both practical and sustainable. Remembering the motivation behind becoming an educator and embedding creative, intellectually engaging components supports professional identity. Prioritizing faculty engagement without increasing stress is paramount to maintain sustainable teaching.

Keywords

Faculty Burnout, Distance and Hybrid Education, Interdisciplinary Collaboration, Pedagogical Flexibility, Sustainable Course Design

1. Introduction

Faculty in higher education are susceptible to stress and burnout [1]. In addition to teaching demands, scholarship, service, and administrative responsibilities add to workloads, especially as faculty progress through their careers [2]. Instructional design, delivery methods, and the time pressures that accompany can present challenges such as repetitive feedback

and grading, ineffective use of student contact and counterproductive content delivery. The rapid expansion of hybrid, fully online, HyFlex, and low residency distance education models has further transformed the landscape of higher education., This shift requires institutions to intentionally align pedagogy, technology, and experiential learning to maintain the needed

*Correspondence: Callie Victor (cvictor@su.edu)

Received: 2 March 2026; **Accepted:** 16 March 2026; **Published:** 26 March 2026



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academic rigors and student engagement [3]. Condensed semesters, shortened breaks, and faculty appointment structures can also contribute to faculty fatigue and reduced teaching effectiveness, impacting work-life balance and long-term sustainability.

Efficiency, balance, and intentionality in instructional design and delivery supports sustainable teaching [4, 5]. Course structures and learning materials that are aligned, adaptable and reusable reduce unnecessary repetition and revisions while still meeting the standards of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM). Teaching strategies such as grading in batches, providing flexible learning and assessment options, and collaborating across disciplines can support sustainable practices. This focus on effective process, without diminishing quality, promotes teaching excellence while reducing stress and burnout.

Prioritizing one's health and wellness through the adoption of sustainable teaching practices fosters a viable teaching career [1]. Strategies for distance and hybrid instruction include maximizing the features of the Learning Management System (LMS), such as the use of templates, automatic grading, and shared resources. Sustainable teaching is not about doing less or reducing engagement. It's about creating and providing meaningful and maintainable learning experiences that support both faculty and student success. This report combines faculty experiences, published literature, and best practices for sustainable teaching that promote faculty balance over burnout.

2. The Challenge of Faculty Burnout

The demands on faculty within the current academic climate has created systemic challenges that lead to achievement pressure and performance fatigue [6]. As a result, approximately 40% of faculty report experiencing burnout and emotional exhaustion from their work [7]. In addition to one's teaching load, full time faculty are often expected to participate in university committee work, accreditation processes, student advising, administrative tasks and departmental service. These additional responsibilities contribute to faculty reported stress and diverted attention from teaching [1]. When teaching responsibilities extend into non-standard work hours, work-life balance and well-being can be compromised [3].

Another institutional pressure impacting faculty well-being is the continual need to integrate and use technology within the classroom. The rapid growth of technology-based learning has shifted faculty time from improving course content to learning new technologies [8]. Additionally, the online learning environment has resulted in constant access to course materials resulting in expectations for immediate responses with faculty receiving emails and inquiries at all hours of the day. Survey findings show that nearly 80% of faculty feel they are expected to remain constantly connected to their work because of technology [7]. This pressures faculty to constantly be

available, increasing the volume and intensity of asynchronous communication beyond traditional office hours and classroom teaching, contributing to emotional exhaustion [9].

Current research links high academic workload and stress to measurable negative outcomes in faculty well-being and instructional effectiveness [2, 3]. Sustained emotional exhaustion can directly compromise teaching quality and student outcomes [9]. Faculty may resort to less engaging teaching methods, reduced patience or empathy in interactions, and use less rigorous or less personalized grading and feedback practices. Additionally, burnout may contribute to stagnation, resulting in inefficiencies in course design, assessment, instructional materials, student interactions, and intellectual innovation [4, 9]. The use of tools that support sustainable teaching practices addresses common pitfalls that lead to faculty burnout.

3. Sustainable Course Design

Course design, development, and continuous improvement are time intensive processes that often require years of experience to master. Factors such as level of instruction, class size, modality of course delivery, and accreditation requirements add complexity to instructional design decisions. Developing aligned, reusable, and practical course materials promotes greater efficiency and long-term sustainability. Sustainable course design is a proactive pedagogical approach focused on maximizing learning efficacy while optimizing faculty time and mitigating the risk of burnout.

When learning activities, materials, and assessments are intentionally structured, desired student outcomes can be achieved with the minimum necessary investment of instructor time in instruction, assessment, and communication [10]. By front-loading effort into reusable materials and streamlined processes, faculty can shift their focus from repetitive maintenance tasks to high-value interactions such as personalized student support, mentorship, and advising [10]. Every component of a course should be intentionally aligned, including syllabi, learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessments [11]. This approach requires the use of backward design, in which instructors begin with the end in mind. Desired learning outcomes guide the selection of assessment methods, determining what evidence or artifact will demonstrate achievement of those outcomes. From there, instructional activities should be designed to prepare students for the assessments.

Additionally, it is important to ensure that the assessment method aligns with the level at which the material is taught in order to accurately capture student learning. For example, if a learning objective is to describe a topic which is often considered a lower-level cognitive skill, but the assessment requires students to analyze the topic, which is considered a higher-level skill, there is a misalignment within the course design. This misalignment can lead not only to student confusion and frustration, but also to increased faculty workload due to additional time spent clarifying and addressing misunderstand-

ings. When learning objectives, assessments, and learning activities are not aligned, course design becomes ineffective and inefficient, requiring unnecessary faculty involvement [11]. Addressing this misalignment will improve instructional effectiveness and when done strategically, can produce reusable HQIM that promote long-term sustainability.

There are many techniques for creating reusable course materials. One recommended approach is to develop instructional materials in small, self-contained modules. These autonomous modules can then be easily updated, rearranged, or reused within and across courses and semesters, without requiring major revisions. Videos, interactive activities, readings, lectures, and assignments can all be reusable. An example to redesign instructional materials into smaller reusable modules would be to develop four 15-minute lectures from a previous 60-minute lecture with each one focused on a distinct topic. Although this requires an initial time investment, it can reduce instructional workload in subsequent semesters.

When creating modular course materials, it is recommended to use ‘evergreen’ teaching resources that are relevant, accurate, and useful for long periods of time. This includes avoiding references to current events, specific dates, class discussions, and assignment details or deadlines. To maintain personalization and applicability, brief overview videos or written introductions can supplement reusable materials. These resources are quicker to create and update than re-recording an entire lecture, making it easier to adapt content while maintaining efficiency. Intentional course design enables faculty to adjust their teaching strategies in response to student needs and the rapidly changing educational landscape. This pedagogical flexibility supports transformative learning while promoting consistent HQIM and instruction.

4. Pedagogical Flexibility

The intentional practice of incorporating elasticity into course design offering students multiple options for engagement, participation and demonstration of learning is offering pedagogical flexibility. The approach fosters a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment while still promoting instructor stability and resiliency [12].

Student choice with instructional materials and assessment allows learning to support individual needs, strengths and environmental factors. In practice, this aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in which information, participation and demonstration of knowledge and skills are intentionally designed to fit diverse student needs [13]. This pedagogical flexibility enhances student autonomy and empowerment by giving them meaningful control of their learning. When students feel ownership of their learning, they are less likely to disengage or resort to academic misconduct [14].

Applying UDL principles allows instructional materials and activities to appeal to diverse interests, motivations, and strengths. For example, students having the option to read a passage, watch a video, or listen to a podcast before forming

their own artifact supports different learning preferences. Designing activities that can be accessed and completed effectively regardless of a student's physical location or schedule supports pedagogical flexibility for distance and hybrid instruction. The use of asynchronous collaborative tools such as shared documents reflect UDL's emphasis on flexible engagement by minimizing barriers and supporting participation across diverse learning contexts.

Flexible pedagogy can benefit both faculty and students. Student choice in method of assessments, such as a written essay or creative portfolio, promotes authentic demonstration of learning [15]. Additionally, faculty may find motivation in the intellectual stimulation provided by the variety of student work. These strategies may sustain engagement for both faculty and students while helping to mitigate burnout [6]. As engagement improves, intentional collaboration and interdisciplinary support becomes especially important in promoting faculty well-being.

5. Collaborative and Interdisciplinary Support

Collaboration within and across disciplines can help reduce the fragmented workload and isolation that contribute to faculty burnout. By treating instructional materials as shared intellectual resources rather than individual responsibilities, collaboration can promote innovation while improving efficiency through shared expertise [16].

Faculty exposure to new perspectives and teaching approaches through interdisciplinary collaboration encourages pedagogical creativity. By sharing ideas and expertise, faculty can reduce the risks of trying new approaches and learning experiences, leading to more meaningful efforts and stronger outcomes [17].

Faculty who are teaching similar courses can collaboratively develop standardized HQIM that are shared across sections reducing redundant preparation. Team teaching or sharing course management is another recommended approach to spread instructional responsibilities. If one faculty member addresses content delivery while another manages assessment, responsibilities are distributed, supporting efficiency, collaboration, and faculty well-being. Although team teaching takes coordination, research shows that sharing repetitive tasks, such as grading, can help reduce individual workload and stress over time [17].

Learning communities formed around specific themes, such as integrating artificial intelligence into the classroom, can function as temporary faculty collaborations. These structured peer groups have been shown to reduce professional isolation by fostering community, shared problem solving and working together to strengthen teaching ideas before implementation [18, 19]. Effective learning communities can not only enhance pedagogical competence, but also increase job satisfaction and reduce emotional exhaustion [19]. These collaborative approaches

are increasingly important as distance and hybrid instruction become more common.

6. Application to Distance and Hybrid Instruction

Within distance and hybrid instruction, use of an LMS is essential for supporting faculty well-being and maintaining HQIM. The LMS acts as the primary instructional interface between faculty and students and its design and organization shape the learning experience. When LMS features are used effectively, the LMS can function as an additional instructor in the course.

Clear, easy-to-follow navigation and instructions for course content and assignments reduce technical questions, such as where or how to submit work or when assignments are due. Additionally, hybrid courses can unintentionally double faculty workload when full synchronous sessions are combined with the online components. A more sustainable approach is the flipped classroom model, where core content is delivered asynchronously online and synchronous time is used for discussion and active learning [20].

Departments should use shared LMS course templates that standardize the homepage layout, module structure and navigation menu across courses. By having similar LMS experiences, the cognitive load on students and faculty is reduced. Additionally, LMS templates can be reused across semesters with minimal modifications eliminating the need for faculty to rebuild course structures each semester allowing faculty to focus on other priorities.

The inclusion of low stakes knowledge checks such as automatic grading of quizzes provides students with immediate feedback without requiring faculty involvement. Another useful LMS feature is a pinned “Course Q & A” forum that directs general student questions to a shared space, allowing faculty to answer a question once rather than responding to multiple similar email inquiries. Having one central place for communication helps make online teaching more efficient and therefore sustainable.

It is recommended that weekly or biweekly welcome videos are included that highlight course content, assignments, and expectations to help faculty communicate priorities and maintain an instructor presence without having to re-record full lectures. Because these videos are short and modular, faculty can easily update information or tweak content while keeping the core materials intact, which adds flexibility and reduces ongoing workload.

7. Faculty Boundaries and Goals

In the United States, approximately 1.5 million faculty teach in higher education institutions, illustrating the impact that teaching practices and faculty workload have across the

academic workforce [21]. Cultivating professional equilibrium and intentional practices allow faculty to manage their time, effort and well-being for a more effective balance. Sustainable strategies should include setting faculty boundaries and goals.

Student feedback and grading can be laborious tasks that require substantial faculty time and effort. A recommended strategy to mitigate burnout is to set boundaries with student feedback and grading. Through the use of batch or block grading, faculty can intentionally dedicate specific batches or blocks of time for student assessment. For a class of 30 students, batch grading could involve grading in three separate groups of ten students each, whereas block grading could involve one-or-two-hour blocks of dedicated grading time. This approach helps reduce emotional and mental exhaustion associated with long, repetitive grading sessions.

Another approach is to create self-imposed goals to help make the workload feel more manageable and provide a sense of accomplishment and progress. Breaking larger tasks into smaller, achievable ones can further support faculty in maintaining motivation and reducing stress. Ultimately, with consistent boundaries, goals and intentional planning, faculty can sustain productivity while protecting their well-being.

The strategies outlined in this report are designed to make teaching more sustainable. Through reduction of administrative tasks and repetitive work, these recommendations address some of the most common causes of burnout. Using curricular alignment and LMS templates helps streamline communication and expectations, while collaboration and faculty learning communities provide valuable peer support. Pedagogical flexibility ensures that diverse learner needs are met without requiring constant manual adjustments by the faculty. Furthermore, a balanced faculty is more capable of providing high-quality feedback and maintaining teaching presence necessary for deep engagement. Ultimately, a sustainable workload allows faculty to return to the core intellectual and creative tasks that define their professional identity, leading to higher job satisfaction, educator well-being and long-term institutional retention [6].

8. Conclusions

Sustainable teaching uses design principles such as alignment, automation of routine tasks, pedagogical flexibility, and interdisciplinary collaboration to help reduce faculty stress and burnout. In distance and hybrid instruction, these strategies allow faculty to innovate, provide students with more engaging and accessible learning, and support a sustainable approach to teaching excellence.

Research shows that most faculty are satisfied in their roles, with teaching being the primary source of job satisfaction [22]. Yet, there remains opportunity for improvement across all aspects of a faculty’s job demands. One growing area of pressure is the increasing integration of technology in the classroom. Ninety two percent of surveyed faculty expect to use

more educational technology tools in their teaching [7]. Future research should focus on examining how the increased use of educational technology may affect faculty workload, well-being, and job satisfaction in the hybrid and online teaching environments. Additional research should be conducted to explore which sustainable course design strategies and institutional supports work best to balance instructional quality, manage workloads, and foster a supportive learning environment with positive student outcomes.

Abbreviations

HQIM	High-Quality Instructional Materials
LMS	Learning Management System
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

Author Contributions

Callie Victor: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Cathy Felmlee Shanholtz: Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Callie Victor, PhD, OTR/L, CLA is an Associate Professor in the Division of Occupational Therapy at Shenandoah University. She earned her PhD in Health-Related Sciences from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2016 and has been a registered and licensed occupational therapist since 2006. Since 2020, Callie has played an active role in curriculum development, course design, and the adoption of best practices in higher education pedagogy to support hybrid and distance occupational therapy courses at Shenandoah University.

Cathy Felmlee Shanholtz, OTD, M. Ed, B. S., OTR/L, COTA, CLA, is an experienced academic and practitioner in the field of occupational therapy, with over 20 years of experience in occupational therapy practice. Currently serving as the Inaugural Program Director of the Occupational Therapy Program at McDaniel College, Cathy Felmlee Shanholtz brings a wealth of experience in both teaching and program development. Previously, holding leadership roles at Shenandoah University, she advanced multiple hybrid and distance occupational therapy programs. Passionate about fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, Cathy is committed to integrating evidence-based practices and innovative learning models into the education and training of future professionals.