



Combating Imposter Syndrome and Burnout in Academia

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Abstract

Faculty burnout is often a slow process, but stress levels in higher education have increased in recent years. This global issue is a crucial factor in career satisfaction, productivity, and engagement. Examining common triggers can help identify burnout risk earlier. In the current study, nearly half of respondents reported that they have considered leaving their current academic post because of burnout or stress. Another 40% of respondents believe their workload is too heavy. In fact, 62% of respondents reported working more than 40 hours weekly. Many factors impact workplace stress, including job satisfaction, which is associated with burnout. Additionally, student mental health and student academics were reported as contributing factors of workplace stress in the current study. Also reported as a workplace concern is imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is a common phenomenon in academia and is more prevalent among specific demographics, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In the current sample, nearly 45% reported experiencing imposter syndrome often or always, and another 32% reported that they sometimes experienced imposter syndrome. Without resolution, imposter syndrome increases risk factors for burnout. Self-care techniques and reframing can effectively increase confidence and decrease burnout probability. This study aims to identify more effective methods for self-care and thus reduce faculty burnout.

Keywords: faculty stress, burnout, imposter syndrome

1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of people affected by burnout syndrome, which according to Quinlan (2025), is considered one of the most important occupational risk factors. Faculty burnout is often a slow process, but stress levels in higher education, similar to the broader and more general occupational trends have increased in recent years (Hyatt, 2022). This global issue is a crucial factor in career satisfaction, productivity, and engagement (Berebitsky & Ellis, 2018). Burnout or burnout syndrome is defined as state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from a prolonged response to long-term exposure to demanding situations. There are three key dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (feelings of overextension), depersonalization (impersonal response towards

others), and a sense of ineffectiveness or lack of accomplishment (Duke et. al., 2020). Burnout was first found in the scientific literature in the 1970s (Mula-Falcon et al., 2022). Research indicates that burnout is usually associated with jobs that require interpersonal/professional relationships (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Burnout has become one of the most important occupational hazards, causing significant costs for both individuals and organizations (Halat et al., 2023).

Existing research points to a unique experience that university faculty are experiencing as it relates to burnout. Attention given to burnout among university faculty has been much more recent and previously focused primary and secondary school teachers in the education sector (Bouwers & Tomic, 2000). With that in mind, it is also important to note that at this point in time, research findings explaining faculty burnout is insufficient (Minter, 2009). The information that is known about university faculty and burnout is important, and perhaps alarming. The critical path to academic professionalism can be time consuming, expensive, and for many, not all that financially rewarding. The literature suggests that those who are directly involved in daily helping professions, (such as university teaching) often expend a greater amount of emotional energy performing their daily responsibilities than do professionals interacting with “things” rather than people. It is also well recognized that those in helping professions are prime candidates for burnout if they are not practicing energy management (Minter, 2009). University faculty encounter challenging and often conflicting expectations, such as rapidly publishing innovative research, providing high quality teaching of large classes, and combining scholarly excellence with managerial and entrepreneurial skills (Acker & Armenti, 2004; 2014; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

Al-Mohaini, Agha, and Jelani (2025) assert that faculty with higher education levels, particularly those with Ph.D.s, exhibit increased risk for burnout. This may be attributed to the heightened expectations, complex roles, and intense pressures to achieve success, secure funding, and publish research. Burnout among university faculty impairs not only psychological and physical health (Bauer et al., 2006; Kebza & Solcova, 2015;), but also harms the teaching environment and student satisfaction by reducing educators’ perceived self-efficacy (Bouwers & Tomic, 2000) and their ability to respond to students’ needs (Watts & Robertson, 2011). Again, burnout has become one of the most important occupational dangers. In response, valuable instruments like the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey have been developed for measuring occupational burnout. These measures have been used extensively in the literature to measure burnout (Cao et al., 2024). However, several other measures, such as the Academic Work Life Survey, are used more frequently in the field and within institutions to gather information on specific populations (Cornell University, 2026).

1.1 Contributing Factors for Burnout

It is important to understand the sources of faculty burnout. One important source of burnout can be described as faculty/employee dissatisfaction. Factors contributing to faculty/employee burnout include little recognition for work done, small and infrequent pay increases, and inflexible work environments. Additional institutional and workplace factors that contribute to burnout include perceptions of low control in the office, work environment, perceived lack of fairness and reciprocity, and a lack of social support, including low supervisor and coworker support (Duke et. al., 2020). These factors also contribute to a rise in faculty/employee turnover (Sabagh et al., 2018). Some point to an increasingly troublesome political environment and a greater frequency of political attacks on higher education. Factors associated with the greater frequency of political attacks on higher education include attacks on academic freedoms and attempts to dismantle academic systems and structures, such as

weakening teachers' unions (Sabagh et al., 2018). It is also worth noting that faculty members working in academic settings without adequate institutional or personal coping mechanisms face considerable stress. Heavy workloads and a lack of appreciation further contribute to burnout. Research has shown that burnout is more likely to occur when high performance expectations are not accompanied by corresponding rewards (Dousin et al., 2021; Duke et al., 2020).

Accounting for individual aspects of faculty identity may help provide greater insight into factors that contribute to burnout. For example, Redondo-Florez et al., (2020) reported that female professors showed higher levels of perceived stress than males, and that burnout is reported more frequently in female professors than in male counterparts. Martinez et al. (2023) acknowledged and speculated on the notion that women faculty of color experience a double bind – that is, racial microaggressions and barriers and inequities based on gender that lead to other difficult and troubling experiences in addition to burnout, such as depression, isolation, loneliness, and feelings of imposter syndrome.

In the current academic community, it is both interesting and useful to consider how global events may influence burnout and imposter syndrome experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of such a global event. Faculty teaching during the pandemic's days of quarantine had to quickly adjust to new teaching methods and ways of interacting with students. This was all required in a short window of time, often within a few weeks. Some faculty had not taught remotely previously and were forced to learn to navigate new technologies during the pandemic to serve student and institutional needs (Bruggeman et al., 2022; Mosleh et al., 2022). However, the reopening of schools and public places did not eliminate the additional stress and load on faculty. A growing but still limited body of research indicates that reintegration processes post-pandemic, coupled with new governmental and institutional policies have imposed increased demands for research productivity and scholarly output for faculty and staff in higher education (Slavova et al., 2024).

1.2 Consequences of Burnout

Burnout has been linked to deterioration in care quality and service, missed work days, employee turnover, low morale, and personal distress (Duke et al., 2020). As a result of high burnout and stress levels, educators in higher education often report reduced mental well-being and heightened distress (Chahar-Mahali et al., 2026). Shen et al. (2014) found depressive symptoms rates of 58.9% in their total sample of 1210 Chinese university instructors (Chahar-Mahali et al., 2026). Occupational burnout is associated with decreased well-being, job performance, and job productivity (Byrne et al., 2013). Lower engagement at work and quitting intentions (Li et al., 2013), health problems, pervasive fatigue (Demerouti et al., 2001), anxiety, and psychological complaints (Li et al., 2013) are also implicated in occupational burnout.

Faculty burnout can also negatively impact students. Burnout can lead faculty to experience difficulties in engaging with students, a problem that is linked to lower academic performance and a lack of motivation and involvement (Klusmann et al., 2016). The result of faculty burnout can also affect the overall university performance (Turner & Garvis, 2023). Recent studies suggest that high levels of faculty burnout may indirectly contribute to lower student retention by reducing academic achievement and motivation, two key predictors of student persistence (Mijakoski et al., 2022).

1.3 Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome or imposter phenomenon (IP) impacts various populations and may be particularly prevalent in fields where the “appearance of intelligence is vital to success” (Kets de Vries, 2005, 2). Not surprisingly, IP is often studied in academia (Woolston, 2016) at both the student and faculty levels. Some research suggests that IP is most prevalent in the early career stages for academics (Wang & Li, 2023). IP is typically described as the persistent belief of inadequacy or incompetence in the field and the inability to internalize success (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014). Successes are attributed to luck or error, which serves to increase feelings of self-doubt rather than moderate them (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). Individuals experiencing IP have difficulty accepting praise and minimize the importance of their contributions or successes. They are more likely to display perfectionistic tendencies, achievement orientations, and conscientiousness and are likely to work in highly competitive fields (Hutchins, 2015).

IP is associated with several actors and outcomes. For example, individuals with IP may initially work to prove themselves to their colleagues with the goal of reducing their own insecurities. When they meet success, however, their inability to accept recognition can lead to stress and burnout (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). Over time, this can result in lower job satisfaction and avoidance of possible negative feedback to protect their self-image (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). This avoidance may manifest as a reluctance to seek out challenging, career-boosting experiences (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016), much like fixed mindset. Additionally, IP is correlated with lower academic self-efficacy (Thompson et al., 1998), depression, anxiety (Bravata et al., 2020), lower well-being, and symptoms of illness (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

Because of the pervasiveness and seriousness of IP, significant interventions are warranted (Mori et al., 2026). Mori and colleagues (2026) suggest increasing seminars, workshops, and academic retreats to address IP and reduce the stigma associated with it. Training supervisors to provide constructive and balanced feedback may help reduce the internalizations of IP. Lastly, institutional identity and practices that imbed well-being and holistic development as primary objectives may work to break the structural walls holding up IP in academia (Wang & Li, 2023).

1.4 Present Study

The present study has three the primary goals: (1) to identify primary factors related to faculty burnout; (2) to investigate the prevalence of imposter syndrome in modern academia; (3) to increase understanding of the experiences of faculty and move research toward interventions to address issues of burnout and imposter syndrome.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

Institutional Review Board approval was granted 16 June 2025. Recruitment approval was snowball sampling, direct email to public faculty listservs, and social media recruitment posts in approved academic online spaces via Facebook. Due to the nature of snowball sampling, response rates cannot be calculated. All recruitment materials were submitted to and approved by IRB. To participate, faculty must have been (currently) employed at an institution of higher learning and fluent in written English. Participants in the current study included 65 faculty members between the ages of 29 and 70, with a mean age of 48. Participants were primarily female (73.8%). The sample also contained a majority of white participants (84.6%), with Black or African American, Asian, or Latinx comprising 4.6% each. Although more

representation is warranted, the majority of faculty in the United States is Caucasian (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

2.2 Measures

This study utilized items from a variety of established questionnaires, including Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire, Healthy Minds Study, Academic Work Life Survey, Personal Life Questionnaire, and the Self-Care Questionnaire: The Institute for Functional Medicine. Some items were slightly modified to fit the study population. Additionally, researchers added demographic items and two self-care items (“*Self-care is important for job satisfaction*” and “*Self-care is important for job performance*”), which were evaluated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

2.3 Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire

The Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (TSWQ) is an 8-item measure that evaluates two dimensions of teaching psychological functioning. These dimensions are school connectedness (SCS) and teaching efficacy (TES). Factor analysis demonstrates structural integrity across elementary, middle, and high school teachers (Mankin et al., 2018). These subscales demonstrate strong internal consistency ($\alpha_{SCS} = .89$; $\alpha_{TES} = .83$; Renshaw et al., 2015). The current study only utilized one item (I feel like I belong at this school), which was rated from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always).

2.4 Healthy Minds Study

The Healthy Minds Study (HMS) was originally an annual survey to investigate mental health issues for college students. However, a faculty and staff version is also in use. This web-based survey aims to gather information about mental health and related concerns among faculty and staff. The measure’s subscales demonstrated good to moderate internal consistency with two initial studies ($\alpha_{Awareness} = .60$; $\alpha_{Connection} = .74-.79$; $\alpha_{Insight} = .71-.78$; $\alpha_{Purpose} = .80-.81$) and an overall scale range $\alpha = .47-.67$ (Kral et al., 2024). The current study utilized only 2 modified items (“At my institution, faculty and staff mental and emotional health is a priority” and “Supporting students in mental and emotional distress has taken a toll on my own mental and emotional health.”) from this survey. These items asked university faculty to report on the mental health of faculty as an institutional priority and the role that supporting student mental health plays in personal mental health. Items were evaluated from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*.

2.5 Academic Work Life Survey

The Academic Work Life Survey (AWL), administered by Cornell University, asks full-time faculty members about their workloads, departmental climate, general feelings about work and university support, and life outside of work. First administered in 2005, Cornell continues to administer the survey. The current study utilized items related to workload, general satisfaction with faculty position, and mentoring programs. This measure is frequently used by Cornell and other institutions, though validation studies are not readily available, as it is typically used for internal or pilot work.

2.6 Self-Care in Your Personal Life Questionnaire

The Self-care in Your Personal Life Questionnaire investigates six areas of self-care (physical, cognitive, psychological/emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, and existential), each with 5 items. Items are measured on a scale from 0 (never) to 3 (usually). The current study utilized the four items from physical self-care, two items from cognitive self-care, two items from

psychological/emotional self-care, and three items from the behavior self-care subscales. The measure is widely used in research, clinical, and professional settings, though validation study information is difficult to locate.

2.7 Self-Care Questionnaire: The Institute for Functional Medicine

The Self-Care Questionnaire was created by The Institute for Functional Medicine as a basic screening measure. This is not a validated diagnostic tool, though its use is common for self-reflective practices. The measure contains four subscales (Physical Wellbeing, Mental/Emotional/Spiritual Wellbeing, Professional Life/Work/Career, and Social Life/Family/Relationships), each with 10 items. Items are rated from 0 (Never) to 5 (Always). Higher scores indicate greater proficiency in self-care and wellness across the assessed aspects of life, while lower scores indicate that behavior modification would be helpful. The current study modified the response scale to a 4-point scale (1=never; 2=rarely; 3=fairly often; 4=usually). Three items were used from the Mental/Emotional/Spiritual Wellbeing subscale, and 9 items were used from the Professional Life/Work/Career subscale.

2.8 TimelyCare

TimelyCare provides mental health services for k-12 and higher education through app-based and tele support. In 2023, TimelyCare conducted a national survey of higher education faculty and staff to determine the impact of supporting the mental health and well-being of students. These items were reported on their site and available for use in the current study. Because the survey was created in response to the expectation of faculty's role in supporting student health, the measure was not psychometrically validated. Rather, this was created as a descriptive tool to encourage further investigation and resources. The current study chose to use applicable survey items in much the same manner, investigating the frequency of self-reported burnout and stress of faculty.

3 Results

A total of 65 responses were collected during the study period via the Google Forms survey platform. Descriptive statistics were conducted for demographic variables (i.e., age, faculty rank, length of employment, ethnicity, gender). Categories of specific interest for the current project included aspects of work most associated with faculty stress, ways that faculty cope with work stressors, perceptions of and participation in self-care activities, and perceptions of burnout and imposter syndrome.

For this pilot study, descriptive percentages and correlations were analyzed. Over 50% of respondents reported that they have considered leaving their job because of burnout, increased workload, or stress. When asked about specific aspects of the job leading to stress, faculty cited fatigue/burnout (60%), workplace politics (53.8%), and student demands/needs (50.8%) as the primary considerations. Faculty were then asked how they cope with stress. Spending time with family or friends (75.4%), engaging with media, such as watching tv, movies, or playing video games (58.5%), and exercising (58.5%), though less than half reported exercising regularly, were the top responses. Similarly, less than half reported taking time for themselves regularly. Although workload was a primary factor indicated, fewer than 25% reported declining added responsibilities at work. Even so, over 75% reported finding a sense of enjoyment and meaning in their work. Significant correlations were observed for current job satisfaction and belonging ($r = -.40, p = .00$), burnout ($r = -.35, p = .01$), workplace politics ($r = -.42, p = .00$), institutional financial issues ($r = -.31, p = .01$), and career advancement opportunities ($r = -.43, p = .00$). See Table 1 for full correlations. Additionally, approximately

77% of participants reported experiencing imposter syndrome and 89% believe that imposter syndrome contributes to burnout.

Table 1. Spearman Correlations for Study Variables

Variable Names	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Belonging	2.85	.92	-						
2. Workload	.62	.49	-.20	-					
3. Burnout	.60	.49	.37**	.39**	-				
4. Workplace Politics	.54	.50	.32**	-.16	.06	-			
5. Inst. Finances	.32	.47	-.18	-.62	-.04	.44**	-		
6. Career Advancement	.28	.45	.40**	.14	.23	.23	.09	-	
7. Overall Job Satisfaction	3.48	1.32	.65**	-.22	-.35**	-.42**	-.31**	-.43**	-
Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$									

4 Discussion

Factors associated with burnout in this study are consistent with previous work exploring multiple occupational areas and demonstrating the interconnectedness between stress and burnout (Costin et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2019). This suggests that workplace stress is a universal key predictor of occupational burnout. The current work, however, aimed to identify the underlying factors leading to workplace stress specific for academics. The current study set out to identify primary factors related to faculty burnout, the prevalence of imposter syndrome in modern academia, achieve a greater understanding of the experiences of faculty, and move the research toward interventions to address issues of burnout and imposter syndrome. While research in this area is not new, much of the current literature focuses on the undergraduate or graduate student populations.

Work investigating faculty in academia is strengthened by the results of the current study, as consistencies were observed. For example, a study of Chinese universities also observed significant associations between stress and job satisfaction, as well as stress and burnout (Cao et al., 2024). The current study, like Cao and colleagues (2024), focused on academic or job-related stressors rather than external life stressors often studied in burnout literature, making this study an important contribution to the field. Based on results, it is clear that further investigation into the relation between feelings of belonging and burnout is warranted. Other work often examines belongingness and student success and achievement. The significant correlation in this study indicates that belongingness is an important factor in job satisfaction and burnout for faculty.

However, the current study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample was heavily skewed female and white. This suggests that results may not be consistent with broader or more diverse samples. Additionally, although multiple sampling methods were utilized, the sample size was small. This limited not only the generalizability but also the analysis. The current analysis was primarily descriptive in nature, with frequencies and bivariate correlations reported. Given a more representative and larger sample pool, future analysis or follow-up studies should utilize multilevel or nested models to better understand the relation between variables, particularly burnout predictors. Given the ordinal nature of many of the items, ordinal regression may be an analytic option with a larger sample. Both ordinal regression and complementary log-log (cloglog) analyses were attempted. In both cases, the data failed to converge. A larger sample

size with more diverse variance would be helpful for future analyses. The current data could not identify predictors of burnout, though predictors of imposter syndrome were discussed based on previous research. Prior work has demonstrated a link between imposter syndrome and early career academics (Chakraverty, 2022) as well as academics from underrepresented groups, including women (Melis et al., 2022), first-generation academics, and academics of color (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025).

This pilot study utilized many survey and questionnaire items that are common in mental health and university settings. While this provided a general landscape of the frequency of many concepts, the use of more psychometrically tested questionnaires may have yielded more significant contributions. Future studies, including a follow-up of the current work, should investigate psychometrically-validated measures for all variables of investigation. Lastly, future work should utilize imposter syndrome scales rather than only two items of the experience of imposter syndrome and the perception of its frequency in academia.

4.1 Future Directions

While work is still needed to fully uncover the factors that lead to faculty burnout and to better understand imposter syndrome in modern academia, the current study has inspired some recommendations that could benefit university personnel, the institutions themselves, and students. To begin, universities should implement methods to regularly assess faculty stress and burnout. The tools and questionnaires used in this study have been utilized in other institutions, though separately. The compiled survey from the current study may serve as a practical framework that can help institutions evaluate their specific stressors and risks. Perhaps the broadest recommendation and most ambitious effort involves transforming institutions of higher education into entities that promote the well-being of faculty. Related activities could include establishing more support networks for faculty by creating structured mentor programs. Such a wide-reaching initiative could be particularly beneficial for early career and non-tenured faculty attempting to navigate the tenure process. Part of the mentoring initiative should craft reasonable and achievable assessment indicators to be reviewed regularly.

This would provide faculty with benchmarks along the pathway to tenure or other such goals. Universities might also reconsider their long-term missions and goals. Cao and colleagues (2024) propose a contribution-oriented salary system, though research on the likelihood of this reducing rather than increasing faculty stress is absent from the literature. Reshaping faculty workload expectations may be a clearer path to reducing stress, burnout, and imposter syndrome, as clear expectations aid in planning. Having open and frequent discussions about workload and with more senior faculty may reduce prolonged stress and positively impact faculty retention over time. Institutions of higher education might also consider how they can establish the practice of self-care as a priority and expectation for faculty and all university personnel. Professional development series, workshops, and other programs geared towards the promotion of well-being can be put in place to help ensure the long-term establishment of health, work satisfaction, personal connection to the institution, and high morale. It is believed that these recommendations represent significant steps towards combating stress, burnout, and imposter syndrome for university faculty.

5 Conclusion

This work adds to the growing literature examining occupational burnout in academia. While often studied independently, the current study also investigated imposter syndrome for faculty, finding the experience at all faculty ranks rather than primarily in the early years of academic

employment. This work also investigated perceptions of the importance of self-care and actual engagement in self-care activities. While the use of more psychometrically tested measures may have provided greater detail and opportunities for analysis, this work serves as a pilot study and possible tool for administration to study faculty concerns and job factors. Lastly, recommendations were made at the individual and institutional levels to remediate negative workplace experiences of burnout and imposter syndrome.

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