Academic Well-Being Under Siege: A Systematic Review of Faculty Mental Health Challenges

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Abstract

Despite being intellectually fascinating, academic employment is becoming more widely acknowledged as a major cause for anxiety and mental health issues for university professors. Using a methodical literature analysis, this study investigates the various stressors that academics encounter, such as rigorous teaching loads, significant research demands, administrative duties, and the never-ending quest for tenure and promotion. It critically investigates the multifaceted effects of untreated distress and looks at the substantial incidence of mental health conditions like stress, depressive disorders, and burnout among faculty. A drop in educational quality, increased organisational risks such as attrition, possible moral and legal ramifications, and a widespread detrimental effect on institutional culture are some of these repercussions. Systemic obstacles that worsen these problems, particularly in the post-pandemic age, are highlighted in the review. These include stigma, a lack of institutional support, and rigid policies. This paper seeks to advocate for the adoption of supportive institutional measures and effective, systemic interventions by synthesising existing data and bringing to light the hidden toll that academic jobs have on faculty mental health.

Keywords: faculty mental health, academic stress, burnout, work-life balance, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the psychological strain endured by faculty in higher education institutions. The academic environment, traditionally associated with intellectual freedom and professional prestige, is increasingly marked by chronic stress, excessive workloads, precarious employment conditions, and high performance expectations. These conditions pose significant risks to the mental health of faculty, leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and in some cases, long-term psychological impairment (Oliveira et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2024).

A "state of well-being in which every individual fulfills his or her own potential, can cope with the usual demands of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to their community" is the World Health Organization's definition of mental health for 2022. Emotional, psychological, and social well-being are all included, not only the lack of mental illnesses. According to Maslach and Leiter (2016), burnout is a psychological syndrome that develops as a sustained reaction to ongoing interpersonal pressures at work. It has three main dimensions:

- Emotional exhaustion: feeling worn out and emotionally depleted,
- Depersonalization: adopting a cold or pessimistic outlook on one's job,
- A decreased sense of personal accomplishment, which includes emotions of inadequacy and failure.

Academic stress is the term used to describe the psychological suffering caused by academic responsibilities, including teaching, research, grant writing, and administrative work. This stress is sometimes exacerbated for academics by the "publish-or-perish" mentality, student assessments, and institutional rules that prioritize performance goals over well-being (Carvajal & Guedea, 2021; Mundle et al., 2021).

Importance of Addressing Faculty Mental Health

A key component of higher education institutions' academic missions is the mental health of their faculty. In addition to influencing students' intellectual growth, faculty members make substantial contributions to institutional governance, public policy, and knowledge production. However, a number of studies show that faculty members are experiencing severe levels of discomfort, such as burnout, anxiety, and depression (Tzioti et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2024). Studies show that a significant mental health crisis is extending beyond students to encompass a substantial portion of university faculty and staff, with rates of depression, anxiety, and stress being comparable across all groups. Key findings indicate that a large percentage of faculty and staff experience emotional (38%) and physical (33%) exhaustion, with over half feeling this way daily. This pervasive distress is linked to systemic issues rather than individual failings, primarily driven by excessive workloads, insufficient compensation, lack of respect, and limited voice in decision-making. Furthermore, the increasing mental health needs of students place an additional, disproportionate burden on faculty, especially women and non-binary individuals, exacerbating their own well-being challenges. While in-house mental health support is valuable, a comprehensive solution requires systemic changes, including fair pay, reasonable workloads, and a respectful work environment, areas where faculty and staff unions can play a crucial role (Ellen Flannery, 2024). Mental health issues are widespread among college faculty and staff, with over one-third of respondents indicating psychiatric medication usage in the last year and more than half acknowledging that emotional troubles affected their work performance. Given that the vast majority of faculty and staff feel comfortable discussing mental health with students and believe that student mental health issues are much worse than when they began their careers, it is critically important to support those in student-facing roles, as evidenced by the nearly one-third who received mental health therapy or counselling within the past year (Arnston, 2024). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, faculty members in higher education have become more involved in addressing students' mental health issues. Considering this level of engagement, several faculty members have noted low trust in their capacity to recognise students in distress, and the tiny fraction of trained individuals is worrisome. Institutional leadership should take aggressive action in response to all of this in order to better assist professors in talking with students regarding their psychological well-being ("THE ROLE OF FACULTY IN STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH," 2021).

Failure to address faculty mental health has multidimensional consequences

In higher education, faculty members' mental health is a crucial but frequently disregarded aspect of institutional efficiency. Neglecting faculty mental health has both personal and significant institutional repercussions that affect organisational performance, educational quality, and the larger academic culture. One of the quickest consequences is a drop in the quality of education. Chronically stressed or emotionally spent faculty members are less able to mentor students, participate in meaningful pedagogical innovation, or design engaging learning environments. Untreated mental health needs jeopardise mental stability and clarity, which are essential for the psychological and cognitive demands of academia and research.

Burnout among faculty members poses serious organisational problems. Burnout is linked to greater rates of faculty attrition, absenteeism, and lower collegial engagement (Oliveira et al., 2021). These results weaken the institutional knowledge foundation that supports academic achievement, interfere with academic continuity, and increase the expense of hiring and training new employees.Ignoring the psychological health of academic members presents moral and legal issues. Institutions that neglect their responsibility of care and do not offer sufficient mental health help run the risk of moral criticism. Furthermore, if faculty members suffer injuries at work as a result of untreated stress or psychological disorders, such carelessness may expose them to legal repercussions under workplace safety and health regulations. Long-term stress among faculty members can have a very damaging cultural impact. Traditionally, the academic community has been based on principles like independence, intellectual curiosity, and camaraderie. These values are compromised by ongoing psychological stress, which lowers morale, reduces academic engagement, and erodes institutional identity.

Importantly, systemic barriers, such as the stigma attached to seeking treatment, a lack of institutional support, and inadequate policies, often prevent faculty from accessing the tools for mental health care they require (DeModna, 2025). These difficulties were made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced new forms of labour that increased psychological vulnerability and blurred work-life boundaries (Arifin et al., 2022). In light of these dynamics, empirically supported methods to protect teacher well-being are desperately needed. These include creating cultures within the company that are supportive, putting proactive mental health policies into place, and offering tools that are specifically designed to address the difficulties that academic staff members confront. Different approaches should be taken by institutions to assist their professors and lessen emotional problems, stress, and burnout. By practicing servant leadership and setting a good example, leaders can increase cooperation, teamwork, and camaraderie while calming intense and competitive situations.In addition to offering tools for professional growth in studies, instruction, and service, institutions can show their support for faculty by expressing gratitude, encouraging them, and reassuring them of their worth. Fair task distribution, openness regarding tenure and promotion requirements, fair evaluation and compensation, prompt, efficient, inclusive communication, and leadership that embodies equity and diversity are also crucial (Halat et al., 2023). Spreading appreciation at work promotes growth, reduces bad feelings, prevents fatigue, and makes the workplace more enjoyable and effective overall.

Methodology

This study synthesizes previous scholarly research on academic stress, burnout, and faculty mental health using a systematic literature review technique. Finding, evaluating, and incorporating excellent, peer-reviewed research that examines the psychological difficulties faced by academic faculty is the goal of the project. Secondary data insights, such as reported prevalence rates, demographic trends, and discipline-based inequities in mental health, are included to supplement the review. This approach eliminates the need for original data collecting and enables a thorough, evidence-based analysis of the issue.

Review Objectives

- To identify the primary psychological stressors experienced by faculty members in higher education institutions.
- To analyze how factors such as academic discipline, professional rank, and gender influence mental health outcomes.

- To evaluate the role of institutional culture and support systems in either alleviating or exacerbating faculty stress.
- To explore the most effective strategies and interventions for enhancing the mental well-being of faculty members.

Review of Literature

Mental health in academia has become a prominent area of concern due to increasing stressors and emotional demands placed on faculty. Unlike other professions, academics are often evaluated not just on performance, but on a constantly moving target of research productivity, teaching quality, administrative service, and student satisfaction (Cao et al., 2024). A systematic review by Carvajal and Guedea (2021) underscored that chronic job demands among university professors have led to elevated incidences of anxiety, depression, and emotional burnout. With rates of stress, anxiety, and depression that are similar to those of students, college professors and staff are experiencing a widespread mental health crisis that highlights the critical need for institutional support. It emphasises that although mental health care is crucial, all-encompassing solutions must also address structural problems including heavy workloads, low pay, and disrespect from employers—areas in which unions may be extremely helpful. Additionally, as explained in the article *The Mental Health Crisis Among Faculty and College Staff, faculty and staff* frequently shoulder the responsibility of helping students with mental health issues, which can exacerbate their own stress levels. For this reason, they advocate for more extensive institutional support for employee well-being, including internal counselling and more extensive systemic changes (Ellen Flannery, 2024).

Academic burnout is commonly measured using Maslach and Leiter's (2016) paradigm, which includes depersonalisation, diminished personal accomplishment, and emotional weariness. Due to a heavy teaching load, pressure from tenure, and ongoing deadlines, faculty frequently experience emotional weariness (Oliveira et al., 2021). Because of their solitary work structures and publishing pressures, teachers at research-intensive universities were far more susceptible to depersonalisation than those at teaching-focused universities, according to a recent meta-analysis by Tzioti et al. (2025). Furthermore, Hassan et al. (2024) highlighted how social support might act as a buffer against burnout. According to the study, instructors who had access to administrative and collegial support systems reported feeling less emotionally exhausted, especially in high-pressure situations. Academic culture has a strong hold on faculty mental health. Systemic problems like ineffective leadership, inflexible bureaucracy, and the commercialization of education are cited by Mundle et al. (2021) as major causes of faculty stress. These stressors, which are influenced by neoliberal university models that priorities effectiveness, rankings, and outside money, are both psychological and organizational in nature.

A narrative assessment, Understanding and Fostering Mental Health and Well-Being among University Faculty: A Narrative Review summarises the body of research on psychosocial stressors related to the workplace that impact university faculty (Halat et al., 2023). It emphasises the pervasiveness of anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout in a variety of academic disciplines and career stages. It emphasises how mental health issues have been a major global illness burden since 1990 and have not decreased, a situation made worse by a 25% global rise in anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to enhance faculty mental health outcomes, the review closes by identifying the elements that influence their mental health, investigating work-life balancing strategies, and proposing practical solutions. According to DeModna (2025), the notion of academic stress encompasses elements such as employment insecurity, performance-based contracts, a lack of autonomy, and inadequate mental health facilities. Stress levels are

further increased for faculty in contract or adjunct positions, who are especially vulnerable due to instability and the need to labor across several schools to maintain income. Significant demographic differences in the manifestation of stress and burnout are also found in studies. According to Oliveira et al. (2021), female faculty members reported feeling less supported and experiencing more burnout, especially when they were involved in caring responsibilities.

The article T*ipping Point: The Staff Wellbeing Crisis in Higher Education* from Frontiers in Education (Jayman et al., 2022) discusses the growing issue of staff well-being in UK higher education and attributes it to a marketized academic environment that requires faculty to work faster and more efficiently. It emphasises that this performance-driven culture has serious detrimental effects on staff mental health by undermining professionalism, limiting academic independence, and intensifying job instability. According to the study, more than half of the academics polled said they likely suffered from depression and had generalised bad mental health, mostly as a result of having a lot of work and little autonomy. In order to enhance faculty well-being, the essay ends by arguing for a thorough, multi-level systemic approach that emphasises the necessity of integrated support services and collaborative creation of mental health policies inside institutions. Additionally, elderly teachers frequently feel alone or "institutional fatigue," whereas early-career faculty report increased levels of anxiety as a result of tenure-track demands (Carvajal & Guedea, 2021). Discipline-specific variations are also important; the social sciences and humanities frequently have more teaching responsibilities and less financing opportunities, which increases workload and psychological stress. Digital exhaustion and a major shift in work-life balance were brought about by the COVID-19 epidemic, which also added another layer of mental suffering. The sudden transition to remote teaching and the expectation of constant digital availability caused a significant rise in teacher anxiety, according to Arifin et al. (2022). Increased caregiving obligations, social isolation, and a blurring of the lines between work and home, especially for women and marginalized faculty members, also contributed to an increase in mental health issues.

Research shows that structural gaps still exist, even if some universities have implemented faculty wellness initiatives or mental health workshops. According to DeModna (2025), structural stigma keeps academics from seeking mental health therapy because they are afraid of being judged by their peers or facing consequences for their careers. Additionally, Jabber et al. (2023) pointed out that organizational faculty burnout is exacerbated by a lack of proactive leadership and mental health policy frameworks. Crucially, in order to successfully address these mental health issues, Cao et al. (2024) recommend incorporating organizational psychology and emotional support systems into university governance. The article *Battling burnout: the urgency of prioritizing mental health for faculty and staff* (Laman, 2024) highlights how urgently higher education institutions must put their academic and staff members' mental health first because they are increasingly dealing with burnout, excessive workloads, and severe stress that is making them think about quitting their jobs. It makes the case that promoting the mental health of employees is essential for increasing job happiness, lowering the stigma associated with mental illness, increasing retention rates, and eventually promoting student achievement. The article suggests a multifaceted strategy to address these issues, which includes encouraging work-life balance, providing flexible scheduling, fostering community, addressing workload concerns, offering leadership support, guaranteeing access to mental health resources, and putting in place thorough training and awareness initiatives.

Findings and Discussion

According to the review's findings, there is a serious mental health crisis in higher education, especially among faculty members who are dealing with emotional, structural, and cultural issues. Despite being intellectually stimulating, the academic profession is becoming more and more characterised by long-term stressors such high workload requirements, performance-based evaluation criteria, and a dearth of institutional protections for mental health. Systemic problems, such as a lack of autonomy, job insecurity, and an institutional culture that frequently puts productivity ahead of personal well-being, make these stressors worse.With melancholy, anxiety, and burnout emerging as prevalent problems, this comprehensive investigation provides compelling evidence that faculty members in higher education are coping with severe and complicated mental health concerns. The academic profession is now more frequently associated with emotional labour, performance pressure, and continuous stress, despite its historical association with scholarly involvement and intellectual independence. One of the primary findings of the review is that teaching, research, and service professions are overworked. Assistant professors appear to be disproportionately affected by emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, especially during the tenure-track phase. These findings are consistent with the Maslach Burnout Model (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) and are backed by recent empirical evidence (Cao et al., 2024; Tzioti et al., 2025).

One finding that is especially troubling is the disparity between institutional support and faculty accountability. It is becoming more and more expected of faculty to be the first to respond to mental health concerns among students, but many say they lack the emotional and training capacity to do so. In addition to having an effect on their mental health, this extra load also brings up moral dilemmas regarding duty distribution and role ambiguity in academia (Flannery, 2024; "The Role of Faculty in Student Mental Health," 2021).Additionally, institutional frameworks such as organisational rigidity, student evaluations connected with performance assessments, and contract roles that are insecure exacerbate psychological strain. The neoliberalization of academia, which promotes competition and productivity metrics, erodes intrinsic motivation and reinforces a culture of overwork. Despite the increasing prevalence of burnout and depression, the institutional response remains inadequate. Programs are often underutilised due to embarrassment, ignorance, or worries about possible professional repercussions. Leadership is usually reactive rather than proactive, and support is given in piecemeal or superficial ways, such as anxiety seminars rather than structural upgrades.

It is evident from the data that structural changes are necessary. When institutional rules continue to perpetuate unhealthy work cultures, interventions that are restricted to education initiatives or sporadic wellness workshops are insufficient. Universities need to move towards comprehensive, systemic solutions that incorporate leadership responsibility, workload redistribution, explicit mental health policies, and the incorporation of mental health into systems of governance. According to Halat et al. (2023), rather from being viewed as a side issue, well-being ought to be incorporated into institutional ideals and assessed as a major performance metric.In addition, the COVID-19 epidemic served as a trigger, escalating pre-existing vulnerabilities and bringing in fresh stressors like loneliness, digital exhaustion, and a blurred work-life balance. Unstable schedules, increased caregiving responsibilities, and technological difficulties adjusting to remote learning all contributed to increased anxiety among faculty, especially those from marginalised backgrounds (Arifin et al., 2022). Since the epidemic, these problems have remained, and many organisations are still trailing behind in providing flexible scheduling or adaptive work environments.

Furthermore, stigma is still a strong deterrent, keeping academics from asking for assistance out of concern for social rejection or professional consequences. Faculty are frequently left out of the conversation around student mental health, even though it is becoming more and more accepted. Institutions must proactively foster a culture that secures anonymity in mental health interventions, encourages peer support, and normalises vulnerability in order to combat this. Finally, the analysis emphasises how community involvement and supportive leadership may help build resilience. It has been demonstrated that procedures like open communication, acknowledging contributions, equitable assessment procedures, and collaborative decision-making reduce psychological stress and bring back a feeling of purpose and community in the academic setting. Institutions are better positioned to retain and develop their faculty when they embrace fairness and empathy and implement a servant leadership approach.

Conclusion

Unquestionably, this comprehensive literature analysis has shown that higher education faculty members' mental health is experiencing a serious and worsening crisis that has a profound impact on both the individuals and the basic efficacy and integrity of academic institutions. Alarming instances of depression, anxiety, and burnout among academics are caused by a variety of stressors, including heavy workloads, demanding research, administrative burdens, tenure and promotion pressures, and the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are clearly several repercussions if this situation is not addressed. They show up as less pedagogical creativity, weakened student mentoring, and a drop in educational quality. Collegial cooperation and institutional stability are threatened by significant organisational risks that institutions face, such as rising faculty absenteeism and attrition. In addition, disregarding the psychological health of faculty members presents significant moral and legal issues, which is indicative of a larger cultural decline in fundamental academic principles like independence and cooperation.

Significantly, the review emphasises that faculty mental well-being is a systemic issue that is closely related to the culture of institutions, leadership styles, and the availability of sufficient support systems. Faculty members' growing involvement with student mental health, frequently without adequate training or support, adds to their own psychological stress and has a cascading effect on the university community. Therefore, institutions must prioritise and diligently execute broad, proactive mental health policies for their faculty if they hope to maintain the quality of higher education and ensure its sustainability. This calls for a fundamental change in organisational culture to value well-being in addition to specific policy changes that address support systems, workload, and compensation. Institutions can protect the well-being of their most important resource, their professors, by creating settings that are empathetic, transparent, and provide strong psychological support. This will ensure that education continues to be of high quality, encourage innovation, and respect the fundamental goals of higher education.

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