Burnout Resilience: The Power of Community
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1. TITLE - Thank you for that warm introduction, President Pringle, and thank you all for inviting me to be with you today to talk about this important subject - burnout. The last three years have been challenging for us all, to say the very least, but we know burnout was a problem in higher education before the pandemic.

2. AGENDA - On our agenda for this afternoon is a little bit about my burnout story as a faculty member and then a focus on the origins and definition of burnout that we are working with today. Then I want to connect that to a burnout-resilience path to community and what actionable next steps might look like. We'll have time for questions after.

3. RPR - As President Pringle shared, my name is Rebecca Pope-Ruark and I'm a faculty developer, facilitator, author, and coach. I've written two books that really focus on the topic of faculty vitality from very different angles - Agile Faculty which is about productivity strategies and Unraveling Faculty Burnout which is about burnout in higher education.

4. RPR - But I'd also like to introduce you to me, circa 2016. I was a tenured faculty member at a lovely liberal arts university in the southeast. One of those books I just mentioned was in the works and under contract with a very well-established university press. I was teaching 2-3 courses a semester, deeply involved in student learning and mentoring. I was leading a program that was about to become a departmental major and serving on several committees and a presidential task force. I was publishing regularly and presenting often. I was productive for my little corner of academia.

   Behind the scenes though, I was working all the time, sometimes at the expense of relationships with friends and my hobbies. Over time, I found myself sick a lot, but I always went to work anyway. Once I taught an entire lesson on resumes using only a meme-filled PPT and group activities because I had laryngitis and bronchitis. And I never ever thought my work was good enough - it was always, what's next? Constant expectation escalation was the message I was taking in from my surroundings.

   So when the opportunity arose to lead an exciting pedagogical project sound design thinking, I jumped with both feet. My colleagues and I were going to innovate so hard we would change the face of higher education - no pressure, right? I pushed myself and those around me hard for a few years to get the program off the ground and to seed others around campus. But while I was actually leading the program with enrolled students, I started to find it really hard to get out of bed in the morning. I would have to talk myself into going to class - which in the program meant 3-4 hours a day five days a week with the same group of students. I would find myself spending 30 minutes in

deserted stairwells trying to figure out what to have for lunch. And I had panic attacks anytime I had to go to my on-campus office. And to make matters worse, the program that was supposed to change higher ed didn't work, even the second time we ran it. The students were unhappy, things fell apart, and I fell apart with it.

By Fall 2018, I was in full-blown burnout, and in Spring 2019, with the help of an excellent therapist and psychiatrist as well as a supportive dean and chair, I went on medical leave to figure my life out. I felt broken and ashamed - why couldn't I hack it in academia anymore? What was wrong with me?

5. PA 2019 - In March while I was on medical leave, I decided to go to a conference I had already committed to attending, it didn't hurt that it was in my hometown and I could stay with family. I wasn't presenting so it was low stress. I had been in therapy for months and was dealing with the shame I had associated with my burnout. And something really interesting happened at the conference. After months of feeling that shame, I let some of it go, and whenever I chatted with peers or former professors I hadn't seen in a while, I I answered truthfully when they asked how I was doing - "I'm on medical leave for burnout and I don't know what's next."

And their responses were shocking and not shocking at all. Rather than look uncomfortable and try to get away from me as if I were contagious, almost everyone was kind, understanding, and even relieved. And they had their own stories. The former professor who told me he almost didn't come back from a semester abroad due the trauma his department regularly inflicted on each other. The junior faculty member I knew from Twitter who nearly cried with relief that she wasn't the only one feeling that way. The grad school friend who told me about a close colleague they were worried about. Everyone had a story. I wasn't just me.

What I inadvertently found was a community I didn't know I was missing or that I needed. Here were so many other academics feeling the same symptoms of burnout, worried and ashamed that there was something wrong with them when there were others all around us. There was instant comfort in knowing I wasn't alone - but also anger - why was this happening to so many of us? It couldn't be that there was something wrong with all of us - so where was the problem?

And that's how I came to this work.

6. DEF - So what is this thing - burnout - that I and so many others were feeling? The concept of burning out has been around for a while, there is even a mention of a woman burning out her love in a Shakespeare poem. But the empirical research stats in the 20th century with it really taking hold with the work of Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s and Christina Maslach and colleagues in the 1980s through today.

7. DEF - Coming out of this research, the World Health Organization defined burnout in 2019 as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.

8. DEF - Two important words I want to highlight here. First, syndrome. WHO is not classifying burnout as a mental illness but instead a collection of symptoms caused by workplace stress that can lead to mental and physical health consequences.

   Second, workplace. Burnout is a workplace phenomenon, burnout arises out of workplace conditions causing unrelenting stress and misalignments between the workplace and workers' expectations of reasonable and manageable workload. Burnout is first a workplace culture problem that causes individuals harm.

9. DEF - The WHO and the research they draw from shows that burnout has three characteristics in individuals - the first is exhaustion. This isn't end-of-the-semester exhaustion, but a sustained, bone-deep weariness that is emotional, intellectual, physical. When I was in burnout, it was all I could do to teach a class and run home to play Solitaire on my phone the rest of the day - I had nothing to give anymore.

10. DEF - Second is cynicism, negativism, even depersonalization. You distance yourself from those you work with and care for in the workplace. Early burnout research was with helping professions and they found carers pulling away physically and emotionally from those they served in order to protect themselves. For me, I started having very negative thoughts about students, cynical that they cared as much as I did about their education, worried they wanted things from me I didn't want to give any more.

11. DEF - And third is reduced professional efficacy. This can be feeling like you can't do your job well anymore or actually not doing your job anymore. It feels like there is no point, who cares, why bother? I started doubting everything I knew about myself as a teacher and writer and often found myself paralyzed about what to do next. I had completely lost the plot.

12. POLL - So I'm curious, how many of you see yourself or a close colleague in the definition of burnout? Here is a QR code to a quick poll you can do on your phone.
    <switch to poll, debrief results>

13. HANDS - Now just a quick show of hands, how many of you think burnout might be a problem on your campus among faculty and staff?
    <debrief visually>

14. TAKEAWAY - One thing I want to empower you to know and do now is to take action to normalize talking about burnout without continuing to normalize the workplace conditions that lead to burnout in the first place. So how do we do that?

15. PILLARS - In the book Unraveling Faculty Burnout, I outline what I call the four pillars of burnout resilience that helped me and many of the women faculty I spoke to for the book deal with, mitigate, or overcome our burnout. These are lenses for understanding our experiences and recentering ourselves and our work in higher education.

16. PILLARS - These pillars are purpose, compassion, connection, and balance. The more I've been thinking about burnout and workplace conditions and change and community, the more I think these pillars work beyond individual lenses - they can be calls to action or rallying points for joint efforts for change in our institutional communities.

17. COMMUNITY - I believe that community, communities at institutions, communities like this one, can overcome burnout conditions when we behave with purpose-driven compassion and connection in action.

18. PURPOSE - So purpose. We as a community can address burnout by (re)articulating and (re)committing to a communal purpose. One based on shared values, shared goals, and a shared agreement on what constitutes reasonable and meaningful work for people. At some places, that might be through a careful and transparent strategic planning process. It might mean departments do some shared values and visioning work and decide together what a reasonable workload is and how to apply it equitably. It might also mean some grassroots efforts or the work of tempered radicals to build networks that can champion a shared set of values for workplace change.

19. COMPASSION - Next, I believe that as a community we can address burnout by allowing vulnerability, normalizing asking for and offering support, and shifting unrealistic work and productivity expectations. This means offering mentoring, coaching, and peer fellowship opportunities where people can deal with burnout and other professional life issues. It means training leaders in values-based leadership as well as how to support someone in or heading towards burnout. And it means taking a hard look at how norms around productivity and evaluation and flexible work and how it impacts those around us, including students.

20. CONNECTION - And finally, I believe that as a community we can address burnout by building connections across ranks, roles, and siloes to focus on human relatedness, shared experiences, and mutual interdependence. This includes ways and means to gather in small and large groups around shared interests and professional development. Taking hard looks at the culture of interactions between faculty and staff and across different ranks and roles and having real conversations. It means forging communities around shared interests and the joys and challenges of working at a special place like a college campus.

21. COMMUNITY - So those are my pillars of burnout and community resilience. I want to leave you with a few questions to take the next steps in your campus community. The

first two are research questions.

22. Qs - How can you understand if burnout is a problem on your campus? This is a research project. The COACHE survey might get you some good data, or an institutional instance of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. These would gather some good, anonymous quantitative data. Focus groups and interviews can get at shared and individual experiences, field work can look for positive deviants. This would get at more qualitative and descriptive data.

23. Qs - Next up, how do we empower the community, especially faculty and staff grassroots leaders, to make changes to workplace conditions and culture that create burnout? Here is a space for organizing, locating change agents and the tempered radicals on campus who are already making small-scale change happen. How can these folks be supported, called up, to lead valuable change efforts? How can you leverage your union community to take this on?

24. Qs - How do we support faculty and staff already experiencing burnout? I focused on what we can do as communities to change conditions, but we need to support those in burnout while we create change. It might be mentoring, group coaching, leaves, I invite you to compassionately experiment to see what works. At the very least, we can allow and invite vulnerability among colleagues, being listening ears and sounding boards.

25. E/E/A - I want to leave you today with a challenge. To take what you've heard and make it concrete. I encourage you to think of a few easy ways you might address burnout at your institution by leveraging this idea of community as purpose-driven compassion and connection in action. Then what are some exciting things that might take more time or effort? And finally what are audacious things, assuming money was no object and rules weren't in the way, what would you do to make change today?

26. WRAP-UP - I hope you walk away this afternoon feeling empowered to use the power of community to address burnout with your colleagues and institutions. Thank you for your kind attention, and we can now open the floor for questions.