

# Thriving in Academe

## Feeling Overloaded?

You're Not Alone

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Hundreds of thousands of faculty feel chronically overloaded and out of control of their work life. What can you do about it?

Why are so many of us feeling so overloaded all the time? One big reason is that 21st century higher education is generating tasks faster than the academy's work force is expanding. Somebody's got to do this new work, and that somebody is often faculty.

Another reason why so many of us feel chronically overloaded is the faculty tradition of autonomy and self-governance—we like to be in control of our fate, to be involved, to have a say. Can you say “committees”? We have a billion of them, of our own making.

Still another reason for widespread overload, yet again of our own doing, is that many of us measure ourselves and others by our busyness. When we ask colleagues how they're doing, if they

don't rattle off a long list of professional activities until they are red-faced and gasping for air, then many of us wonder why they aren't pulling their weight. “Slackers!” “Put them on a committee!” “They'll never make full professor behaving like that.” Chronic overload has become an indicator for us of productivity and professional accomplishment.

Overload-as-pernicious-norm leads us to the final reason why the problem is so widespread:

Vested interests in the larger systems of which we are a part benefit from us thinking that working until we feel fried is something to which we should aspire.

How many of us would feel guilty if we finished the semester without metaphorically staggering across the finish line of our teaching triathlon? Plenty!



### MEET DOUGLAS REIMONDO ROBERTSON

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## Tales from Real Life

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

**THIRTY YEARS AGO, AT THE DAWNING** of my career, I worked at a liberal arts college that was on the bleeding edge of the lifelong learning movement. By pure chance, I joined a motley crew of young Ph.D.'s with public service and social change in their hearts and minds, and in their pasts. I saw this merry band as creating a laboratory for a new kind of college that served place-bound, working adults better than traditional institutions were doing at the time. I was on a mission.

On this mission, I learned many things. I learned that Camelots don't last forever. Working 70 hours a week and skipping vacations for the joy of birthing a new college was exhilarating until a new president dismantled much of what was special to me and, by my perception, rendered the college plain. I learned that structuring my work so that overload was inevitable was just another path to egocentric martyrdom. I learned what Freud meant when he said that the secret of a healthy life was love and work.

Making my work team my family was fine until Camelot ended; then I was in deep trouble. I learned that having my life unbalanced toward work served people who made 10 times more money than I did and who actually took vacations.

Perhaps most importantly, I learned that if I want a balanced, healthy, fulfilling, sustainable life, free from chronic overload, I need to create it myself.

I don't need to find time; I need to make time.

—Douglas Reimondo Robertson  
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# Overload Epidemic!?!

Hundreds of thousands of faculty feel chronically overloaded and unable to control their work life. What can you do about being overloaded in your work life?

**L**et's get personal here. We are talking about you—just you—not the larger systems of which you are a part, although goodness knows the workplace needs our attention as well. But for now, let's laser focus on what YOU, and only YOU, can do.

The first thing to do is to realize that you have MUCH more control than you actually exercise over how you use your time (the 168 hours per week). If that Trickster—the Crazy Yeah-But (cousin to Bugs who hamstrung Elmer Fudd all those years)—has you bamboozled into thinking there is nothing you can change about how you use your time, that you are a helpless, hopeless, victim of circumstance (“Yeah but I HAVE to do this.” “Yeah but I HAVE to do that.” “Yeah but I have no choice.”), then you may as well stop reading this article right now. You don't have time to read it anyway. You're too busy.

The second thing is to keep to yourself and your most trusted colleagues any thoughts about your efforts to live a balanced work life. Remember: Balance has become professionally abnormal and suspect. We're talking guerrilla health here.

A third thing is to consider six principles from my book, *Making Time, Making Change*, about avoiding chronic overload in college teaching. If the ideas are helpful great; if not, keep looking. Your life may depend on it. Really. No joke.

## Principle 1: Be able to be efficient in all things.

This first principle is the obvious efficiency dictum. With more and more things coming at us, we need to develop ways to take less time to do the same things with similar quality. My book (and your colleagues) have lots of concrete practices for doing this. However, if I were to pick one thing to highlight for the limited space of this article, it would be the clever use of course management systems (CMS's). Essentially, without sacrificing educational quality—and in many cases increasing it—CMS's allow us to use robots for much of the time-consuming, tedious, but necessary parts of teaching such as, course record keeping, scoring quizzes, distributing course materials, making resources available, conducting simple instruction, communicating evolving course policy, forming student groups, and so forth.

## Principle 2: Express your values in how you use your time.

Avoiding overload involves values clarification, which is

expressed in the development of a time budget for making tough choices related to how we spend our time. My book has a short series of questions the answers to which produce a time budget that allows you, when faced with two demands on your time, both of which are important, to say “no” to one and “yes” to the other, without guilt, knowing that your decision is in alignment with your deepest values related to living a healthy, productive, sustainable life.

In workshops, when faculty work through these questions and discover how much time they really have for each of their key responsibilities—teaching, research, service, and professional development—most are flabbergasted at how little time they really have for each task—say, teaching a course—and how far out of alignment

their expectations are for what they think they should accomplish. Essentially, semester after semester, year after year, they realize through this reflection, they've set themselves up to feel as if they have failed.

This principle is by far the most powerful, most difficult to follow, and not surprisingly, least likely for us to spend time on. It involves reflecting on our deepest values. It takes time to make time. Feeling overloaded, we shortchange reflection that will heal our condition. Who has time? We do. We have the power to make the time, and we must choose to use our power.

## Principle 3: Don't hoard responsibility, share it.

This principle involves searching for ways in which other agents in our environments can do what we do with the same or better result. For example, in our teaching, we need to look for sources of NIC's (Non-teaching Instructional Content) and NIF's (Non-teacher Instructional Feedback). Sources of both include: (a) students (for example, short term dyadic or small group exchanges in class, enduring work groups that may involve face-to-face meetings outside of class, or electronically mediated agorae such as CMS discussion boards and Web 2.0 social networking sites), (b) electronic and print mastery learning programs (many texts come with these CMS building blocks now), (c) outside experts with whom students can interact electronically or personally, and (d) electronically-accessed research databases.

In our teaching, this principle advises us to look for solutions: that help students (particularly traditional age students) to develop and mature while also making time for us. Notwithstanding our



good intentions, making things easy may not always serve students' development well. Giving students responsibility and consequences does serve them well and is part of our responsibility as educators.

**Principle 4: For every aspect of your life, find a time and place befitting it.**

This principle recommends that we find dependable matches for what we are trying to do and the environment in which we are trying to do it. My biggest concern here is for faculty work that is vulnerable to interruption—such as thinking, reading, writing, grading, or preparing for a course. Often, faculty have difficulty being able to block access to themselves completely. But we need to find dependable ways, metaphorically, to close the door and not answer it no matter how insistent the pounding.

**Principle 5: Be short with many so that you may be long with a few.**

Being present for students and colleagues—giving them our pure attention—is perhaps our biggest gift and, certainly, one of our most effective professional resources. However, we often waste it. We simply cannot be present effectively for our students and colleagues when we are frazzled and distracted. Face-to-face communication is a precious resource that we must use intentionally for

fear that we squander it on whatever is in our face at the moment.

We need to use asynchronous communication tools—voice-mail and e-mail are two examples—that buffer us from interruption, while preserving the information communicated, thereby allowing us to respond at a time, pace, and intensity of our choosing.

**We need to find dependable ways, metaphorically, to close the door and not answer it no matter how insistent the pounding.**

**Principle 6: Stick to your knitting: refer, defer, delegate when possible.**

This principle instructs us to use the professional practices of referral and delegation when appropriate. When we see teaching as facilitating learning rather than disseminating knowledge, college teaching becomes a helping profession akin to, but different from, other helping professions such as counseling, social work, and ministry.

College teaching is perhaps the only helping profession that does not teach its professionals important practices such as boundary management and referral practices. We need to have phone numbers and e-mail addresses handy for the counseling center (when students have emotional problems), writing center (when students can't write well), math center (when students have a math block), technology help desk (when students can't log on to Blackboard), and so forth. We do not need to do it all.

I have been brief here, but you can find many specific ideas for applying these six principles in *Making Time, Making Change*.

### BEST PRACTICES

## Setting Boundaries and Being Productive

An example of the small, but generative, changes that individual faculty can make to practice *guerilla health* (i.e., develop a healthy productivity even in an organizational culture that is hostile to it) involves discreetly setting new boundaries for some practice such as processing e-mail. In a workshop, one faculty member testified to the incredibly positive ripple effects of simply not answering e-mail on Saturday mornings. In the same workshop, another faculty member was so impressed with the pleasing outcomes of this modest, doable boundary setting, that he declared that he would try for one week not working after dinner on Wednesday nights to see what the effect of this mid-week break would be. Usually when faculty try these mini-experiments in boundary adjustment, they find that nothing bad happens even though all those years they had feared the worst.



These ideas about faculty health are not just for faculty but also for organizational leaders. A department chair recognized the power of departmental culture to influence individual experience and wanted to use that power to encourage healthy productivity among her faculty. Rather than normalizing overload, she wanted to “abnormalize” it. So she purchased copies of *Making Time, Making Change* for each of her 29 faculty, asked me to facilitate a workshop on the book, and consistently made it clear that healthy productivity was a core value in her administration which would be supported and rewarded. Along similar lines of systemic intervention, I have had the president of a distinguished liberal arts college with 110 full-time faculty participate in a half-day workshop and go forth enthusiastically with all kinds of ideas of what he could do to encourage healthy productivity at his college.

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## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

# Overcoming Resistance

**Our own hidden assumptions thwart our efforts to change.**

### Can these techniques be dangerous to my health?

Absolutely! These techniques can help us to get more done in the same amount of time. So, ironically, potential exists to use these anti-overload techniques to accomplish the opposite and lock in chronic overload with a vengeance—to increase output until the same, barely tolerable, feeling of overload is again achieved. This temptation may be reinforced by rewards for our higher output. But if our work life is not balanced, fulfilling, and sustainable—however we define those things—then we flirt with health-related tragedy in ourselves and our relationships.

### Why don't we change, even when we want to?

Resistance to change, resides in ourselves. Usually, when we say that we want to do something differently but don't, our desire to change is balanced by a hidden assumption that if we actually made that change, something really bad would happen. Why don't we leave our disruptive offices to do reflective work?

Perhaps we don't because we believe that our students and colleagues would think we were goofing off. Consequently, we would not get tenure and we would have to leave our college in disgrace. Unable to find another academic position, our spouses would divorce us and take the kids. We would end up living under a bridge somewhere. Sounds extreme? Think about it. We all have our version of

this slide into utter catastrophe which is linked to our not making that change we are always saying we want to make.

In addition, resistance can reside in our relationships. Few of us are strong enough or socially obtuse enough to withstand messages in our environments that undermine us.

If I am trying to adjust my workweek from 70 hours to 50 hours, or even, in an extreme act of courage, to 40 hours, and I have daily hall-chats with colleagues who persistently one-up each other about how much they work, I will have a hard time sticking to my new commitment.

### What can we do about it?

In *Making Time, Making Change*, I have adapted four questions developed by Kegan and Lahey which can help identify hidden assumptions that create resistance to change in ourselves. Think about some change that you've wanted to make with regard to structuring your work as a teacher but have never been able to accomplish, then explore what YOU are doing to prevent that change and why. Bingo. You'll unearth how your hidden assumptions are holding yourself back. Then you can explore these assumptions and test their validity in small, fail-safe experiments.

In our relationships, we need to discern who supports the change, who doesn't, and who is ambivalent. Then we can develop specific strategies to increase support in our networks while decreasing resistance.



## THRIVING IN ACADEME

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