

Why Yoga Won't Fix Our **Burnout** Problem: A Higher Education Student Affairs Case Study

AMBER SERRA, MASTER OF ARTS CANDIDATE

Problem

- This study **explores social connection in the workplace and its effect on feelings of burnout.**
- Employee **burnout** and high turnover in higher education student affairs staff is not a new trend.
- This modern epidemic, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has left many student affairs professionals overworked, **burned out**, and isolated.
- I conducted a case study of student affairs staff in student-helping roles at one university in the southwest region of the United States.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship, if any, between social connection in the workplace and feelings of employee **burnout**?
2. How does a remote work environment affect feelings of social connection in the workplace?

What is **burnout**?

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies **burnout** as an “**occupational phenomena**” resulting from unsuccessfully managed chronic workplace stress.”

Mixed Methods Approach

Qualitative Interviews (10 key informants)

- Connection
- Community
- **Burnout**/Emotional exhaustion
- Culture
- Remote/Hybrid work

Quantitative Survey (62% response rate – 51 participants)

- Social connection in the workplace
- Workplace friendships scale
- Workplace integration scale
- Feelings of **burnout** (Maslach **Burnout** Inventory)

Secondary Data

- Employee satisfaction survey
- Employee turnover rates

Results

Qualitative Interview Themes & Analysis

- 100% responded that community in the workplace is important, extremely important, and/or vital.
- 100% stated their workplace friendships reduced their emotional exhaustion due to work.
- 78% felt less connected to their direct teams when working remotely.

***These responses were consistent with Social Baseline Theory in that having others helps work feel less exhausting as human brains use others as resources for load sharing (Beckes & Sbarra, 2022).**

Quantitative Survey Results & Analysis

- 68.6% scored medium to high emotional exhaustion.
- 59% spent half to all or nearly all time working alone.
- Respondents reported the more time they spent working alone, the fewer workplace friendships they had.

Hypothesis 1: As social connection in the workplace increases, feelings of employee **burnout** decreases.

Hypothesis 2: As time spent working remotely increases, feelings of social connection in the workplace decreases.

Outcome: The quantitative findings showed no statistically significant relationship between the variables; therefore, neither hypothesis was proven.

***These quantitative findings were contradicted by the qualitative data, so additional research is needed.**

“People are working from home feeling isolated. All the cushion that surrounds the job, meaning the connections, the relationships that you have in the culture that's built within the organization and then teams, all of that is kind of gone or reduced to the point where the impact of it is not there anymore.”

“Community is a protective factor for suicide, but also knowing community, the importance of community when it relates to **burnout**...So the work is definitely challenging from time to time but with the community, it makes things a lot lighter.”

“I think the organization could do more to care for its staff's well-being. It seems like the approach is that staff fend for themselves...It feels like a passive approach to taking care of the people who make up the workforce.”

“Yes, [workplace friendships reduce emotional exhaustion] because I'm not having to hold all of this that is getting stirred up either from work or society at large on my own. I'm able to connect with colleagues who are maybe also dealing with similar reactions.”

Conclusions

- Student affairs staff at the case study site are experiencing feelings of **burnout**, particularly the emotional exhaustion dimension.
- Participants have felt less connected to their teams and student affairs when working remotely.
- Many participants are spending more than half to nearly all their time working alone (without colleagues).
- Community is vital to student affairs professionals.

Proposed Solutions

- More research needs to be completed on social isolation and loneliness specific to the workplace because both conditions negatively impact overall health.
- Leadership should create intentional time and space for staff to connect with their colleagues to build community.
- To create a learning culture, leadership needs to facilitate long-term cultural change based on what staff value to flourish in the work environment.
- Student affairs and other organizations can improve the overall staff experience by prioritizing staff's needs.

Further Reflections

Addressing **burnout** is not only essential to employee well-being but to student success. As McClure notes, “Student success is inextricably linked to staff and faculty working conditions. You don't get the former without investing in the latter” (McClure, 2021).

Therefore, leaders must acknowledge **burnout** is an organizational issue; it is important; and they are ready to listen and act on what staff need and not only recommend more self-care or **burnout** will persist.

Key Literature Cited

Beckes, L., & Sbarra, D. A. (2022). Social baseline theory: State of the science and new directions. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43, 36–41.

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2018). Fostering social connection in the workplace. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 32(5), 1307–1312.

Koch, T., & Denner, N. (2022). Informal communication in organizations: work time wasted at the water-cooler or crucial exchange among co-workers? *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*.

Marshall, S. M., Gardner, M. M., Hughes, C., & Lowery, U. (2016). Attrition from student affairs: Perspectives from those who exited the profession. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 53(2), 146–159.

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the **burnout** experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World psychiatry*, 15(2), 103–111.

Moss, J. (2021). *The **burnout** epidemic: The rise of chronic stress and how we can fix it*. Harvard Business Press.

World Health Organization 2019; classifies **burnout** <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

Acknowledgments

“You don't know what you don't know.” Thank you to the HDO faculty, staff, and 2022 cohort for making this experience truly illuminating. Thank you to the case study site and participants. Lastly, thank you to my family who supported me while I did the hard things.

 For more information, email me at amberpserra@gmail.com.