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## BURNOUT DOESN'T FRIGHTEN ME

Meredith A.G. Stange\*

This past semester we all taught during an unprecedented worst-case scenario, moving our courses online at the literal drop of a hat. Although I know my experience is not unique, from March to the end of the semester in May, I felt like I was just treading water. I was teaching three classes, fighting with technology, and trying to make class time as close to normal as I could. But this was not a normal situation and there was no way to get back to normal, which was incredibly frustrating to me. After one particularly difficult day, I vented to a friend that I felt I was giving my students a lesser experience in spite of my best efforts and that doing so “wasn’t me.” Thinking about the conversation later, I realized that feeling unsure of myself, feeling disconnected from my students, and feeling like I was just treading water really was not me. In fact, I had not felt this way in the classroom since my first few years of teaching. Those were days I did not want to revisit because, after seventeen years of teaching, I felt I had finally reached my stride. I was a self-assured teacher and had left the panic of my early teaching years behind me. However, much to my chagrin, with the shift to online learning, I had to start all over again and relive those early days.

Although it has been uncomfortable at times, revisiting those first years of teaching has given me the opportunity to reflect on how much both I and my profession have changed over the course of nearly two decades. While reflecting on these early years, I recalled what was one of the most fearsome things to me when I started: burnout. When I started teaching, I was told that Legal Writing teachers had historically only been given short-term contracts as a way to prevent them from succumbing to burnout related to grading assignments. The belief was that this grading was so onerous that Legal Writing faculty could not possibly help but bend under its weight. Despite the fact that there did not seem to be any proof for the contention that Legal Writing professors were more susceptible to grading-based burnout than any other professors, it was deemed so worrisome that it led to Legal Writing careers having strict term limits, often no more than two years. Our school had abandoned such time restrictions

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years before I came. However, as a result of hearing about the potential for grading burnout, I spent the first few years of my career waiting for and fearing it. In my mind, burnout would come like a light bulb blowing out; one day a switch would be flipped inside of me and my love for my job would simply make a soft pop and go out. However, just like *Godot*, grading burnout never arrived. Seventeen years later, I still love my career despite having graded enough papers that I should have burned out several times over.

But while reflecting on my long-forgotten fear of burnout, I realized that I have in fact experienced burnout several times over the course of my career, although it did not manifest in the way I expected it and it was not fatal. Contrary to popular belief, burnout does not come from the work itself, but from the amount of work we are asked to do. Legal Writing professors, myself included, tend to be non-tenured. As a result, we have fewer job protections and lack the bargaining power tenure-track professors have. This often makes it uncomfortable to say no, even when we want to. As such, we tend to be the group that administration or other faculty ask to do the things that no one else can or is willing to do. Becoming exhausted or frustrated as your workload grows, often while your pay stays the same and remains significantly lower than that of your tenure-track colleagues, is a perfectly reasonable response.

Further, burnout comes from dealing with the inequities between Legal Writing faculty and other faculty members as well as the length of time, and often the lack of institutional will, needed to effectively change them. Change in academia tends to be glacial, so it often takes some distance to appreciate how much has occurred. During this time of reflection, I have realized that in my time as a Legal Writing professor, I have gone from being unable to serve on committees at all due to my status to serving as the chair of the Academic Standing Committee multiple years in a row. I have gone from not being able to attend faculty meetings at all, to attending faculty meetings without being able to vote, and finally, being able to vote on all but law school administration, faculty hiring, and promotion and tenure. Further, in recent years I have heard numerous faculty members and members of the law school administration openly talk with our students and to us about the importance of Legal Writing and the Legal Writing faculty. That's something that I never heard when I first started. Back then, there seemed to be faculty resentment if students spent time on Legal Writing, culminating in a failed push to make Legal Writing pass/fail so students would not feel they needed to spend so much time on the assignments or the class.

Yet despite how far we have come, it remains difficult to work in a career that we are constantly told is valuable and important to the

profession but that is perpetually relegated to a lower status. It is especially disheartening when even our accrediting body will not acknowledge the profession deserves a status commensurate with its value. When the ABA supported increased status and long-term contracts to provide job protections for clinicians, it could have easily chosen to advance Legal Writing faculty as well. Yet it did not choose to do so, in spite of its emphasis on ensuring schools provide law students with the skills to be practice ready, of which legal writing is a large part. With the recent fiscal challenges faced by schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I fear there will be even less incentive for the ABA to seek advancement for Legal Writing professionals. Given the strain on law school budgets, the ABA is unlikely to want to burden law school administrations with a requirement that Legal Writing professors be given more job protections and the salary increase that usually goes with a status change. However, having been an employee of Illinois—a state known for its seemingly endless budget crises—for a long time, the one thing I have learned is that there is never enough money. Yet despite that, somehow schools manage to prioritize and fund things they deem important. Unless and until Legal Writing is one of those things, being told we are valuable is merely lip service. Frustration over deeply ingrained inequities that even good people do not appear incentivized to change is another perfectly logical reason for burnout.

Perhaps the most surprising cause for burnout is wanting to do your job well. We hear the phrase “the law is a jealous mistress” all the time in law school, but no one reminds us of this when we start in academia. It is so much fun to teach students and to create new problems and watch them come to life that at times we forget to protect ourselves. I fall victim to this often. The most recent example is what I did to myself this past summer. I volunteered to teach a section of Legal Writing II during our second summer session, even though I was already teaching Health Law in the first summer session. This resulted in finishing my spring semester grading while starting my first summer class, drafting a final exam and a Legal Writing appellate Record at the same time, grading exams for my first summer class while teaching my second, and finishing my second summer class while starting 1L Orientation. As overwhelming as this sounds, and it is, I have only myself to blame. While I will make sure to never do this to myself again, this overloaded summer has reminded me of something that I tell my students all the time: If you are not careful, the law will consume your life. That can contribute to burnout as well, because if you are giving everything to one part of your life, you are neglecting others. My incredibly messy house can attest to this.

Finally, regardless of its cause, the most important thing about burnout is that it can sometimes be countered by a strong support system. You do not have to go through it alone. Regardless of when or how burnout happens to you, let yourself be angry and frustrated and then reach out to the Legal Writing community to help you get through it. I used to hear people say that all the time when I first started teaching. I was horrified at the suggestion that I should waste the time of far more experienced members of the Legal Writing community with my little gripes. But as I have gotten to be one of those members, I will tell you that this community absolutely wants to provide help and support. Every Legal Writing colleague I have met genuinely welcomes the opportunity to provide help or support to anyone. So if you are reading this and are struggling to keep your head above water and need some advice, or if you just want to vent, please contact me (really, I'm not kidding, send me an email any time) or someone else in our community. The one thing that has kept me sane when I have felt burned out by the stresses that being a Legal Writing professor can bring is reaching out to the people all around me who are willing to help me through it. We have all had victories and struggles. Sharing them and realizing I am not alone has been critical to keeping the light bulb of my love for Legal Writing shining brightly all these years. So even though it is real, to take liberties with Maya Angelou's incredible words, burnout doesn't frighten me at all.