

3rd April, 2024

Dear Drs. Lench, Hill Price and members of the Associate Provost for Faculty Advocacy search committee,

As some of you may be aware, I was initially appointed to this search committee but promptly recused myself. I did this because, upon hearing the job description, I immediately felt compelled to apply for the position myself! The prospect of embracing this new role within the university, along with the chance to uplift and advocate for our faculty, fills me with great excitement thinking about the potential and possibilities.

For purposes of brevity, I will lay out this letter, in bullet format:

- How I foresee this new role operating:
 - through advocacy and elevating faculty voice,
 - building bridges across the university,
 - possible future projects and responsibilities.
- My personal qualities and strengths, and why I want this job.

I envisage this new faculty advocate role would embody the Aggie RELLIS Core Values and support all six (6) of the priorities detailed in the 2020-2025 strategic plan¹; with primary focus on (1) "GROW" and support our world-class faculty, and (2) make Texas A&M University the "BEST PLACE" to live, work, and learn.

Advocacy and voice

1. This role would advocate and provide a voice for individual and collective **faculty 'perspectives'**, which I define as encompassing various experiences, worldviews, disciplines, concerns, ideas, and projects, irrespective of faculty rank or location. It's important to note that my vision for this role is distinct from the promotion and tenure process, and is neither replicating nor replacing, but is congruent, to the roles of the Ombudsperson, Faculty Senate, CAFRT, and/or University Grievance Council—roles and responsibilities, by-laws, rules and SAPs, etc., of which I am familiar.
2. This advocacy and voice should come from a **place of support, empathy and respect** for different perspectives, recognizing that some faculty feel they have no voice and no power, and therefore disengage and/or remain silent on key issues. This is a role I am very familiar with, as on a regular basis numerous colleagues from across campus seek out my advice on disparate topics and concerns, often surreptitiously and requesting anonymity. For example during the recent "quicklook sessions"², I was approached by several groups, including a group of very scared librarians looking for advice and direction. Also frequently, during our online Faculty Senate meetings, I often give voice to those who do not have the courage to speak out. Following our last senate meeting (3/18/2024), I was contacted by several individuals who have been threatened and harassed by external forces (primarily

¹ (https://provost.tamu.edu/files/documents/strategicplan2020-2025_dec2023.pdf)

² <https://president.tamu.edu/quick-look-assessment/index.html>

because of the topics of their discipline and research) and was able to point them in the direction of the recent excellent guidance publication³, as well as provide an empathetic listening ear.

3. **Identify trends in the perspectives.** Help facilitate the elevation, and evaluation, of those perspectives, and report back on progress and/or implementation of solutions to the faculty, thereby ensuring there is a feedback loop in the process, and faculty are not left hanging. Here I am trained in qualitative content analysis, and highlighting salient categories, and have been told I have excellent communication skills.

4. Provide a vehicle to **elevate amazing ideas** to decision makers. A recent personal example: my students suggested a brilliant idea to reduce traffic on campus during the 'passing period'; I contacted the Provost's and Registrar's offices, and the idea is now in the workflow of enterprise applications to change the student's registration software. This was a transformative moment for the students having ideas put into action. What if I could enable that opportunity for other faculty? I have also facilitated other faculty ideas, including recently coaching the AggieWay Program⁴ coordinators in preparation to meet with senior administrative decision makers.

5. **Elevate and connect amazing research** and other positive things to sources of funding and exposure (for example, facilitate connecting groundbreaking researchers to The Foundation and MarCom). This also happens to be one of the options for the new Aspiring Leaders Program⁵, which I am sure could be a fruitful collaboration.

6. Ensure there is **faculty voice in decisions that affect the university's core missions** of teaching and research. I have been instrumental in several committees that have changed the course of the university: IT Governance, EC of the Faculty Senate, LMS (Canvas) selection, Hullabaloo-U and First Year Experience, to name a few. One pivotal and noteworthy inclusion of faculty voice was the planning and construction of the ILCB — where I worked on a team, facilitated by the CTE, that commenced with the architects and followed the project right through until instructors were in the classrooms. Championing these types of interactions and processes is extremely beneficial to the core mission of the university and the growth of our faculty. As an early adopter and champion of ideas, this ability to collectively build something on campus was truly transformative and opened my eyes to amazing possibilities.

Building Bridges

1. A key focus of this position would be to implement a user-friendly, multi-method process (e.g. in-person, online, anonymous or named) for **reporting perspectives** and informing administration (and vice versa). My vision would be to develop a streamlined process and database that could inform decision makers and track trends.

2. Raise awareness of the plethora of **existing resources** for faculty (e.g. professional development, funding sources, service opportunities, childcare, mentoring/mentor opportunities academy etc., helpful guides, SAPs and also ombudsperson and grievance

³ <https://facultyaffairs.tamu.edu/news/2023/08/faculty-support-guidance.pdf>

⁴ <https://aggiewayep.tamu.edu/>

⁵

processes). This would be done at new faculty orientation and other events (detailed below in Community Building), and also at one-on-one meetings. In preparation for this role, you will note that I have often presented to my peers on campus at interdisciplinary events, including a New Faculty Orientation several years ago.

3. Facilitate **improved connections and communications across silos**: between faculty sub-groups, administration and staff, VPR, GPS, Faculty Senate, Council of Principal Investigators, Council of Deans, and the Department Head Council Steering Committee, as well as staff who engage in scholarly or educational activities in their primary job role, including librarians and research scientists. In this new role, I would attend meetings and/or garner information from these groups, in order to learn about salient issues on campus with the intent of connecting the dots. For example, current issues with predatory LTI (Canvas plugins) vendors aggressively approaching faculty, has a knock on impact to OER initiatives, faculty burden and student success – this requires a coordinated ‘intra-siloed’ bridge-building effort.

Possible future advocacy projects for faculty growth, retention and parity

1. Publish and administer the non-faculty senate elections for university level committees, thereby creating a ‘catalog’ (central repository) of **University-level service opportunities** for growth and ultimately promotion. e.g. CAFRT, FDL, APTFN, UGC, Honors Council, HURAC etc. This function is currently managed by the Faculty Senate, but there is a misconception that one must be a Faculty Senator to apply and run, thus reducing faculty engagement and awareness of these important service functions.

2. Identify areas of **faculty burden** that detract from faculty’s main mission of research, teaching and service, and bring these issues to the fore. I suspect some areas of concern include bureaucratic paperwork, compliance and risk management processes, and other technological developments that failed to include faculty perspectives in implementation.

3. Provide a point of contact and guidance/best-practice advice to existing **Faculty Networks** (e.g. Women’s Faculty Network, APT Faculty Network etc.).

4. Provide opportunities for faculty to **find and build community**. e.g. Expand my pilot of the Critical Friend Group, which is especially important for new faculty members (see addendum), faculty socials, garner support TTLC and IMPACT events, or build a mechanism (like the old T3 grant program) where like-minded individuals were easily able to find one another.

5. Should advocacy efforts include salary and merit issues, I would propose **Equity Studies** be discussed and evaluated.

6. Double-check **composition on search committees** is balanced and representative of the faculty body.

7. Revisit the value of a Faculty Campus Climate survey. We have been losing valued faculty with little knowledge of the rationale. I would spearhead discussions towards development of retention focus groups, as well as satisfaction and exit interviews.

Personal qualities and strengths

As a cultural anthropologist, I see the world through a holistic lens, while maintaining respect for different worldviews and perspectives. In my previous university-level service

roles and programs (listed on my CV), I have worked with faculty and administrators of all ranks and titles, staff, and students across campus. Most recently, I was appointed chair of the Faculty Senate Planning Committee with the view to revitalizing their mission and impact on campus. In the last two months, we have made great inroads; we now have the VP for Strategic Planning as a standing guest at our meeting; and invited the COO and presented him with (1) a list of maintenance issues on campus that are severely impacting faculty performance, and (2) a report on the siloed nature of the personal electric vehicle problem on campus informed by conversations with transportation services, University Police, staff, students and faculty. From this experience, and the many other service roles I have engaged in, I have developed a deep appreciation for the benefits that shared governance.

On a personal level I think my outgoing personality, life-circumstance and experience, are perfect for this new position. My #1 Clifton Strength is WOO — I love the “challenge of meeting new people and making a connection with them”. My second strength is individualization — I have “a gift for figuring out how different people can work together productively”. And finally, my third, four and fifth strengths are “Communication”, “Connectedness” and “Achiever” — and they probably don’t need explaining.

One other element that I feel is vitally important and should be stated — I clearly understand the inherent conflict in this position: living in limbo between administration and faculty. But I am not afraid; I will knock on doors, listen to both sides, speak up on behalf of, or advocate for, others. To me this position needs a person who is willing to go the extra mile and not be afraid of consequence. I have a strong desire to be a change agent on campus, making a positive impact on both faculty success and student success (which is intertwined no matter which way you slice it).

While I do not necessarily have formal conflict resolution or mediation training, I do have experience in Difficult Dialogues: I have presented on this for Hullabaloo Instructors; and frequently had purposeful and respectful facilitation on difficult topics in my classrooms. I also learned and used one-on-one mediation methodology through Posse Mentor training. I have also completed the CIMER Mentor certificate. I have often thought about obtaining a formal mediation certificate, and it was only time and money that prevented me.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that this position requires an individual who brings a unique perspective, fearlessly advocates on behalf of faculty, and drives innovative change. My recent awards, and appointments to significant committees, underscore my commitment to the faculty's best interests and garnering respect within the institution. Given the chance, I am confident in my ability to contribute positively to our university and its faculty. I sincerely hope you will consider me as a candidate for this pivotal role.



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CRITICAL FRIEND GROUP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

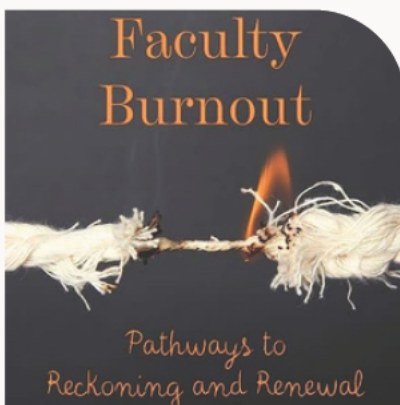
PURPOSE

Faculty burnout has become a growing concern in academia. Funded by a Merging Three Colleges seed grant, we created a Critical Friend Group (CFG) made up of 14 award-winning educators from across the newly formed College of Arts and Sciences. The CFG aimed to enhance faculty's feelings of connection and community. It was designed by faculty, for faculty. Our purpose was to meaningfully engage with peers to reflect and assess our experiences in academia, both in and out of the classroom, as well as to reconnect with oneself and our career-focused purpose.



METHODS OF EVALUATION

The current study explores the extent to which the CFG pilot program impacted participant's wellbeing, particularly faculty's feelings of burnout. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory in two end-of-semester surveys, three facets of burnout were examined: emotional exhaustion (EE); personal accomplishment (PE); and depersonalization (DP), an unfeeling and impersonal response toward students. Additionally, a brief questionnaire was completed after each critical friend meeting to examine the meeting's value and obtain qualitative insights on participant's experiences. It is our intent to use these preliminary findings to enhance the future impact and experience of the CFG. (TAMU IRB IRB2022-1357)

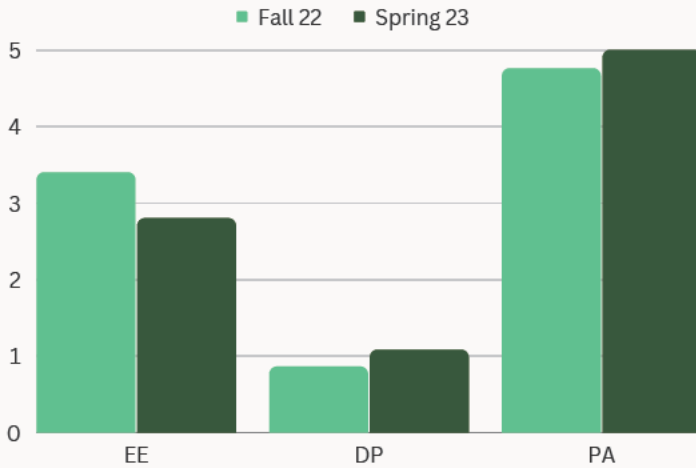


CFG EVENTS

During the CFG pilot, several highlight events were offered. These included informal social gatherings, both on and off campus, as well as a shared book reading. The CFG hosted an informal question and answer session with the book's noted scholarly author, Rebecca Pope-Ruark, Director of the Office of Faculty Professional Development at the Georgia Institute of Technology and founder of Agile Faculty.



RESULTS & FEEDBACK

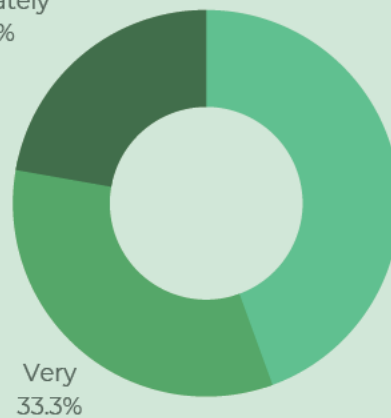


2 out of 3

core aspects of Maslach burnout measures improved from the fall to spring semester. Faculty in the CFG indicated feeling less emotionally exhausted (EE) and more personal accomplishment (PA) by the end of the spring semester. However, faculty members experienced greater depersonalization (DP) in the spring semester.

78%
of the CFG participants indicated their meetings with their critical friend were very to extremely valuable.

Moderately
22.2%



Extremely
44.4%

Very
33.3%

"Thank you for setting this up. It's made a huge difference in the quality of my work life."

"I really really appreciate the creation of community in a university that is increasingly emphasizing individual effort. I also appreciate all the breadth and depth of knowledge in this robust group."

"Taking time to ourselves to connect with others who are like minded. The conversations are good for our mental health."

"I joined this group to widen my network and learn more about the experiences of brilliant people in other departments in the College, and my progress on this goal has been fantastic!"

"It has been really affirming to talk to my partner. I completely reoriented my sense of myself in the classroom this semester after years of Covid teaching as labor. Some of his insights made me feel more at home with my role as a facilitator rather than a "content provider."

"I am not alone, need to focus on myself and my priorities and need to remember what my passion is and keeps me going".

"I have a new friend and colleague in a different department! A new connection made!"

"Talking through what's happening in the classroom that feels uncomfortable or ineffective really recommits me to my teaching practice and allows me to see the affordances of what felt like errors."