

Proceedings from the 2019 CEA Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana: The Joy Project: Helping Faculty to Find Joy in and out of the Classroom

Erin Clair
Arkansas Tech University

One of the main challenges facing colleges and universities today is student retention. To help in this effort, many institutions have looked to improve their training of faculty advisors. For decades, research shows that, the vast majority of time, students do not drop out of college because they cannot do the level of work expected of them, but rather because of “life challenges”: financial struggles, the inability to cope with stress, mental or physical health issues, family pressures, or confusion about why they are in college.¹ To help many students stay in college today, faculty need to advise students in these areas as much as they need to advise them about what classes to take. But what we found in surveying the faculty in my college and in the surveys of faculty at other institutions is that faculty members themselves tend to struggle in the same areas as their students...except they don’t have the same level of support as students.² The question then became, “How can we help our faculty members build an effective work-life balance, as that will also better train our faculty as advisors?” In search of that answer, we thereby asked, “How do we help faculty to experience joy (i.e., epiphany, transcendent revelation, breakthrough discovery, and synergy) within their lives and within their classrooms, especially at an underfunded state institution where the rewards for faculty are unlikely to be

financial?” This talk will explain the steps I have undertaken in my work for the dean’s office at the College of Arts & Humanities at Arkansas Tech University to address the above questions via a College-wide endeavor called “The Joy Project.” I’ll share the resources we have made available to faculty to help them understand joy both inside and outside the classroom; I’ll discuss the partnerships we are creating with local institutions to understand joy and stress in the workplace; I’ll share the reactions from faculty to this project (both positive and less positive); and I’ll outline our future plans for The Joy Project. My hope is that this talk can be of use to faculty at other institutions who are facing similar challenges helping their students, themselves, and their colleagues find a work-life balance that is not just livable, but frequently joyful.

When we look at the available literature on faculty work-life balance—that is, the literature about how to be a good administrator—it is mostly about productivity; namely, how administrators can increase faculty productivity. Even the “Great Colleges to Work For” survey published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* measures happiness in terms of workload and compensation (“Great Colleges”). Don’t get me wrong, workload and compensation are critical factors in stress-levels in and out of the office; but let’s think about how students are supported versus how faculty are supported. Mental health, physical health, stress workshops: at many institutions, if not most of them, there is little to no support for faculty in these areas, but yet, we expect faculty to advise students to be healthy in these areas. There are effective leadership models we can employ that value human relationships and a healthy work-life balance. These are *more* productive than models that only value faculty output. As well, techniques from these

models can be used by individuals and small workplace communities even under an unsupportive administration to help faculty gain more control over their own access to joy.

What we've established in the College is a research-based example of a leadership model that attempts to find active ways to value faculty based on what *they* say they need to be successful: from the bottom-up, rather than the top down. Arkansas Tech University, which is the third largest institution in the state, is like a number of state institutions: we are underfunded, and so every student right now counts to the institution as dollar signs. When a student drops out, the faculty are often blamed for not working harder to keep them. My position is as Director of Operations for the College of Arts and Humanities, which means I get one course release to work on projects for the dean's office, but I am still a full-time faculty member. The main part of my job, as I see it, is to help faculty by advocating for them. So if the impetus—our goal as a university—is student retention, and therefore we are called to provide more effective training of faculty advisors -> and reasons for student drop-out largely related to stress, mental health, physical health, family pressures, and/or finances -> then to train faculty in these areas, we had to understand how faculty felt about or balanced these areas in their own lives.

At the beginning of Fall 2018, we surveyed all 107 full-time faculty within the College with a 62% response rate. Since this first phase was focused on advising, adjunct faculty (who account for another 100 faculty in the College) were not surveyed, as they do not serve as official advisors. However, they are included in the project as a whole and will be included in a second survey. The anonymous and voluntary survey, distributed via Survey Pro, asked respondents to rate their satisfaction in 42 areas under the following broad topics:

- Ability to integrate work and personal life
- Community in and out of the workplace (Opportunities to talk with colleagues within the department, the College, and the University at large, and time spent with friends and family)
- Sources of stress in the workplace (Teaching, research, service, advising, annual review, workload increases, campus politics)
- Sources of stress outside the workplace (Health, family, friends, finances, time management, isolation, taking care of sick relatives)
- Stress management (Which techniques they use to manage stress: exercise, meditation, spiritual practice, medication, friends/family)
- Perception of stress (Comparing perceived lack of time on and off contract; stress level as compared to other comparable jobs such as medical doctor or lawyer; who controls career trajectory: students, colleagues, administration, or self)
- How often they experience joy (epiphany, revelation, breakthrough discovery, synergy) in and out of the workplace
- Open response suggestions for how the College can help facilitate a better work-life balance
- Department identifiers so we could learn which departments had particularly strong work-life balance and learn from them

While we already were aware about the workload stresses of our faculty, we were surprised to find how much stress came from their life outside of work. Nearly half of faculty considered

their health a significant source of stress, while 52% of faculty found some degree of stress from managing or providing from someone who is ill, disabled, aging, or in need of special services. Fifty-nine percent of faculty considered their finances a source of stress, while 41% indicated they did not have time to pursue non-work interests. To manage their stress, faculty seem at a loss: half or more of faculty do not practice the stress-reduction techniques listed. Fifty percent of faculty do not exercise regularly each week; 73% do not have a meditation practice, and 56% have no spiritual practice. Somewhat shockingly, 52% of faculty use medication to manage stress.

Despite these stressors, the overwhelming majority of faculty (77%) are satisfied with their jobs at ATU. But the pattern of outside-of-work stress colored how they understand stress, time management, and even happiness. For example, 35% of faculty reported that they hardly ever feel joy outside of the classroom (compared to 58% of faculty who regularly feel joy *in* the classroom). What this seems to indicate is that faculty are struggling in the same areas as their college students struggle: family pressures, mental and emotional health and coping skills, time management, and financial pressures. These results required us to look deeper at the department-level subsets to see if there was a correlation in the responses: that is, were some departments handling stress better than others and, if so, why? Surprisingly, the departments that were the most productive on campus—those that serve on the most committees and publish the most—were also the happiest. Those departments who did far fewer of these activities were the least happy. The departmental-level results correlated with how satisfied the faculty members were with their level of intra-department communication with their colleagues: a sense of belonging to

a supportive community increased not just faculty productivity, but also faculty happiness and moments of joy.

Between the question results and the open responses about how the College can help faculty to experience more moments of joy, we determined three main areas of need to focus on during the year:

- Need for Community (as faculty wanted opportunities to be together in informal ways)
- Work-Life Balance Skills (as faculty, on the whole, do not employ healthy stress-reduction practices)
- Cultivating Moments of Joy (as the data showed that faculty, on the whole, do not intentionally recognize when things are good or know how to replicate those moments)³

Need for Community

After talking with the department heads whose faculty indicated the strongest sense of community and happiness, we found that what seemed to work best was a bottom-up approach to community where gatherings are determined by the faculty themselves. A top-down approach—what one faculty member called “Forced Family Fun”—feels like an extension of work obligations, and hence is another source of stress. So based on faculty suggestions via polling, I began to facilitate informal, bottom-up College activities for faculty to decompress and talk to each other: monthly gatherings at a local sports bar, a College picnic, a College Faculty playlist

of their favorite current songs. The faculty came out strong, with 30-60 faculty attending each event. For faculty who are not used to socializing with each other across disciplines, those numbers were very good and indicate faculty hunger for community. In the future, we're planning to expand these activities to trivia nights, floating trips down local rivers, and hiking excursions.

Work-Life Balance Skills

As the survey showed significant stress but few practices to manage the stress, another goal was to provide resources to help faculty with stress management and work-life balance. I compiled an extensive bibliography for The Joy Project of research on positive psychology, mindfulness practices, neurological and philosophical studies of happiness, and academic work-life balance recommendations. The bibliography---compiled of books, articles, fiction, poetry, films, documentaries, and TED Talks---was distributed to faculty as a resource, and the works therein were made available to faculty and students for check-out or viewing by searching "The Joy Project" on the main search box on our university library website.

To directly teach stress management and work-life balance techniques to faculty in the College, we organized a four-week workshop series on positive psychology and mindfulness. The participants who enrolled in the series increased their positivity score 30 points from the start to the end of the four weeks, and reported feeling better able to deal with stress. However, only ten of the 102 full-time faculty signed up for the project, and they were all women. As the Humanities are a critique-based culture—we are trained to criticize things in order to make them better—rewiring our brains to be positive can feel like the opposite of our profession. Further

research is needed to see whether positivity, or even seeking help, is stigmatized by faculty in general or by specific subgroups.

In order to help faculty better understand our own issues of stress, we partnered with the local hospital to have faculty offer stress-reduction workshops in art, music, and writing to physicians. This helped the physicians learn techniques to combat “second victim” syndrome and burnout, while also teaching the faculty who were offering the workshops how to use the skills they already know to manage their own stress.

Last, we traveled to Angelo State University, a peer institution repeatedly ranked as a “Great College to Work For” to learn about their work-life balance practices. Takeaway Needs for our own campus included promotion from within the University, incentives for taking on additional duties, on-campus daycare for faculty at a reduced rate, workforce development for spouses and partners, and an urgent care facility on campus.

Cultivating Moments of Joy

It is difficult to value moments of joy, or know how to replicate them, if we focus on critiquing what went wrong and not valuing what went right. So the dean’s office began collecting “moments of joy in the classroom” on our College website. These moments will be made available to faculty so they can recognize what happiness looks like and then learn from each other. In conjunction with learning how to recognize moments of joy, I gave a talk through our campus Center for Teaching and Excellence in Learning on designing holistic courses that

address students' daily lives through creative assignments: that is, designing courses that make us as faculty happy to teach with assignments that are most likely to produce moments of joy.

Reaction from Faculty to The Joy Project

The initial reactions to The Joy Project---from the initial survey to the concept itself---ranged from gratitude to suspicion. Both reactions make sense: if an administration had never before directly wanted to know about faculty work-life balance with plans to improve it, it is natural for faculty to wonder if there were any ulterior motives that would require extra work by the faculty or stricter oversight of their actions. As the gatherings, events, and resources got underway, though, and faculty could see the project was genuinely meant to help meet the needs they indicated, the reaction to the project became overwhelming positive. As the plans for community were not coming from the dean or the upper administration, but from me as a fellow faculty member, and as the gatherings had no other purpose but to relax and chat (with no expectations on them), they attended the gatherings and events en masse. The sense of comradery, support, and friendship grew in the College merely by providing opportunities to make such things happen.

Future Plans and Takeaways

Our next steps in the project are to survey faculty again and analyze the effects of the first year of the project. We will expand the survey to include adjunct faculty, which will double the impact of the project. Based on feedback, we will adjust our approaches and our programming.

As well, we have already begun to incorporate what we've learned from The Joy Project into faculty advisor training programs and handbooks so we can better help faculty to guide students to their academic and career goals. On a larger scale, we would like to put into action suggestions from our trip to Angelo State University, beginning with career services for faculty spouses and partners, health insurance reduction plans tied to wellness activities, and advocating for internal promotions.

What we learned from this project as administrators, though, is invaluable. Faculty are more than capable of doing the work we ask of them, and we are used to supporting them in that work, but unless we treat them as human beings with complex mental, physical, emotional, and family lives, and support them in that work as well, then we are not providing an optimal environment for our faculty *or* our students. Faculty today are asked to holistically mentor their students and consider more than just the quality of their academic work, but the qualities of their students' lives. We need to consciously and explicitly offer the same consideration to our faculty. Because, ultimately, effective academic leadership is about giving people a home to do their work: where people feel comfortable to grow and change, where people feel at ease to be their best and truest selves, and where people feel a sense of belonging.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Frank Daley's 2010 article in *College Quarterly*, "Why College Students Drop Out and What We Do about it," or Vivienne Brunsden, et. al. argument from 2010 that "interactionist and ethnographic approaches," rather than academic frameworks, are the most useful measures for understanding attrition rates, or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation continuing study on the 55% percent higher education attrition rate: most of them first generation, low-income, and minority students with fewer support sources for financial, mental, physical, and family health (Daley; Brunsden et. al.; Hess).

² For surveys of faculty work-life balance and the ability to cope with stress in and out of the workplace, see, for example, MIT's "Quality of Life" surveys ("Highlights").

³ That is, three main areas of need that we in the College have some level of control over, unlike, say, faculty salaries and benefits, or space for a permanent faculty lounge, all of which are controlled at the University-level and not the College-level.

Works Cited

- Brunsdon, Vivienne, Mark Davies, Mark Shevlin, and Maeve Bracken. “Why Do HE Students Drop Out? A Test of Tinto’s Model.” *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2000, pp. 31-310.
- Daley, Frank. “Why College Students Drop Out and What We Do about It.” *College Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3, Summer 2010, pp. 1-5.
- “Great Colleges to Work For 2018.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 July 2018, www.chronicle.com/interactives/greatcolleges18.
- Hess, Abigail. “Bill Gates: US College Dropout Rates Are 'Tragic'.” *CNBC*, CNBC, 10 Oct. 2017, www.cnbc.com/2017/10/10/bill-gates-us-college-dropout-rates-are-tragic.html.
- “Highlights from the 2016 Faculty and Staff Quality of Life Survey.” *MIT*, 2016, web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/291/ir.html.