



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## TIPS FOR DE-STRESSING FRENZIED FACULTY

Occasionally, I run across academic articles that advise students about succeeding in college. As I skim over all the succinct list of tips from student punctuality to note taking, I have wondered where faculty's long-awaited, prize-winning survival guide might be. Did I miss the day when the professor distributed my copy in some barely remembered, over-theorized, graduate blur? If I did, someone tell me, and I will go back and demand a copy. In the 10 years I have been teaching, just about every rule I have ever known has changed. It is difficult to distinguish between last week's to this week's to that-will-start-next-week's rule. Even as I write this, some important I-probably-should-but-don't-know-yet rule is changing. I just hope to survive all the class prep, office hours, student conferences, committee meetings, grading, and actual teaching. Over the years, I have observed colleagues who thrive compared to those whose passion is squashed beneath the academic minutia. There have been a few, however, who seem unflappable. This article will summarize the strategies that I have observed and utilized in navigating the academic minefield.

*Schedule down time with colleagues.* Lunch is a great time when colleagues can network and catch up on the latest campus news. Eating together allows everyone to relax in a congenial environment. A friend, who works for a competing institution, meets twice a month with tenure-track faculty. It gives her a chance to meet others outside of her department and get to know them in a social atmosphere. Fun dulls the workplace edge, and networking strengthens the collegiate structure.

*Limit the time-killing, idle chit-chat.* When at work, an instructor's time is fair game to anyone passing by. Your office gives clues to others. Do you have open chairs that invite others to plop down until the next class begins? Examine your seating arrangement, and determine the subliminal messages your office is sending. Several years ago, a colleague made casual mention that

he deliberately made his office inaccessible. In fact, he discouraged non-essential visitors; I cannot remember seeing an extra chair. At the time, his method seemed excessive; however, while I do not want to encourage anti-social behavior, I caution that office time is precious. Students must have access to instructors during office hours, but excessive visiting with colleagues robs *you of you*. If you find your office is often the location for group gatherings, rethink the office chair arrangement, position for a neutral location, or at least move to the office of the one who seems to have endless time. If instructors do not stake out their time, others will.

*When a meeting is over, leave.* To continue to debate an issue after members of the committee have left is counterproductive. If the item up for discussion is important, then note it and bring it up at the *next* meeting.

*Clearly define your workspace and work time from your personal space and personal time.* When you leave work, leave work. Unfortunately, instructors by their very nature tend to spread work all around: a little at work, a little at home, and, of course, a paper or book always in tow. One English instructor realized that Monday through Friday afternoons were open season on her time; however, she declared a campaign to seize the weekends for herself. So she reclaimed the weekends as hers and hers alone, where school was not allowed to infringe. If you want personal time, squeeze in an extra hour of grading in the office; leave paperwork there.

*Be selective in events you attend.* By all means, support your school and community. But learn to say "no" to events that are not at the top of the list. This often means gently letting down a friend or colleague who would "guilt you" to come just for a couple of hours. If you allow it, extracurricular events will crowd out your personal life.

*Take advantage of email.* I have students create a signature. The signature includes their full name, class, section, and phone number. If I decide to pick up the phone, it saves time and minimizes possible interruptions if I have that student's number handy. Internet classes and "office hours" are being revised continually. I often make night calls to busy students. Many times,



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I can have a student conference by phone or answer a question by email. This saves precious time for both student and instructor.

*Disconnect.* At a determined time, turn off the computer. Do not take one last look at the email. The 10 minutes that it takes to answer an email slides into another few minutes, and soon half an hour slips by.

Faculty are a passionate breed and, unfortunately, sometimes slow learners. We tell our students to pace themselves, prioritize the week's events, and stake out "me" time. Faculty need to learn how to follow their own good advice. Reclaiming personal time means redrawing the boundaries. Passion comes at a powerful price. However, it is a price that faculty often are willing to pay. If not careful, we could lose what we most cherish. We must stand guard against time slipping away. It is up to each of us individually, not a once-a-year college rah-rah "welcome back" speech, to maintain commitment. We—the guardians of tomorrow—must protect and nourish our passion to teach. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it, ultimately, to the future.

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