Preventing the Burnout and the Burn Through: Leaning Into Structured and Strategic Rest

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Burnout is a known issue in higher education, but *burn through*—the way institutional practices drive individuals into and beyond burnout—is less recognized. This paper explores the definitions and contributing factors of both burnout and burn through, providing a conceptual framework grounded in care, well-being, and cultural change. This paper advocates for intentional rest practices as a form of resistance and change to institutional overwork and misalignment by presenting the concept of structured and strategic rest, rooted in the work of scholars such as Tricia Hersey and Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith. It further asserts practical tools and leadership strategies that support cultural shifts toward sustainability, wholeness, and humane professional expectations.

Keywords: burnout, burn through, structured rest, higher education, leadership

Introduction

The prevalence of burnout in higher education has been well-documented, yet a lesser-discussed phenomenon—*burn through*—continues to erode the health of institutions and their people. Burnout refers to the personal impact of chronic overwork, emotional fatigue, and structural imbalance, while burn through highlights systemic patterns that rapidly consume and discard people and their talent. This paper examines both phenomena through the lens of institutional leadership, care work, and the power of rest. Using insights from leadership practitioners and rest scholars, including Tricia Hersey (2022) and Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith (2017), the following sections frame rest not as a luxury, but as a strategic imperative for sustainable leadership and organizational transformation.

Understanding Burnout

Burnout is often classified as emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion resulting from ongoing stress and overwork. Contributing factors in higher education, include chronic workload, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, digital fatigue, emotional labor, and values misalignment. Faculty, staff, and administrators are often faced with growing pressures to do more with less, respond to constant demands, and sustain high levels of performance amid shrinking resources. These conditions erode morale, damage retention, and diminish the quality of service to students and communities. Burnout is not simply the result of personal inefficiency or weak coping skills—it is the predictable outcome of systems that perpetuate urgency, inequity, and unsustainable expectations.

Beth Godbee (2023) expands this understanding by distinguishing between structural and individual causes of burnout, urging institutions to stop treating it as an isolated personal failing. She highlighted that the problem is not just overwork, but the cultural and systemic norms that reward overextension and neglect recovery. Without institutional accountability—such as fair workload distribution, recognition of invisible labor, and the cultivation of psychological safety—efforts at personal resilience amount to "band-aid fixes" for deeper structural wounds. Burnout thrives in environments where autonomy is restricted, community is undervalued, and well-being is deprioritized.

Recognizing Burn Through

Burn through differs from burnout in that it highlights the institutional mechanisms that drive turnover, exploit key personnel, and neglect infrastructure investments that impact personnel. This pattern results in the rapid consumption of talent, insufficient support systems, poor change management, and a cycle of crisis response. Burn through disproportionately affects those in care-oriented roles and historically and systemically marginalized communities, compounding systemic inequities – and expands both conceptually and in name what Goodbee (2022, 2023) highlighted as a systemic rather than individual problem.

Burn through refers to the institutional process by which individuals are pushed beyond burnout due to systemic neglect, exploitative practices, and normalized expectations of overwork. Unlike burnout, which focuses on individual symptoms, burn through highlights how institutions continue to demand labor from already depleted individuals, often until disengagement, departure, or collapse occurs.

Expanding the Concept of Burn Through

Although *burn through* is not yet widely recognized in academic literature as a formal term distinct from burnout, it aptly describes a worsening condition wherein individuals persist through deep exhaustion, driven by systemic pressures. Instead of being supported in slowing down when facing burnout symptoms, individuals pushed into burn through mode often continue working beyond their limits—sometimes due to necessity, internalized and externally pushed expectations, or cultural norms and deficiencies within institutions that seek only productivity without appropriate support structures in place.

In the context of higher education, burn through can manifest when faculty, staff, or administrators face ongoing demands without institutional mechanisms to support recovery or redistribute labor. These conditions are especially prevalent in under-resourced environments and care-oriented roles, where the work is mission-driven, people-powered, and the boundaries between work and personal life are often blurred. The expectation to "power through" can ultimately intensify harm, erode long-term capacity, and normalize crisis-driven work cultures.

Godbee (2022) reinforces this framing, arguing that burnout is not simply an individual failure to manage stress, but a "collectively constructed" issue rooted in dehumanizing institutional structures. Recognizing burn through as an institutional pattern—not just a personal shortcoming—invites leadership and institutional actors to take responsibility for cultivating cultures of care, rest, and sustainability.

Institutional strategies to address burn through include creating space for candid conversations about workload, embedding rest into professional development structures, adjusting expectations around availability and urgency, and publicly modeling balanced behaviors from the top down. Without these changes, individual efforts to resist burnout are unlikely to succeed. To this point, Godbee (2022) notes that the collective efforts, and collective care, is what is most needed.

Intersectional Impacts of Burn Through

Burn through is not experienced uniformly across the workforce; it disproportionately affects individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. Structural inequities—such as racism, sexism, and classism—shape how burnout manifests, how it is responded to, and who is most likely to carry its burdens. Black women and other women of color in leadership often find themselves navigating both hypervisibility and invisibility: expected to lead equity work, mentor across difference, and perform at high levels while contending with racialized and gendered scrutiny. The expectation to constantly adapt, perform, and translate across dominant cultural frameworks creates a state of leadership code-switching—a survival strategy that is both cognitively taxing and emotionally depleting (Grier, 2021). These dynamics accelerate burn through by compelling leaders to remain visible, credible, and resilient in the face of sustained institutional resistance.

The concept of "racial battle fatigue" (Smith, 2004) helps explain the cumulative toll of navigating racially hostile or invalidating spaces. Constant code-switching, microaggressions, and resistance to inclusion efforts deplete emotional and cognitive resources, contributing to what King (1988) terms "multiple jeopardy"—the compounded effects of holding multiple marginalized identities. Harris-Perry's (2011) work on the "Strong Black Woman" schema

further illustrates how cultural expectations of unbreakable strength discourage vulnerability, help-seeking, or rest. Individuals experiencing burn through under these dynamics may mask their depletion to meet external and internalized expectations, leading to patterns of compartmentalized or silent burn through. Without intersectionally informed interventions, institutions risk reinforcing the very inequities they claim to dismantle. Rest-forward structures must account for these nuanced dynamics by embedding cultural competence, workload equity, and trauma-informed care into policies and leadership practice.

Strategic and Structured Rest

Structured and strategic rest refers to the intentional creation of rhythms, routines, and policies that support recovery, conserve energy, and promote long-term, sustainable efforts that center on and care for our humanity. It expands rest beyond the personal into the structural, recognizing that exhaustion is often built into the architecture of academic institutions and other complex organizations. Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith (2017) identifies seven types of rest—physical, mental, sensory, creative, emotional, social, and spiritual—that respond to distinct forms of fatigue. This framework helps to more appropriately diagnose areas of depletion and respond with targeted recovery strategies. Tricia Hersey's Rest is Resistance (2022) extends this thinking into the political realm, asserting that reclaiming rest challenges grind culture and reclaims dignity, particularly for communities historically dehumanized by labor systems.

Rest cannot be sustained by individuals alone. Beth Godbee (2023) argues that burnout is a systemic failure, not a personal flaw, and calls for "large-scale and long-haul" institutional interventions. These include policies that slow down workflow expectations, distribute labor equitably, and scale back harmful norms. Strategic rest, in this context, becomes a tool for redesign, disrupting the status quo of overextension and offering pathways toward more humane work cultures. Drawing on Grier's (2021) research, structured respite can include practices such as biennial sabbaticals, maximum leave accrual, and meeting-free weeks—not only for executive leaders, but for faculty, staff, and frontline professionals whose roles demand continuous emotional labor and cognitive output. When institutions embed these structures across all roles and ranks, they affirm rest not as reward or escape, but as a shared responsibility and strategic necessity. Rest becomes infrastructure—essential to retention, equity, and institutional integrity.

In practice, leaders and staff alike can benefit from learning to diagnose their own fatigue and respond with the appropriate form of rest. For example, after a day of back-to-back virtual meetings, sensory and mental rest may be most needed. After a difficult conflict resolution meeting, emotional and social rest may be more appropriate. By building awareness of these distinctions, individuals and organizations can cultivate more resilient, responsive rhythms of recovery. Leaning into these ideas can be done much like any other data-informed decision is made in an institutional setting. Thus, structured rest must be viewed as a necessary strategy for individual and institutional success.

Rest as Leadership Practice

Rest is not just an individual behavior; it is a leadership stance and strategic competency. Leaders who model and prioritize rest actively reshape organizational culture by interrupting the normalization of urgency, overextension, and extraction as ways of working. In doing so, they signal that well-being, reflection, and restoration are not counterproductive—they are

essential to effective leadership and institutional longevity. Leadership that values rest cultivates more resilient teams, reduces attrition, and enhances decision-making through greater clarity and emotional regulation. This is particularly critical in environments where burnout is prevalent, and care labor is unequally distributed.

Rest-forward leadership includes three key dimensions: modeling, designing, and protecting. Modeling rest means leaders visibly practice boundary-setting, take their leave, acknowledge fatigue, and normalize the importance of recovery. Designing for rest means building structures—such as meeting-free periods, distributed decision-making, and workload audits—that embed rest into the work ecosystem. Protecting rest means ensuring that policies are equitably applied, that rest is not penalized or pathologized, and that cultures of overwork are actively disrupted. As Godbee (2023) argues, this work includes dismantling the "way things are done" and intentionally slowing down timelines to prevent institutional harm. Grier (2021) adds that for systemically non-dominant leaders and equity practitioners, rest is also a mechanism for resilience in the face of cultural taxation. Leadership, then, becomes not about how much one produces, but about how effectively one stewards energy—one's own and that of others.

Structured Leave for Leadership Roles

As leadership roles carry heightened visibility, decision fatigue, and emotional labor, several institutions have begun to develop leave policies specifically for individuals in administrative or managerial positions. These structured leave programs recognize the unique intensity of leadership work and the necessity for intentional rest to maintain effectiveness and innovation. At the University of Utah, "Administrator Leave" is offered to faculty members who have completed terms in significant leadership roles. This policy provides one semester of paid leave after three years of administrative service, and two semesters after five years, framing the break as both a reward and a recalibration opportunity.

Hillsborough Community College in Florida offers a sabbatical program for administrators and professional/managerial employees that mirrors traditional faculty structures. Eligible staff members can take leave for one to six months at 75% pay, provided they demonstrate how their leave will contribute to their professional growth and the improvement of the institution. Similarly, the County College of Morris in New Jersey offers both full and "mini" sabbaticals to its management team, designed to support creative work, professional exploration, and sector engagement.

These leadership-focused policies underscore a broader commitment to shared sustainability. By acknowledging that those responsible for guiding institutions also require rest, recalibration, and space to innovate, these programs challenge outdated assumptions that leadership requires constant availability or self-sacrifice. When structured leave is extended to those in positions of influence, it sets a cultural precedent: wellness and institutional effectiveness are not opposing forces but interdependent priorities. In this way, structured rest becomes a model for leadership integrity, not an exception to it.

Structured Leave Across Sectors

Structured leave policies—such as sabbaticals and restorative leaves—are increasingly recognized as essential tools for addressing systemic exhaustion and fostering long-term well-being. While historically concentrated in academic settings, these practices are now

expanding across sectors as organizations acknowledge the need to embed rest into the rhythm of professional life. In the corporate sector, companies such as Adobe, Bank of America, and PayPal have offered formal sabbatical programs to employees with five or more years of service. These programs range from four weeks to three months, often fully or partially paid, and are framed as periods for renewal, reflection, or personal growth. Importantly, such policies are not reserved for executive roles alone; they are becoming a valued part of talent retention and engagement strategies across all levels of the organization.

In the nonprofit sector, structured leave is increasingly framed not just as a benefit, but as an equity tool. Organizations like the Durfee Foundation and YES! have developed sabbatical programs tailored specifically for nonprofit leaders and staff in high-touch roles, acknowledging the emotional and relational demands of mission-driven work. These policies are often tied to leadership development and sustainability rather than crisis response, positioning rest as a proactive organizational value. Some programs, such as those funded by philanthropic initiatives, also prioritize accessibility by offering full salary continuation and funding for organizational support during the absence.

Higher education institutions continue to lead in formalizing sabbatical structures, especially for tenured faculty. Colleges like Oregon State University and Salt Lake Community College offer sabbaticals after six years of service, often for one or two semesters, to promote scholarly renewal and research advancement. Notably, some community colleges have extended sabbatical eligibility to include professional staff or administrators. These examples signal a growing awareness that rest, creativity, and institutional contribution are deeply linked, regardless of job classification. The expansion of leave policies across sectors reflects a shifting paradigm: rest is not a reward for surviving overwork, but a structural component of thriving, sustainable workplaces.

Leaders play a crucial role in modeling and promoting a restful culture. This includes advocating for time-off policies, protecting team members from overextension, and designing workflows that do not rely on constant urgency. Rest-forward leadership prioritizes care, sustainability, and alignment, positioning well-being as a core component of institutional transformation.

Structured Rest Across Cultures and Time

In addition to Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's seven types of rest, Ximena Vengoechea's Rest Easy (2023) offers a contemporary, person-centered approach to implementing rest as a resilience practice. She frames rest not as a luxury but as a form of self-preservation and abundance, presenting diverse strategies—including movement, sound, journaling, digital disconnection, and mindfulness—that align with and expand upon Dalton-Smith's model. A key contribution of her work is the emphasis on personalization; readers are encouraged to take a self-assessment to identify their ideal rest modalities, underscoring that adequate rest must be responsive to one's identity, context, and specific patterns of fatigue.

Vengoechea also addresses the cultural and technological barriers that make rest difficult, especially in high-pressure environments like higher education. She advocates for proactive digital boundaries, intentional pauses, and compassionate self-talk to counteract internalized norms of productivity. These strategies provide practical ways to incorporate sustainable care into daily routines. By foregrounding rest as both individualized and institutionally relevant,

her work reinforces and complements leadership-centered approaches to rest, adding nuance to how organizations can embed recovery and well-being into their everyday operations.

Structured rest is not a modern invention but a deeply rooted global phenomenon embedded in spiritual, communal, and environmental traditions across cultures. Throughout history, rest has served not only as physical recuperation but also as a spiritual, emotional, and social necessity—intertwining recovery with ritual, meaning-making, and ecological rhythms.

In Judaism, the observance of Shabbat as a sacred, weekly cessation from labor reflects a covenantal rest—a divine mandate to pause, reflect, and connect with others. Shabbat emphasizes both spiritual renewal and social equity by mandating rest for all, including servants and animals. Christianity similarly preserves Sabbath traditions, although the day and emphasis vary among denominations, emphasizing rest as a form of renewal and honoring the resurrection. In Islam, Friday (Jumu'ah) prayers form a rhythm of rest through spiritual gathering and communal pause. These structured times of spiritual rest are not just about inactivity but about centering values, relationships, and intentional stillness.

Rest practices are integral in many Indigenous knowledge systems, where well-being is viewed as holistic, relational, and inseparable from spiritual and communal life. For the Māori of Aotearoa (New Zealand), the Te Whare Tapa Whā model—developed by Sir Mason Durie—emphasizes balance across four interconnected dimensions: taha tinana (physical well-being), taha wairua (spiritual well-being), taha whānau (family and social relationships), and taha hinengaro (mental and emotional well-being). This framework positions rest not as an isolated activity, but as a natural expression of maintaining harmony across one's internal and external worlds (Durie, 1998). Similarly, in many Native American traditions, rest is embedded in ceremonial and communal practices, such as sweat lodges, talking circles, and healing rituals. These practices often involve intentional withdrawal from daily routines and serve as opportunities for physical purification, emotional release, spiritual connection, and collective healing (Duran, 2006; Gone, 2013; Hart, 2002). Across these Indigenous frameworks, rest is not merely recuperative—it is restorative, ceremonial, and essential to the ongoing health of individuals, communities, and ecosystems.

Across African cultural traditions, rest is often expressed through communal, spiritual, and cosmological rhythms that are deeply intertwined with daily life and ancestral connection. Among the Serer people of Senegal, certain days—particularly Mondays and Thursdays—are traditionally observed as sacred or spiritually significant, often reserved for ritual prayer, familial gatherings, and ancestral veneration (Diouf, 1998). Ceremonies such as the Xooy divination ceremony, led by Saltigue priest-healers, and seasonal rituals like the Raan Festival, create structured times for reflection, renewal, and alignment with cosmological cycles. In Gabon, Bwiti spiritual practices—primarily associated with the Fang and Mitsogo peoples—incorporate overnight ceremonies that involve music, communal introspection, and the use of iboga, a psychoactive root used in healing and spiritual work. These rituals are designed to facilitate physical, emotional, and spiritual balance through guided rest and altered states of consciousness (Fernandez, 1982). Across these traditions, rest is not passive disengagement but a communal return to rhythm, meaning, and ancestral wisdom.

Contemporary models like Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's seven types of rest (physical, mental, sensory, creative, emotional, social, and spiritual) echo these ancestral patterns. Recent contributions, such as Ximena Vengoechea's person-centered framework and research on deep rest, cognitive rest, and systemic rest, suggest that rest is most effective when it aligns

with context, identity, and need. Taken together, these cross-cultural and scholarly insights affirm that structured rest is not an escape from responsibility—it is a return to wholeness, community, and a deeper understanding of meaning.

Recommendations and Tools for Interrupting Burn Through

Burn through is not simply a result of overwork—it is the product of cultural, structural, and institutional choices. Moving from recognition to repair requires a rest-centered redesign of how organizations lead, support, and sustain people. The following recommendations align with both contemporary scholarship and activist frameworks such as Tricia Hersey's *Rest is Resistance* (Hersey, 2022) and Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's *Sacred Rest* (Dalton-Smith, 2017).

Leadership Strategies

1. Model Boundaries and Rest Literacy: Leaders should demonstrate a nuanced understanding of rest beyond sleep or vacation. As Dalton-Smith (2017) explains, burnout often stems from deficits in specific types of rest—such as mental or creative rest—not just physical fatigue.
2. Disrupt Urgency Culture: Hersey (2022) critiques grind culture as a tool of white supremacy that normalizes overproduction and detachment from bodily needs. Leaders must interrupt urgency as a default mode.
3. Rest-Centered Performance Reviews: Shift evaluative systems to value long-term sustainability and energy stewardship. Ask: "What would it mean to lead well and rested?"

Human Resources and Policy Shifts

1. Restorative Leave and Rest Spaces: Inspired by Hersey's (2022) call for communal rest, institutions can establish policies like restorative leave and reimagine space, offering rest pods, sensory-reduced rooms, and encouraging break taking for all employees.
2. Cultural Workload Audits: Include assessments of invisible labor and rest accessibility audits: Who is never "off"? Who gets to step away? What barriers do we need to remove so that everyone can better manage their rest needs?
3. Use Rest Typologies as Tools: Dalton-Smith's (2017) *7 Types of Rest* framework can guide onboarding and retreats to help teams identify where their energy is most depleted.

Team and Organizational Practices

1. Team Rest Charters: Co-create team norms that protect boundaries, such as no Friday emails or seasonal "slow weeks" (Hersey, 2022).
2. Check-Ins Rooted in Rest: Use questions like "What kind of rest do you need right now?" to normalize the need to pause.
3. Protect Deep Work and Creative Time: As Dalton-Smith (2017) notes, creative rest is especially overlooked in care-based professions. Allowing for silence, beauty, and uninterrupted work enhances well-being and innovation.

These practices shift rest from the margins to the center of institutional life. When rest is viewed not as a reward for productivity, but as a birthright and a relational ethic, organizations become spaces of renewal rather than extraction.

Conclusion

While burnout has become a recognizable term in workplace discourse, burn through remains under-theorized. Yet it surfaces in distinct patterns that reveal the varying ways people cope with chronic institutional neglect. Identifying these patterns helps shift the burden from individual failure to systemic malfunction. This typology outlines three core forms: silent burn through, explosive burn through, and compartmentalized burn through.

Silent Burn Through

This form often affects individuals who internalize exhaustion without expressing it outwardly. They may continue to perform their duties—quietly absorbing stress, hiding fatigue, and avoiding conflict—until they suddenly resign or disengage without warning, or worse, begin to have health issues. Silent burn through is dangerous because it can go unnoticed by leadership, creating false perceptions of stability until critical knowledge and relationships are lost.

Explosive Burn Through

Characterized by a dramatic rupture, this type includes public resignations, emotional breakdowns, or conflict that erupts after sustained institutional harm. Often, this is not the result of a single incident but the accumulation of unresolved stress and microaggressions. Explosive burn through challenges the narrative of the "angry" or "unprofessional" employee by revealing the weight of prolonged neglect.

Compartmentalized Burn Through

In this model, individuals maintain high performance publicly but experience emotional, mental, or physical collapse privately. They may continue meeting goals while relying on dissociation, overwork, or detachment. This pattern frequently appears in high-achieving professionals who feel both pressure to represent their communities and fear of disappointing their institutions.

These manifestations are not mutually exclusive. Many individuals cycle through different types or experience hybrid forms. The value of this typology lies in helping leaders and organizations recognize the early signs of burn through—not just burnout—and respond with accountability and structural change rather than individual intervention alone.

Institutional and organizational success is predicated on the success of whole and comprehensively cared for individuals and teams. Rest, as a strategic imperative, must be part of the ongoing processes we incorporate into leadership structures, and institutional priorities to best care for teams and prevent burn through.

Burnout and burn through are intertwined challenges that demand both individual strategies and systemic change. Structured and strategic rest provides a pathway toward renewal and institutional accountability. By shifting cultural expectations and embedding care into

leadership and policy, we can build more humane and effective institutions. Rest is not a pause from the work; it is the work of caring for self and others.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my colleagues Vanessa Neal and Iesha Valencia for their thought leadership and partnership on this topic. Additionally, thanks to my colleague Michelle Strange and to all those who continue to push for change by centering rest and care in their leadership practices.

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