Mind the Gap:
Divergent Perspectives on Faculty Workload

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In May 2023, the USFA and Employer released a report from the Joint Workload Committee, which can be read here. The report is presented as two parts, one from USFA representatives and one from Employer representatives. In this VOX article, I highlight some of the report's key findings, identify gaps between faculty and Employer perceptions of workload, and offer ideas to begin addressing our pressing workload issues.

Highlights from the USFA section of the report

The USFA section covers broad ground, including research on faculty workloads, analysis of Assignment of Duties documents, and focus groups and a survey of USask faculty. Some striking findings are that:

- Approximately 40% of assistant and full professors, 48% of associate professors, and 70% of lecturers (!) have considered leaving their job because of workload (p. 35).

- Faculty report working 53.3 hours per week on average, including evenings and weekends, to manage their workloads (p.

32).

- Approximately 65-80% of faculty report that their work-related stress has increased (p. 35). [1]

- Faculty report several significant drivers of workload problems, including reduced staff support, increased teaching loads and clerical/administrative work, a reduced faculty complement that has increased workload for those who remain, lack of recognition of various types of work including clinical work and "invisible" tasks, and low morale and rising burnout.

Highlights from the Employer section of the report

The Employer's section of the report is comparatively short, but well worth reading. Some comments in this section do acknowledge workload concerns raised by faculty, such as rising burnout and the challenges of adapting teaching to meet increasing student needs. Likewise, some reasonable suggestions are offered that might help address

workload concerns. Unfortunately, however, these comments and suggestions are balanced against some surprisingly unreasonable commentary (for example, implying that faculty who run labs work harder and produce better scholarship than those who produce single-authored books). Moreover, several themes in this section highlight a substantial gap between faculty and Employer perceptions of workload.

Theme 1: Workload creep

The gap between faculty and Employer perceptions is most evident in the Employer's Analysis of Workload Creep (p. 51-52). The Employer draws three major conclusions from their analysis. The first conclusion is that faculty get too much vacation time. This conclusion could be interpreted as implying that faculty workloads are too low. However, counting the number of vacation days faculty are allotted ignores the reality that faculty, like workers in other sectors, are often unable to use their vacation time because their workloads are too high to take a break (e.g., Hilbrecht & Smale, 2016; Kuykendall et al., 2021). The second conclusion from the

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Employer's analysis is that "creep in teaching loads was found to be insignificant" (p. 51). Here the Employer explicitly states that faculty teaching loads are too low. They offer questionable numerical data to support this claim. First, they report that the number of 3CU sections per full-time faculty member increased in 2021 relative to the years prior, but attribute this increase to a "one year drop in FTE faculty in 2021" (p. 51). Although 2021 is the last year for which they present data in this analysis, both USFA data reported on p. 11 and the 2022 faculty complement the Employer cites two paragraphs later indicate that the faculty complement continued to decline in 2022 and 2023, contradicting the claim that the drop was temporary. Second, the Employer claims USask's sections-to-faculty ratio is well below a "normative" "minimum reasonable teaching assignment" (p. 51) for a research-intensive university, yet they provide no comparative data to substantiate that claim. Third, analyzing 3CU sections averaged across all of campus ignores large differences in teaching workloads among units. Fourth, analyzing 3CU sections ignores how rising enrolment caps *within* 3CU sections impact teaching workloads. The Employer does address "student numbers" by claiming that USask faculty fall short of a "rule of thumb" metric that we should have "(23 BSc + 7 GS)/FTE faculty member" (p. 51). Again, however, no data are provided to support this metric and it is applied across all campus units combined.

The employer's third conclusion is that faculty are "overloaded with committee work and the governance of collegial processes" (p. 51). Notably, faculty concerns about administrative workload largely do not refer to collegial committees but rather how administrative systems such as ConnectionPoint and Concur, as well as loss of support staff, generate overwork. Furthermore, the Employer characterizes USask as being in a state of "over-governance," which they define as the unwillingness of faculty to cut academic programming, amalgamate small units into larger ones, and streamline collegial processes (p. 52). This aligns with another theme of the Employer's report, which is that if faculty workloads are too high, then faculty themselves are to blame.

Theme 2: Faculty choose their own high workloads

The Employer begins their report by arguing that faculty research, and some teaching, is "passion work" that faculty "choose to take on" (p. 49), and that to protect academic freedom, the Employer cannot dictate the scope of this work. The Employer also characterizes faculty workload as "a perception," suggesting that faculty might (mis)perceive their workloads by expecting more than available resources allow, failing to keep their "drive for excellence [from] tipping into perfectionism," and carrying heavy emotional loads (p. 49).

These claims are problematic in several ways. First, characterizing work as passion-driven legitimizes exploitative management practices such as asking employees to work extra hours without pay (Kim et al., 2020). Second, attributing workload problems to faculty (mis)perception absolves the Employer of responsibility for creating a workplace climate that pushes overwork. It also implies that faculty should simply lower their expectations and reduce their emotional loads, which are problematic suggestions because lower expectations likely translate to lower quality, and emotional loads are themselves created by external factors, including student needs and workplace conditions. Third, characterizing research as a "choice" ignores the reality that faculty are not only required to conduct research but are also expected to excel in doing so (as the Employer reiterates throughout their report). Even more importantly, characterizing research as a choice absolves the Employer of responsibility for ensuring that faculty's teaching and administrative workloads are manageable within the context that they must balance these workloads alongside the time required to conduct their research.

The Employer's report also attributes faculty's workload to their reluctance to cut established academic programming in response to reduced faculty complements and fiscal capacity (p. 52). This too shifts responsibility away from the Employer and ignores the reality that cutting academic programming risks compromising academic quality. This reality is most obvious for programs that are subject to external standards such as accreditation. Indeed, multiple USask programs have come perilously close to losing

their accreditation because faculty have been asked to mount them with too few resources. Although this issue might be less obvious for programs that do not require accreditation, it stands to reason that mounting them with too few resources would likewise jeopardize their quality.

Framing reduced faculty complements and fiscal capacity as problems to be solved by cutting programming also ignores the reality that budgets reflect choices that could be made differently. Any number of choices, such as how funds are allocated across units, how funds are allocated to faculty versus administrative positions, how predictable leaves such as sabbaticals and parental leaves are planned for, and how senior administration responds to government funding decisions, could offer potential solutions that do not compromise program quality. Financial problems should be pushed "up" to senior administration and governments that set budget policies, instead of pushed "down" on faculty and students to resolve through reductions in the quality of academic programs.

Theme 3: Differing perceptions of reasonable workloads

A final theme worth noting in the Employer's report relates to perceptions of what a 'reasonable' faculty workload might be. For example, concerns are raised that faculty refuse to increase their workloads relative to historical assignments or relative to what they consider to be a comfortable workload, and that research-focused faculty are reluctant to take on service roles. Yet, little consideration is given to the possibility that these might be reasonable decisions. For example, given evidence of workload creep provided by USask faculty and research on academic workloads, perhaps historical workloads were manageable, and faculty are right to push back against increases. Perhaps the purported need to increase workloads is caused by bad fiscal policy and faculty are right to resist such demands. Perhaps research-focused faculty do need time to produce excellent research. Perhaps a "comfortable" workload is what we should be aiming for, and we should not uncritically accept that "comfortable" necessarily implies "underworked".

Calls to Action

The Workload Committee Report offers numerous recommendations for how to move forward.

I suggest we start with the following:

1. **Recognize** that there are significant workload problems at USask. If you are among the 40%-70% of faculty who have considered leaving the university for this reason, know that you are far from alone. If you are among the remaining faculty who haven't considered leaving, know that this is a challenge your colleagues are facing. Consider that implied and explicit claims that faculty are underworked might have little basis in reality.

2. **Discuss and implement** the report's recommendations for addressing workload concerns. As one example, thoughtful recommendations are provided for revising Assignment of Duties documents to better account for faculty workloads (p. 46).

3. **Push back** against demands for workloads to increase, and **push for** systemic changes. Here, we might consider the recommendation to develop clear standards for what constitutes a reasonable workload (p. 46) to be an urgently needed starting point to reduce the gap between faculty and Employer perceptions of faculty workloads.

References

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