

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Our teaching-and-learning experts give you insights on what works in the classroom. Delivered on Thursdays. Teaching is written by [Beth McMurtrie](#) and [Beckie Supiano](#). We love hearing from readers, so please don't hesitate to reach out to us directly. You can also read [more articles about teaching and learning](#).

FEBRUARY 4, 2021

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From: Beth McMurtrie

Subject: Teaching: Students Say Their Workload Increased During the Pandemic. Has It?

This week:

- I talk to a teaching expert about the student-workload dilemma.
- I share a survey highlighting concerns faculty members have about intro courses this fall.
- I ask you to tell us how student evaluations are being used during the pandemic.

The Workload Conundrum

You've probably heard about this dilemma, and perhaps even experienced it in your own teaching. Since the pandemic hit, students are [reporting](#) that their academic workloads have increased. In fact, some say they're overwhelmed by the sheer number of assignments they've been given.

Meanwhile, many faculty members say they've scaled back expectations, mindful of the demands on students' time, and of the challenges of online or hybrid teaching. Perhaps they reduced the number of assigned readings or papers. Maybe they replaced high-stakes tests with quizzes, or long lectures with short videos.

What's happening here? Betsy Barre, executive director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at Wake Forest University, has put together a few theories, in a [thoughtful essay](#) I'd highly recommend reading.

I talked to Barre last week about the hypotheses she's developed, based on conversations with students, professors, and colleagues during these past few months.

First, she says, it's possible that instructors are actually assigning more work. Maybe they're excited by new teaching practices they learned over the summer and want to try them — perhaps too many of them — in their classes. Or maybe they're fearful that online learning will put their students at a disadvantage and are compensating by adding more assignments to keep everyone on track.

Another of Barre's hypotheses is that professors haven't made their expectations clear. Did you tell your students, for example, that they shouldn't spend more than 15 minutes on a discussion post or writing prompt? If not, perhaps they're going overboard on work that, if done in class, would have a defined time limit. "It's not that we're expecting too much of students," she says. "But for some students, we're not telling them what we're actually expecting."

Some of Barre's other theories have to do with students' mind-sets. As we all know, if we dislike our work, it can seem to take longer than it actually does. If online assignments feel like a task, and there's not much else going on in their lives because of the pandemic, students may feel as if all they're doing is work. Similarly, if students are anxious and depressed, their ability to study efficiently is impaired, meaning that it actually takes them longer to do their coursework than professors realize.

Another of Barre's hypotheses has to do with an effective teaching practice which may have unintended side effects: breaking large assignments into smaller pieces. It should all add up to the same amount of work. But in reality, five 10-minute assignments spread out over a week takes more time to manage than a single 50-minute one. That's especially true if you are juggling dozens of assignments over four or five courses.

The exhaustion students are experiencing is similar, Barre notes, to how working adults might feel jumping from one task to another during the day, compared to immersing themselves in a project. The time spent could be the same, but the mental energy expended is quite different, and far less satisfying.

Breaking down longer assignments, lowering the stakes of each one, creating more formative assessments and requiring more regular check ins are all effective teaching practices. Should they be scrapped simply because students don't seem to like them?

Barre says no. In fact, she reports that some faculty members say that their students are coming to class better prepared, and that discussions are more engaged. This reminds me of something I heard from a professor at Mount Holyoke College, whose campus [switched to modules this year](#). Teaching a seven-week course, she said, forced her to scale back the number of projects but to dive more deeply into each one, with more regular assessments and feedback. She found that the quality of students' performance increased over all.

This connects to Barre's most intriguing hypothesis, one that [others have expressed](#) as well. What if, before the pandemic, a lot of students were, well, not studying particularly hard? Barre points to [research](#) that shows students often spend far less time on school work than professors expect them to. If professors weren't evaluating learning through frequent assignments and feedback, students could have more easily gotten away with, say, showing up for class without having done the reading and sitting quietly in the back of the classroom.

While instructors may be doing a better job of keeping students engaged and on track, Barre asks, "Is this the moment we hold them accountable? If we know they were only spending 15 hours a week on homework, are we going to now expect them to do 30?"

She knows that's a controversial opinion. And it's unclear if professors would be willing to scale back, particularly when surveys show that many still struggle to engage students in online and hybrid classes.

Given all this, what should instructors do? Barre offers a number of suggestions, starting with a quick reality check. Evaluate how much work you're giving students, and whether you are making your expectations clear.

Faculty members can use an interactive Workload Estimator she helped create to sort that out. Instructors (and students) can enter information such as the number of writing and reading assignments, as well as exams and videos, to determine how much time students will need to spend on the class. You can find the original version, created through Rice University's Center for Teaching Excellence, [here](#), and an updated version, which factors in online teaching, on the website of Wake Forest's Center for the Advancement of Teaching [here](#).

Beyond that Barre says, ask yourself if you needed to make all the changes you've made to your revised online, hybrid, or socially distanced course, given that we're juggling so much more during the pandemic.

In our conversation, Barre elaborated on some of the challenges embedded in these ideas. We all know, she says, that the more quality time we spend learning something, the better we will get at it. So encouraging students to master concepts through frequent low-stakes assignments is a good thing. At the same time, if that work isn't really advancing students' understanding, then it becomes busy work. It can be hard to know the difference from a distance.

Making things more complicated, she says, is the question of equity. A student who has to work or who has family responsibilities can't put as much time into any given class as a student who doesn't have these obligations. If you ramp up the demands of your course, are you giving some students an edge?

Like others, Barre wonders what longer-term impact pandemic-driven course redesign will have on teaching. Over all, she thinks the effects will be positive. Instructors will think more deliberately about their goals for their course and how to achieve them. They will know that active learning and regular, formative assessments are important for students to stay engaged and take charge of their learning.

"I feel heartened by this challenge. It's a sign that our faculty have done something different on a massive scale," she says. "Not everyone has radically transformed their courses, but many have, which is why we see this issue."

If she has one piece of advice for instructors who worry that their students are burning out, or simply spinning their wheels, it's this: Talk to them. Perhaps even set aside class time to discuss what they feel is working, and what isn't. "Being in touch with your students may be more helpful than listening to broad recommendations," she says.

Intro Courses and the Pandemic

Faculty members who teach introductory courses are reporting higher levels of D's, F's, withdrawals and incompletes this fall, according to a new study, "[Time for Class](#)

[Covid-19 Edition Part 3: The Impact of 2020 on Introductory Faculty and Their Students](#),” produced by the consulting firm Tyton Partners in collaboration with the digital-learning advocacy group Every Learner Everywhere.

The report, the third and final in a series designed to assess the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning, looked at the experiences of more than 850 instructors who teach these courses at two- and four-year institutions.

While they reported increased levels of satisfaction with digital learning, a significant percentage of instructors teaching introductory courses — between 24 and 39 percent — saw increases in drop rates or anticipated-failure rates. And those who taught at institutions with a high proportion of Pell-eligible students reported higher failure rates.

Do you teach a gateway course? If so, drop me a line at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, and tell me what effect the pandemic has had on students’ learning and their grades. Your story may appear in a future newsletter.

Talk to Us About Course Evaluations

Has your college changed the questions it asks students on course evaluations — or how it uses their answers — in light of the pandemic? Have you observed changes in the kinds of feedback your students provide?

We’re curious about how pandemic teaching might affect [course evaluations](#). Even in normal times, we know they don’t always measure what they set out to, can be used in statistically dubious ways, and convey students’ biases against professors in marginalized groups. Please share your observations with us using [this Google Form](#), and pass it along to any colleagues you think may be interested, too. Thanks!

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

-Beth

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TEACHING & LEARNING



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