

Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:05] This is Leading Lines. I'm Derek Bruff. Back in November, my colleagues and I at the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching conducted a series of focus groups with students about their experiences learning in online and hybrid contexts in the fall. One clear theme that emerged was that students felt that their workload had increased last fall, with several students mentioning having too much busy work in the online components of their courses.

[0:29] Around the same time, I was alerted to a Twitter thread posted by Jody Greene, Associate Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Here's the first tweet in that thread, "I often get asked about why college students are being assigned more work during the pandemic based on anecdotes. Since I have never met an instructor who sat down and decided, 'I'll give the students more work during this plague,' something odd is going on here."

[1:00] The paradox that Jody pointed out resonated with me since I was hearing much of the same from both students and faculty at Vanderbilt. Students were complaining about the increased workload, while faculty were making intentional choices to scale back the work required in their fall courses. It was a mystery, so naturally I tweeted about it. And like Jody Greene, I got a lot of replies.

[1:24] Today on the podcast we're sharing a conversation I had in January 2021 with two people who had some very useful thoughts to share about this workload paradox. Betsy Barre is the executive director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at Wake Forest University, where she also teaches in the department of the study of religion.

[1:45] Karen Costa is a faculty developer specializing in online pedagogy and trauma aware teaching. And also author of the 2020 book, *99 Tips for Creating Simple and Sustainable Educational Videos*. The three of us talk about the workload paradox during pandemic

teaching, how this paradox presents itself, where it might come from, and perhaps most importantly, what instructors can do to mitigate it in the coming semester. Betsy and Karen are two of the smartest faculty developers I know and I think you'll find their analysis and advice very useful as you plan your spring courses. (music)

[2:26] Betsy and Karen, thanks for being on Leading Lines today and chatting with me about this challenging topic. To get us started before we dive in to the topic at hand, I'd like our listeners to get to know each of you a little bit better. Can you tell us about a time when you realized you wanted to be an educator? Karen, why don't we start with you?

Karen Costa: [2:47] Sure. I'll share when I realize I wanted to be a higher educator specifically. So I was working in a college access program in Rhode Island after I graduated from college and we used to take our high school students on college tours to get them familiar with the college environments, to give them a chance to ask questions and go through that college decision-making process.

[3:14] And every time I would set foot on a college campus, I had this feeling of I guess like a zing or sense of flow, but I wanted to stay there and at the same time, I noticed that we were helping our students get into college, but they weren't always persisting and graduating. And that really bothered me because I knew the students were so smart and hardworking and talented. So I, you know, one day I followed that zing and I was in a college admissions office. I think it might've been Bryant College in Rhode Island. And I said there's something here. So that was kind of a pivotal moment. And I realized I wanted to go back and get my degree in higher ed.

Derek: [3:56] That's great. Wow, yeah. How about you, Betsy?

Betsy Barre: [4:00] So for me, I think the interesting question is, when did I not know that I wanted to be an educator? So my family, I come from a family of teachers. So my mom and dad are teachers, my siblings are teachers, my grandparents are teachers. And so that was sort of just like some people, that's the only job I knew you could have as a kid, was being a teacher. So I remember moments of sort of trying to decide what I wanted to teach. So which some of my friends might find funny is that one of my first memories is in fourth grade wanting to be an art teacher because I loved my art class so much and I loved my art teacher. But now I don't really see myself as an artist in any way, so that's kind of a funny story.

[4:36] But I think a big moment for me was when I realized I wanted to teach in higher

education instead of K through 12, which all my family members do. So they see me as the sort of heretic who decided to teach in college. And for me it was taking my first philosophy class where I was studying things that had deep meaning to me that were really sort of changed who I was as a first-year student in college thinking about religion and the nature of truth and morality. And I thought, wow, this is an opportunity to really change people's lives and to do it as a teacher, not just teaching, basic, you know, K through 12 subjects, but actually teaching something that could transform the way they think about the world. And so I went home and told my parents I wanted to be a philosophy teacher and they thought I was crazy, but they happily supported me in that effort. And here we are.

Derek: [5:28] That's great. Well, and a thread that I hear in both of your stories and really one of the reasons I wanted to talk with you two in particular about this topic, is this real interest in the power of teaching to affect students' lives and help them to grow into who they can be, help them to succeed, to empower them different ways. And so you are two professionals I look to, to give me insight into the student experience and how the choices we make as teachers can really have an effect on that experience. And so with that as a bit of a background and some framing, I'd like to talk about one aspect of the student experience that I think has been really challenging this pandemic year.

[6:16] And I think I'll quote Jody Greene, he is the associate vice provost for teaching and learning at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He's the director of their teaching center. And he posted this on Twitter back in November in a fairly well-read Twitter thread. He said, "I often get asked about why college students are being assigned, more work during a pandemic based on anecdotes. Since I have never met an instructor who sat down and decided, 'I'll give the students more work during this plague,' something odd is going on here."

[6:54] And so he's naming this paradox where the students are reporting that they're having to do more work than usual while taking classes, this year, but he doesn't see faculty and other instructors as assigning more work. They don't kind of report doing that intentionally. And so I'm wondering if you've heard similar sentiments from students or faculty. How have they kind of presented this paradox to you? Betsy?

Betsy: [7:23] Sure, so it is definitely the case that we have heard a lot about this from our students. And we did an all-student survey at Wake Forest and asked students about their experience this semester. And we ask them specific things about specific pedagogical issues,

but then in the open-ended section we ask them, is there anything else you'd like to tell us? And the number one theme that came out was that there seemed to be a lot more work and the workload was sort of overwhelming for the students.

[7:51] So there are a lot of ways to think about this. I really like Jody Greene's hypothesis. I think that's one hypothesis. I also think there are probably other things that might be going on as well. My general view is that all of the things are happening at the same time. We can think about, you know, reasons that faculty maybe aren't estimating how much work they're assigning correctly, reasons why maybe students feel like it's more work than it actually is. And then also just sort of reasons why it might actually be more work than it is and what we can do about that.

Derek: [8:24] Yeah. Karen, are you hearing this from the faculty that you work with?

Karen: [8:29] So it's interesting that the faculty are reporting, not that they're holding the line with work, but that they're actually cutting workload. And I worked with a group of faculty in the fall and we would meet weekly for sort of what became these informal support groups that were intended to talk about pedagogy, online pedagogy, but ultimately became just surviving this together as humans.

[9:01] And we, one of the mottos was "throw it off the cliff." That dear assignment that you're holding on to just throw it over, just let it go. Just throw it over the cliff. And they were really relying on that. And I work with a lot of STEM faculty, who we love our STEM faculty. But that can, you know, that discipline, the idea of what they perceive as being less rigorous or less challenging is really concerning. And faculty were making a lot of difficult decisions. If you're teaching A and P 1 and you know that that student has to move on to A and P two, traditionally one of the more challenging courses we offer.

Derek: [9:45] Anatomy and Physiology.

Karen: [9:46] Yes, sorry, and yeah, and, you know, there's this concern, am I not preparing that student for what comes next, am I just passing the buck to the next professor? But ultimately, when you're in the sort of global survival mode and higher ed survival mode, what I encourage folks to do, and I think many of us who work with faculty were doing this is just prioritize well-being, prioritize well-being. We can cross that bridge when we come to it. We've got to help students just make it through this day and the next day and the next.

[10:22] So it is an interesting paradox that students are reporting more work when faculty are also reporting that they're assigning less work, not only for the student's benefit, but for their own, right? The more you assign, the more you have to assess, whether you're grading or you're providing feedback. So I have some suspects and I think we'll probably get into that, but I did want to point out that this is really, we're hearing different things from students and faculty.

Betsy: [10:49] And I would just add that our faculty, we were really intentional when we worked on preparing for this semester of thinking about time and thinking about workload. And so actually trying to calculate, whereas in the past they didn't and maybe we're assigning more work. So that makes it even more interesting that there was an intentionality about it and still we have this result.

Derek: [11:05] Right, right. And Betsy, we haven't done a student survey, but we did some focus groups with students back in November with some undergraduates. And I was looking over some of the quotes that I pulled out of those conversations, that this theme of kind of workload and time management was kind of the biggest concern that students had. That and kind of general fatigue and exhaustion, certainly these are connected.

[11:28] And so we had one student who said, "professors are taking advantage of the fact that everything is online. They think we have more free time, so they give us more work." And another student said, "exams have been replaced with smaller assignments, which is good in some cases, but ends up building up a lot when you have four to five classes that follow this format." And then a third quote, "there are so many different fashions in which professors are facilitating online classes and online assignments. And the variability can get overwhelming very quickly."

[12:01] And this is something that I feel like some of this perception of students that they have more work than ever or they have a lot of busy work, I feel a little guilty because we worked with a lot of faculty this past summer in our Online Course Design Institute, helping them think through how to do online education well, for most of them, this was their first time ever teaching online. And we knew that students would be under a lot of stress. And so I remember recommending to faculty, like, let's not have so many big assignments. Let's break things into smaller assignments. Let's scaffold things for students so that they have assignments that build and, you know, hold students accountable or get creative with the tools that you're using.

[12:43] Some of this, I feel like I've helped to kind of create as I was advising faculty to really pursue high-quality teaching in the online environment. These things like scaffolding and, you know, formative assessment, small assignments that build, right? These are good practices. And I think a lot of faculty were very excited about using new tools to teach well in these contexts. But then students perceive this in very different ways.

[13:11] And so Jody's hypothesis, if I can summarize it a little bit, he argued that with the move to online, students are being held accountable for lots of small assignments that previously weren't being tracked by the professors. So in the old days, you might have said, read this section of your textbook before you come to class. And now we're saying read the section of the textbook and also post to the discussion board with your thoughts about the section. And so the reading part may not have changed, but now there's this extra piece that students are being asked to do. And so what are your thoughts on kind of why students are reporting this workload issue, this busy work issue? Do you agree with Jody's hypothesis that we're kind of tracking things that weren't tracked before? How would you unpack this paradox a little bit? Betsy?

Betsy: [14:01] Yeah, I think I sort of had that hypothesis early on. And so those of you who don't know, back in 2017, when I was at Rice, my husband and I created a workload estimator. And we were really interested in this question. I was particularly interested as a humanist and like, how much work should I actually assign? How long does it take students to read things? And I wanted to know was I actually assigning too much work. And so I've been pretty, even prior pandemic, pretty rigorous about making sure my courses are expecting a sort of a reasonable amount of work, 2 hours out of class for every hour in class. And one of the things I've heard from even my Rice students was that, wow, this is a really heavy workload course, even though I was really sticking to two hours out of class for every hour in class.

[14:43] And so that told me something that was really interesting, that Rice students who want to work hard, who are willing to put in the work, saw this as a heavy workload course. And so I started doing some research on that. And it turns out most students spend an hour out of class for every hour in class, that's the norm with a wide distribution. So it does seem to make some sense that if we now, if something that's different now is that we're holding them accountable for our expectations that we weren't doing before. The reality is we are actually increasingly workload and not just increasing it a little bit, but perhaps doubling their workload, which is going to feel really different for students.

Karen: [15:19] So I'll try not to get myself in too much trouble here. It's the start of a new year. You know, if you have a one hour, I'm a student and I have a one-hour lecture three times a week. And I go to that and it's a lecture-based class. And I compare that now to that course has been moved on remote or online, whatever we want to call it very quickly, very rapidly. And that professor has said well, I don't think I can lecture here. How can I find that three hours? Well, I'm going to have the student take a quiz and they're going to do an activity and they've got a post to the discussion. And there's a blog and et cetera, et cetera.

[16:09] One of the reasons that I love online learning and I believe in it, and I know that it can be as good if not better when done well, is because I believe that there's a lot more active learning that the students can, again, when done well, potentially have a lot more agency in an online classroom to do you know, to do and not just to passively listen. So that perception makes a lot of sense to me. Those formative assessments are one of the affordances of online learning, right?

[16:40] So it makes a ton of sense that students who might be used to, I had a class in college, we had one midterm and one final 50-50. I dropped in the third week because, I'm sorry Betsy, it was a philosophy class. (Betsy laughs) And the guy, the professor wrote dog on the blackboard. There was chalk involved. This was a long time ago. And then God. And that was and we just kind of sat with that and I was like, okay, I'm not sure where to go with this. (Derek and Betsy laugh) But I, you know, 50-50, two assignments. And now we've got the discussions are 4% each and you've got ten to do, right? It really does add up.

[17:22] But so what I want to say to that is the missing piece there and I pulled this article and maybe Derek, you can put it in the show notes. A lot of folks in online learning are familiar with the COI model, the Community of Inquiry Model, which talks about building presence in an online course. So there's three types of presence, teaching, social, and cognitive. The authors of this article that I want to share with you, and put in the show notes, their last names are Kilis and Yildirim. And they talk about another type of presence, regulatory presence, the teacher acts as a coach to help students regulate their executive functions.

[18:00] So we're talking about things like helping students plan how and when they're going to post to the discussion, right. You don't have class Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 11:00 AM. So when, if your discussion's due on Thursday, I talk to my students about due dates, D.U.E and do dates, D.O. right? The discussion is D.U.E on Thursday. When are you going to D.O. do it, right? That's an example of regulatory presence.

[18:27] So when we ramp up these formative assessments, if we're not talking to faculty about executive functions, and we're not talking to students about executive functions and how to self-regulate and manage your time and prioritize which of these assignments you're going to do first. Guess what, before you do that discussion, you've gotta do the reading, right? But they might not see that sequence in a novice professor. So absolutely that's happening. I think regulatory presence is the solution for spring that we can maybe try.

Derek: [18:59] Yeah. So is part of this, the fact that we have, in many cases, both students and faculty teaching and learning in online environments that they're just not used to doing, right? Is this something that, like do our students need to get better at self-regulation in these environments? Do our faculty need, like I guess how much of this is that we have a bunch of rookies in this environment?

Betsy: [19:28] Yeah. I think, I'm sure Karen would agree. I mean, I think that's part of it. Even as myself as a rookie in the environment when I was teaching in the spring, just sort of thinking through something as simple as it actually matters how many discussion posts they're reading. Are they reading all 40 students' discussion posts or just as small groups of discussion posts, but actually the reading of discussion post takes time. And of course, folks who've taught online will tell you very quickly you should put them into groups, et cetera.

[19:52] And so I think part of it is that faculty that are adopting new assignments for the first time, they don't really know how long it's going to take their students and they're kind of guessing. And I think similarly our students, my sense is when I read our student feedback is that a lot of our students were thinking about, say, a discussion board post, like a paper. So they were putting tons of time into it and making sure that it was extremely well-written. Whereas our faculty were like, this is supposed to take the place of in-class discussion where it's off the cuff. And that is going to be a really dramatic difference in how much time you spend and what we really have, there's just this sort of lack of communication about expectations that I think could be an important solution as well.

Karen: [20:32] So I made a list of suspects for this paradox over the break. And number one, I called it old neural pathways. The example I have is if we all were dropped into England and told we now have to drive on the left side of the road, but the driver seat's on the right side of the car. There would be chaos, right? If we were just plopped there, we had really no time. For me, it's like March 13th. Now, I'd already been teaching online for a long, long time, but most of the faculty I worked with, it really was that experience of like today, you're a face-to-

face professor, ends March 13th, you are now an online professor.

[21:16] So those neural pathways to teach online simply are not built. And it takes time, as we know, practice makes progress to build new neural pathways, to build new habits. So from the standpoint of understanding how the brain learns and habit formation. You know, expecting folks who were sent home in March to teach online, to be really doing it at their peak in in the fall or even the spring is, you know. I lived in England. I was a student, so I took public transportation, but I'm pretty sure I could live there for years and I would still be driving on the wrong side of the road. You know, those things take time.

[21:59] So I think recognizing that, you know, at a very basic level, in higher ed we're tough, right? We're a lot of perfectionists. We suck at being amateurs, if I can say, you know, and we're not good at saying I'm an amateur at this. And we're not good of accepting other people's need for time to practice. So everybody was expected, of course, to be perfect. And we have these very high expectations and a very pressure-based culture in higher ed. And that's just not how the brain, the brain was like, "oh no, I don't care about that." So I'm still driving on the right side of the road over here. So I think that habit formation is a big piece and that, you know, another thing we're not good at and higher ed is probably patience. We've gotta give people time for this.

Betsy: [22:49] So one thing that's interesting to me is that we didn't get as much complaint about workload in the spring as we have in the fall. And so I think part of what is going on is that our faculty are they got great training, right? And they got excited about all sorts of new things that they could do and new tools that they can use. And again, this is to Derek's point where I feel a little bit guilty about this as well, is sort how did I present that in a way that contextualized it with making sure that you don't go overboard?

[23:18] But I feel like what I've also heard in a sort of positive way is our students saying, well, our faculty find some new thing and say, hey, let's add this without taking something away. And so that's another piece of advice that I sometimes give, it's like a closet. You buy a new piece of clothes, you gotta get rid of something. And that they're just excited because some faculty who haven't thought about teaching in a while are now thinking about teaching and new activities they can do. And so they just want a pile it in. And so that's part a piece of the puzzle too, that they're actually doing a better job in the fall. But that leads to this outcome that is sort of disconcerting the paradox.

Derek: [23:54] Yeah, and I did want to circle back to my own culpability here, not really. But, you know, I think we did as faculty developers, as teaching center people, we were providing faculty with a lot of strategies that would have been good strategies in a normal year where faculty were learning to teach online for the first time, right? Like me and my team, we relied on the literature on online teaching, right? What are best practices? The community of inquiry framework was huge for us. And so we're relying on these kind of good practices that had been developed in non-pandemic times. And we're suggesting them during pandemic times.

[24:34] And so I guess, you know. So for instance, this idea of not giving students just two big assignments in a course, but breaking it into smaller assignments, having kind of multiple opportunities to show what they're learning. Is that's still good advice as we roll into the spring semester? Like would you still share that with faculty? Do we need to moderate that or mitigate that somehow?

Betsy: [25:00] I'm curious what Karen has to say about that as the expert on online.

Karen: [25:04] So I want to circle back and I heard the word normal and pandemic times. So a big thing, also on my list of suspects. And I think also maybe speaks to some of the concerns Betsy just shared about more student overwhelm in the fall than in the spring. So and I want to sort of touch on here, trauma and stress and how that might have played a role here. And I want, you know, I kind of now refer to it as the stress trauma burnout stew, they're all just in there cooking together.

[25:39] So, you know, we didn't and to your point Derek, the COI model is great, right? Building various types of connections in our online courses. Wonderful. And we don't have a lot of literature on how COI works in a global pandemic when people are experiencing immense amounts of stress and trauma and burnout. But we do know what stress and trauma and burnout do to the learning brain and to the teaching brain. And what that means is that when you are experiencing what we're all experiencing to varying degrees and you sit down as a newly online teacher and you say, okay, I'm gonna write this announcement for my English comp one course and I'm going to try to do it in a way that doesn't overwhelm my students' cognitive load.

[26:25] Your brain is like, are you serious right now? Like what, why, what are you doing? Like the world is on fire. You're supposed to be panicking and focusing on threats. You know, our

lovely amygdala, I call it my well-intentioned amygdala, is really running the show, right? So that higher-order thinking is shut down. So I'm, as a teacher, my brain is in survival mode, which is right where it should be. My brain's, that's why we're still here. But my brain is saying, are you serious when I try to do these higher-order thinking things.

[26:58] And then from the student perspective, I sit down to consume that email that maybe my professor has done a pretty decent job of managing cognitive load and explaining things well. But my brain as a student is saying, are you serious right now, English Comp 1? What? I need to learn how to survive right now. So there is this disconnect between the type of learning and the higher-order thinking that we do in higher education and what our brains on a very primal level care about in this moment. And there's no easy answers for that.

[27:30] But I know what, you know, we shouldn't do, which is we shouldn't pretend like that's not happening. So and I, you know, I see a lot of that behavior in higher ed, like, you know, everything's great, everything's fine, everything's normal. It's not. Our brains are truly in survival mode. So we at a very fundamental, just need to name that this is not normal. Our brains are surviving. They're not prioritizing the types of things we're talking about in higher ed in many cases. And then funneling resources to mental health support for students, faculty and staff.

[28:07] So when I hear, I get pretty frustrated when I hear about hundreds of thousands of dollars being spent on things like surveillance technology and what I see and a lot of the data is showing a mental health crisis in higher education for students, faculty, and staff. So if you can help people somewhat, you know, there's no easy answer there. It's not gonna go away. But if you can help people manage that a little bit better, you might open up some of that cognitive load for them to continue to pursue their studies. And I do want to say, I don't think we should shut things down and say go focus on your mental health. A sense of purpose in the world is a protective factor against stress and trauma. So helping students and faculty and staff continue to work toward their goals is really important. But we've got to balance that out with support.

Betsy: [28:58] Yeah, and I think I mean, we're shooting for the moon in many ways trying to get these, get us into the, become these wonderful online teachers in this moment. And I, it's been interesting because there have been some cases of students sharing, for example, that in particular classes, the discussions were really sort of affirming and help them feel like they had something to do outside of dealing with the trauma at the moment that this was really

important to them. But other times, the attempt to create that community and let's create, here's all these assignments where you have to have discussions seems burdensome and so sort of trying to figure out, thread that needle of when does it work and when does it not work is a really interesting scientific question and a pedagogical question. But whether we can figure that out in time and in the case of an emergency is just really challenging.

[29:43] And so that's why I think when I think about what I would recommend next semester is I would share this data about what we're hearing and say, you know, try to do your best, but you know that may be that you make choices to not have as many discussions and to ask the students to get engaged. I think that's always an important response is to say, ask your students what they want to do. Do they want discussion boards, do they want to have synchronous sessions? What are ways that they feel empowered to build community and be open to changing that throughout the semester if they feel burned out, I think could help, but I think it's just going to be really challenging to tune that perfectly for the spring when we're all exhausted, the students are exhausted, et cetera.

Derek: [30:24] Yeah. So I didn't teach in 2020. I wasn't on my rotation. I teach one course a year at Vanderbilt and so I was able to get my fall course moved to the spring because being the director of a teaching center was kind of keeping me busy. So I get to find out in a few weeks when classes start at Vanderbilt. And one of the things I am going to do later today is I've got 16 students in a writing seminar and I'm going to e-mail them today and say, essentially what's, you know, what's one thing that worked for you this fall in terms of course structure and what's one thing that, you know, didn't work?

[30:57] And because I feel at this point I do have a lot of choices. And I often feel this as someone who studies pedagogy. When I go to my own class, I just see this huge toolbox and I, it's like you said, Betsy, I just want to reach for all the tools and just use them all, right? But I need to be really thoughtful and I think being responsive to the particular needs of our students wherever possible. And, you know, acknowledging that this may be a year that yeah, I do like I've got to ramp down the busy work that I have my students do. And that might be ok.

[31:35] Because there's another thread here that I don't think we've touched on yet. But I feel like it's easy for me as an instructor to think about my students in my course. It's harder for me to think about them as taking three to four or five other courses at the same time. And we heard a little bit of that in one of the student quotes that I read earlier, right? If you've got

four or five courses that are all making these shifts to online active learning, to formative assessment, to scaffold and structured assignments. You know, it used to be that I might have had three courses where all I have to do is show up in the lecture hall three times a week and then eventually write a paper or take a test, right? So like the, that's a simple course structure, right? And whether or not it's effective, it's a simple one.

[32:22] And so now I've got four or five courses that are all having complex course structures. And so that regulatory presence, I think, becomes much more important when you've got that. And it struck me, Jody Greene wrote a follow-up piece and I'll put a link to that in the show notes as well. But it struck me that we have a lot of research on active learning in various contexts and how effective it can be for students, formative assessment, things like that. I don't know of many studies that look at active learning and formative assessment across five courses at once, right? Like most of the research I know focuses on one course at a time in isolation. And so I do think there's this element of students are seeing this from four or five different directions at once. And that's adding to their cognitive load in pretty significant ways.

Karen: [33:11] Well, and Derek, to that point. And so I teach, I've been teaching fully online for a while now. Many institutions that offer fully online courses and programs offer modified terms. So instead of running a 15, you're taking the, you know, four or five traditional 15-week courses, you're going through eight-week term, eight-week sort of mini terms or whatever you want to call them. So typically, as an online student, you would take two courses in an eight-week term, and then two other courses in the second eight-week term to get to that four over the course of 15 or 16 weeks. So that very intentional, right?

[33:52] Forget the coursework, let's just look at like announcements and emails. I post three announcements per week in my online course, Monday, Wednesday, Friday consistently. So what happens if you're taking five courses and you've got Monday, Wednesday, Friday, five announcements to read for every course? Like that doesn't make any sense, right? If I'm taking two courses and I have two announcements to read, that's another ball game, that's much more manageable. So the old, I don't know if this is a Star Wars quote or something, but the old ways aren't working here. And I wish that higher ed moved quickly enough. It doesn't. And maybe some institutions have done this, that term structure could have been modified for the spring to do that two-two split. I think that would've made a huge difference.

Betsy: [34:45] We actually talked about it at Wake and it ended up making this case, this exact case at Wake for a modified, for a block. And in fact, so because we had already registered our undergrads, it was just too much of a logistical lift to change it. But our divinity school said, we're going to do this. We're going to listen to you and we're going to do a modified block. But guess what? Their students same overwhelm with workload because it's accelerated, right? And so they're just like this is too much.

[35:08] And again, so I think part of it's just a cultural like this is the point about trauma, right? We're just all overwhelmed. It was an interesting sort of control group for us because I thought that was the solution. And it maybe a little bit better for them, but they didn't have anything to compare it to. And so the expectations are really interesting because one of the things we haven't had chance to analyze yet, but I want to break out our students' survey response based on first-year college students, first semester, first-year students, and to see if they're having the same complaints because they don't know what to expect. And I think is a true of online students who are coming into online programs. This is what it is to learn in an online program.

[35:44] But if you have, traditional students, quote unquote, right? Our juniors, seniors who are used to a certain kind of simple course structure. And then all of a sudden it changes and you're already upset that you're not with your friends, et cetera. It just adds to the pile of I'm not happy in this moment. And that makes it harder to do work. And then it feels like it's more work. But I do think that our Divinity School was an interesting case there.

Derek: [36:07] That's really fascinating. Well, and I think also about programs that have been doing online for a while now. Our School of Nursing has been doing online and distance for a couple of decades. And when it comes to the technologies that they use, it's a consistent set of technologies across all of their courses, the school has decided these are the tools that we're going to use. And so I think the rest of our campus this fall, it was a Wild West, right? Faculty would set up their Brightspace courses however they wanted to, they would use this tool or that tool or this tool. And so there wasn't that kind of consistency. And again, within an individual course, that's not the end of the world, but across multiple courses that adds a whole layer of confusion for students.

[36:48] And I knew that we were not going to get to the point over the summer where we had course templates for faculty to use. We call it academic freedom, right? We have too many autonomous agents at play to have that kind of systematic approach that might help

with some of that. But let's talk a little bit about solution. So let's maybe focus first on what individual faculty can do to try to respond to this. We've talked about a few elements, but I'd love to hear more of your thoughts about what I, as a teacher with my one course or my two courses or my five courses can do to try to thread the needle a little bit.

Betsy: [37:26] So I think, so it's sort of like a shameless plug for the Workload Estimator. But I think the Workload Estimator can be a useful and it's an estimator. I always say that to folks because some people think that it's a calculator, I'm like, oh no, it's not that precise. It's just giving you a ballpark. But even if you don't use the Workload Estimator, really sitting down and thinking about how much time you are expecting of your students. And not just overall, but for individual assignments because that's what keeps you honest, is when you start adding up the individual assignments and then you realize how much time it takes.

[37:56] So I think this would be true, even pre-COVID, even before the shift to online is that's a really useful thing to do if it really is the faculty that are underestimating how much time it would take for our students to do the work. And to be honest too, that you're an expert, not a novice. So it's going to take your students more time than it would you to do as well. So that's a first step, I think, is just really thinking about how much time we're expecting of students, even in simple assignments we normally wouldn't think about beyond papers on exam.

Derek: [38:25] And I think part of that is that, again, some of the stuff I have my students do, I have them do it traditionally during class. And so they and I have already allocated those three hours a week to be as time on task. And so if I have them do a group activity and they fill out a worksheet or whatever it is that is busy work, but it's time that they've already committed to spending, right? And so if you don't have that kind of default bucket of time now you have to look at every single thing that you're asking students to do and, and somehow estimate how much that time is going to take and communicate that to students.

Betsy: [39:01] And I also think for our students, this is another interesting wrinkle here. There's something about having to turn it in. Turning things in, feel like work. If you're just doing it but not turning it in, it doesn't feel like work in a weird way and so I think that's something important for us to think about as well, could you assign the work and not have them turn it in?

Derek: [39:20] Right. Yeah. Yeah. And that gets to the accountability piece, right? So maybe I

do just say to students, read this section in our textbook before we have our discussion on Zoom and not ask them to do something that they turn in based on that reading. Because that's how I would've done it a year ago, right? Karen, what advice would you give to faculty who were trying to solve this paradox?

Karen: [39:47] You know, I'll stick with my, my line, which is to number one, prioritize well-being. So I can't say that enough. So and what I tell faculty is you have to start with yourself so we can't take care of our students if we aren't taking care of ourselves. And I don't say that as if it's an easy thing to do, but it means setting boundaries teaching online. You can do it 24-7. And I think I've tried and many online folks have. So I have I've gotten much better about this over the years. I like sign in and sign out to work, you know, so I have a planner with 15-minute increments and I am every Sunday, I plan out by the 15-minute increment, including when I'm going to quote unquote clock out. And I have those routines in place for when I'm going to check my email, when I'm going to respond to email, my students know what they can expect from me in that regard. I'm responsive, but I also am a human being who has needs and needs time away from work. So, you know, setting healthy boundaries for yourself and how you're going to fill yourself back up.

[41:00] Holding that space for our students and during the pandemic is incredibly draining. That's why I think, one of the reasons we're seeing this epidemic of burnout. So faculty are reporting to me that their students are bringing so many emotions and challenges into the classroom that when they finish their classes and they finished checking their emails, they feel absolutely drained and that's the road to burnout. So having boundaries, knowing when to refer, knowing when to respond, but also having things that, you know, I just got, I just had a break. So I was doing art classes and painting and playing board games with my family and I tried snow shoeing for the first time. Those things are, are not, they're not selfish, they're not silly. They are incredibly, you know, and again, back to higher ed culture, you know, we're not supposed to play, right? We're not supposed to be playful, we're not supposed to be childlike, but those are the things that will allow us to be better as professionals.

[41:58] And I also want to say it doesn't fall solely on faculty. This falls on our administrations and our leadership to help faculty do that. And the short answer to that is reduce workload wherever possible. And, you know, the other thing I would say to faculty, the big word in trauma informed care and trauma aware teaching is choice. So I want to just echo what Betsy said about talking to students. That the tricky thing about choices, we've got to balance it with structure because too much choice can be overwhelming. So an example, I think that

might be helpful for folks if you're going to do discussions, for example. And let's say you're going to have eight over the course of your term. Can you say to students you get to choose six and you get to not do two and no questions asked? So you give them some choice.

[42:46] Or if you require reading quizzes, I'm gonna require ten, but you only need to do seven or whatever the case may be. So you're giving students back choice where choice has been taken from all of us in a variety of ways. But certainly students who wanted to be face-to-face who were forced online, had a lot of choice taken from them. So anytime you can give choice, but you want to give structure. So you might say, if you don't want to think about this right now, here's the most typical path that I would recommend. I would recommend you take the quizzes and on weeks 1, 3, 5, and 7 or whatever. So you give them a model, maybe you make a nice graphic to go along with that so that they can see what that looks like. You provide a balance of choice and structure. Flexibility on deadlines is critical if you're holding hard deadlines, I implore you to release that practice. Again, we got to keep students moving forward. But we also want to be compassionate, flexibility, balanced with structure. For yourself and for your students will be really helpful, I think.

Betsy: [43:50] And I think just to piggyback, this is sort of both Derek and Karen said this, I think just a really sort of pragmatic thing about that choice of giving them choice is to think about your previous syllabi if you were teaching face-to-face before and think about how many of your assignments did you, did students actually have a choice of whether they did or not? If they didn't have to turn it in. So what was on the honor system? So read this book. But really you're going to come to class and we're going to talk about it, so you may not really have to read it that closely or do this, think about this problem, but nobody's going to turn it in.

[44:23] Normally, I would say if this was pre pandemic times and I was talking to you, I would say actually you should hold your students accountable for that time. That's good teaching because time on task helps them learn. But now in this moment, I just don't think this is the moment that we then all of a sudden make all of our courses and our students do that amount of work that they weren't doing before. So I think trying to stay consistent with the amount of honor system assignments you had before is probably just a compassionate thing to do. So think about making more of your assignments less required. You can do it if you want, but I'm not going to be monitoring it, et cetera.

[44:57] And then I think the most important thing that you can do is to communicate your

time expectations. And I think just so often we assume students assume, and this is an equity issue too, because I've actually had some conversations with students where one student is spending ten hours on a paper and another student is spending half an hour and they just don't know any better about how much time they should be spending. And so, to help our students understand our expectations, I think saying, I expect you to spend only 30 minutes on this can be really informative for our students and can help sort. And then they can also see like, oh, so actually what I thought was a lot of workload, maybe actually isn't because they didn't expect me to spend as much time as I was on that assignment.

Karen: [45:38] And Derek, can I add one more thing, you know the word trust came to mind? And I think we got to trust that our students are doing what they need to do to take care of themselves in this moment just as we are. That might not look like, it's probably not going to look like what we think they should be doing. And if my student is choosing not to turn in a paper by a deadline, because they have a family member who's ill, who they're caring for because they're a frontline worker as many of my students are an essential worker. They're making the right choice, right? They needed to sleep all day Tuesday because they were up all night Monday. And in my mind, but the deadline is Tuesday at eight. They're making choices for their lives, not mine, based on what they need to do.

[46:28] So I think we got to remember, and that's kind of perhaps the foundation of that flexibility and structure to trust that our students are doing what they need to do to survive this. And that's not gonna look like what we want it to look like and that's okay. That doesn't mean that we're bad teachers and it doesn't mean that they're bad students. It means we're all doing our best. And you know what, that student might come back to me a week later and say, can I submit this or hopefully I've outreached them, which I do a ton of outreach and say, hey, I didn't, I see you didn't turn it in. Outreach is a huge part of online teaching. I see you didn't turn in that paper. Would you like to submit it? Is there anything I can do to help you with that? 90% of the time I got back, I was sick. I was helping my kid. I was having all of these crises that our students are experiencing and I would love to submit it. And they do, and they do a great job.

[47:16] So whose timeline you know, so many of these deadlines are arbitrary, but I do tell them I have final grading deadlines. So folks, let's get it going at the end of the term. But within the term and there are incompletes which I'll make a little plug for. Everybody has different incomplete policies at the end of the term. But within the term, we can certainly be a lot more flexible with our students.

Derek: [47:42] One other thing I think I'll be suggesting a lot to faculty is that if you think about these small assignments that you're asking students to turn something in, is that it needs to lead to something or be connected to something, and that connection needs to be clear to students. So this is often what I hear from students about busy work. It's called busy work because it's just there to keep me busy. It doesn't build to anything, it doesn't inform anything. And so if I'm going to have my students read something before class and post in the discussion forum. And let's say I'm teaching on Zoom twice a week with my students, right? You know, maybe I have students get in breakout groups where they analyze each other's discussion posts and synthesize in some fashion, right? So the thing that student did before class is now kind of part of the course materials for that, that synchronous session.

[48:31] And so there's some value to it. Or maybe I, quote some of the student discussion posts and I put that up and then we have a conversation about that. So it's not something that just feels like a dead end, right? Like I did this thing and nothing came of it. But it is informing the next thing that we're doing. It's building towards the next thing that we're doing. And if it doesn't build in an intentional and clear way, then maybe that's the thing, Betsy, that I don't require them to do. Like, you know, I make that one on your honor system, but if we're going to do something with that piece of writing, then that piece of writing becomes a lot more meaningful to students.

Betsy: [49:11] Yeah, and I think explaining to them, even if it doesn't quote unquote lead to something immediate, why you would give the assignment, that's just good practice is why do you think it's going to help your learning? So having a discussion about, you know, I think if I were teaching in the spring, I would start with the discussion, what do you mean by busy work? And let's talk about what that means to you and what's different from like valuable work and busy work. And it may be this leads to something, but it may also be, well, it's at home and not or it's just I'm doing multiple problems. Well, there's a reason we give you multiple problems because they can be different and practice is important.

[49:46] So I think that just again, talking with our students about our reasons for doing what we're doing. I think can alleviate some of it, but there's still I mean, I do have a hunch that there is that they are doing more work than they were in the past as just a general conclusion here. And it just makes me wonder, are they learning more? I mean, they actually might be, (everyone laughs) another interesting wrinkle here, too.

Karen: [50:09] You know, we just talked about some really practical solutions, but I do want

to kind of put in a plug for a long-term wishlist. Just to touch on faculty development for online teaching and learning. And I got frustrated in pre-COVID times when we would offer professional development on online teaching, but in the face-to-face format. And that always, has always just made my brain want to explode. So the best way to learn how to teach online is to take an online course with a seasoned, strong online teacher. And so now that's happening. So that's a, you know, a step in the right direction. I hope we continue down that path.

[50:54] We've got experts in online teaching who are facilitating professional, online professional development for faculty. So the faculty who I worked with, for example, this summer, going through an online course about online teaching learned not only through the content, but also in witnessing how my co facilitators and I ran that course, how we invited them in, how we created a classroom community. Classroom community online is one of those things. It's like falling in love, like you just got to experience it, right? It's not something you can tell somebody how to fall in love.

[51:27] So giving faculty models. But I've since been thinking if I could just sort of wave the magic wand. I would love for institutions to let faculty take courses, not professional development courses, but courses in subjects that fascinate them that are taught by seasoned excellent online teachers. So you want to take a philosophy class, we've got an amazing online philosophy teacher, take that class, be an online student in that class. Give them a course release and let them be an online student. I think that would be one of the most effective professional development experiences for so many faculty is to see it in action because it's like that. It's like that aha moment like, oh my gosh, this is so good. This is how it's done. This is how you do it. This is how you make those decisions about what to keep and what to cut is to see it in action.

[52:16] And then of course to continue supporting faculty with professional learning communities I think is really important, creating time and space to talk about all this stuff. And not to do it in isolation is really important. But let's get folks taking online classes with great online teachers. Long term I think that's a solution.

Derek: [52:36] Betsy, if you could wave a magic wand, do you have any things you would create or wish for?

Betsy: [52:44] That's interesting. I mean, long-term, I guess is that Karen's thinking about

long-term. You know, I like this idea and actually I think, you know, it's basically related to what we know from the power of observing other teachers. And so it's something we encourage in face-to-face courses. So why don't we do it in online courses as well? And I think that I, to me, I think there's just going to be an interesting conversation happening long-term about this issue of workload. That's why I'm really glad you raised this issue about what is the Carnegie Unit, what are we expecting of students, and what is a reasonable amount? I don't think now is the time that we have that like come to Jesus moment where it's like look, you're not putting enough time into your courses.

[53:24] But I do think, or maybe we, maybe we say that that's not a meaningful standard and there's some other standard that we want to have, but I think it causes a lot of consternation. And we're learning that now that certain kinds of pedagogy require more work that students are actually doing. And so how do we make sense of this moving forward? And so maybe in a year or two we sit down and have a conversation on what we learned and think about moving forward in all of our courses, whether online or face to face.

Derek: [53:48] Yeah, thank you for that. I think that's where I keep circling back because I keep wondering, like what, am I learning things now about what I thought was true two years ago? And I think I am right? Like this idea that students are not working in the ways that I thought that they were working. And I need to kind of reevaluate some of my assumptions about kind of what that means and how that's valuable or not.

Karen: [54:12] And Derek, can I just poke in real quick with the Carnegie unit and this question of, you know, for folks who are listening, if that poked you, research, competency-based education. So what are we measuring? What's our goal here? Is our goal butts in seats for a certain amount of time measuring seat time, or is our goal learning and transformation and helping people be more active citizens in the world? And proponents of competency-based education, CBE would say, what you all are talking about is why we're here, right? So measuring learning outcomes, no matter how long it takes students versus butts in seats and for how long they've been there.

[54:56] So I think that, you know, as you all were talking about and we were talking about that, you know, that you can show up and sit there for an hour. And I'm somebody who can play the attention game really well. But I'm writing a story in my mind or I'm making my grocery list, right? Is learning happening there? And the lecture-based, I'm not anti-lecture and there's a place for it when done appropriately, but there's still a lot of folks relying on

that that model. And online learning is great for CBE because it's so flexible and adaptable to the needs of teachers and learners, and it doesn't have to fit into that box of Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 11-12. So I think that's a really interesting magic wand question for the future.

Betsy: [55:46] Yeah, for sure.

Derek: [55:48] Well, thank you both. This conversation has been so interesting, I've lost track of time, which is a good sign. As I've said in other ways, time is meaningless in 2020. And it's not 2020 anymore, right? Like it's no longer March of 2020. I think we have moved past that month. At any rate, thank you so much for taking some time to chat with us today here on the podcast. I really appreciate it. I really appreciate your experience, your insight, your wisdom to share with our listeners.

Karen: [56:20] Thanks, Derek. Thanks, Betsy.

Betsy: [56:21] Yes, thank you. (music)

Derek: [56:27] That was Betsy Barre, Executive Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at Wake Forest University. And Karen Costa, independent faculty developer specializing in online pedagogy and trauma aware teaching. Thanks to both of them for taking the time to explore this workload paradox with me. I know I'm going to be a lot more intentional in how I structure assignments in my spring course and in how I communicate my expectations to students.

[56:53] I was struck by Karen's comments about the potential for more use of competency-based approaches in higher education after the pandemic. I've been expecting more faculty to embrace online pedagogies after a year and a half of adaptive teaching. And I've been predicting that some traditionally residential institutions will restructure in ways that leverage more online courses and programs. I hadn't thought about the potential for our experiences this year to motivate a rethinking of the traditional credit hour and the ways we think about time on task for students.

[57:26] At the very least, as Betsy pointed out, faculty will be rethinking some of their assumptions about how students use their time outside of class. That old saw about spending two or three hours outside of class, studying for every hour in class seems particularly disconnected from reality. I'm not sure if many colleges and universities will lean into

competency-based education as far as Karen might wish. But I can imagine something of a reset and how faculty and students think about time on task. I'm looking forward to seeing how that plays out in the coming months.

[58:00] Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and The Jean and Alexander Heard libraries. You can find us on Twitter @leadinglinespod and on the web at leadinglinespod.com. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes when we publish them. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening and stay safe. (music)