"Overworkload" becoming common faculty symptom

by David Laderman, CSM Academic Senate President

When Dan Kaplan asked me on behalf of The Advocate if I would write a follow-up article on the faculty workload issue covered eloquently by Teeka James in the previous issue (April 2015, p.2), I replied that I was too busy, no time. I said I thought that would be a good point to put in the article that I was too busy to write. He then replied, "I'll take that as a yes."

So here I am, in a situation that can be described as ironic, at best. Writing an article I don't have time to write, about faculty workload. Or should I say, "overworkload" (a hybrid term: overwork + overload). This latter term does seem more appropriate these days—especially when I look into my colleagues' eyes.

What happened? "They" told us the computer revolution and amazing cyberspace would give us MORE free time. Yes, I suppose in some pockets of our everyday lives, that's true. But regarding faculty overworkload (and not just for faculty, but for students, administrators, staff, and likely all varieties of worker bees across the workplace spectrum), that spin now seems a dizzying sham. The computer revolution ("revolution"—?), amazing cyberspace: yeah, right.

LESS free time. MORE work.

Our waking (and semi-waking) hours have been infiltrated and colonized by...the Matrix. How many times have you heard colleagues say (or have said yourself) something to the effect of: the only way I can get my work done is to work late evening hours and through the weekend—? We know for most faculty this is the sorry state of things.

Please don't mistake this preamble as a neo-Luddite whine. I love my computer; I love my email and the Internet. But the accompanying baggage—massive overworkload? Positing as foregone conclusion, a snarky discourse out there insists you can't have one without the other. Really? Says who? According to what? I'm inclined to copy and paste one of my favorite song titles: It Ain't Necessarily So.

In addressing faculty overworkload, we need to acknowledge the pertinence of these broad hyperreal transformations to our daily work routines. But there are also more immediate and tangible issues for us to lay our hands on. Recently, AFT and District Academic Senate began a conversation on faculty overworkload. An initial meeting between AFT reps and each of the three college senate presidents proved a fruitful brainstorming session. A big piece revolves around electronic communications, but there are other big pieces: SLO's and other accreditation pressures, committee work, the FT/PT ratio imbalance, as well as unequal levels of faculty participation outside the classroom.

Appendix D needs updating

At the end of the session, all agreed the best place to start would be to revisit the contract language of Appendix D, a list of all faculty "duties and responsibilities." Section A lists "required" duties, most of it related to teaching classes. This is a short list. Much longer, Section B lists "additional professional responsibilities not subject to additional compensation." (And lastly, Section C lists "voluntary activities performed without additional District compensation"). I'm told this list has not been touched in some 20 years. I think the time is ripe to do so. Looking over the document, what strikes me is the insidiously effective ambiguity of the language, on the one hand protecting the District from having to compensate faculty for most anything, on the other hand leaving vague any sense of how, and how much, faculty need to do (which likely yields the effect of pitting us against ourselves). If we can put some more specific parameters into the language of Appendix D, we might be able to lighten our load. Put differently, we need to more specifically define our duties and responsibilities in light of recent developments to our current employment situation.

Here at CSM, we have attempted to tackle this discussion in Governing Council. I have urged division reps to bring some revision ideas to the table. But we did not get very far. First of all, like so many of the issues we discuss that depend upon reps reading the relevant documents, folks don't come too prepared—because they don't have time to read what I send them. Secondly, though, generating some potential new language is a daunting and challenging task. One quagmire that repeatedly comes up: wanting to make the language more restrictive so as to reduce workload, but not wanting it to be too restrictive (with a vital eye to achieving buy-in from the District). Similarly, wanting to more equally distribute college participation outside the classroom (especially regarding committee participation), but not wanting to be punitive or create mandates.

Possible forums

How to move forward? One idea emerged, to begin holding college-wide (and then maybe district-wide) forums, hosted by Academic Senate and AFT, where faculty can hash out ideas and perspectives, with the goal of eventually pro-
Rejuvenating the retirees’ chapter through engagement

By John Searle, DART President

A group of four of us (Dan Kaplan, John Kirk, John Searle, and Ernie Rodriguez) sat down over a meal to discuss ways of rejuvenating the local chapter of DART (District Association of Retired Teachers). A pleasant social occasion by any criteria in the up and coming San Carlos restaurant district. The conversation focused on ways to utilize the talents of retired teachers, and formats that would allow them to express themselves.

One idea was to accept an offer by The Advocate to provide a regular column for the “voice” of the retired teacher. Ernie was good enough to volunteer the first of such articles, featured in the last edition. I think the aim is to provide both stories as to how faculty are using their hard earned retirement, and possibly to inspire others to act out their dreams. So, if any individual is interested in writing such a column, please contact either Dan Kaplan or Eric Brenner.

Other ideas tended to focus on how the expertise of the retired could maybe be used in the classroom. Obviously one such way would be to encourage the institution to provide “exit interviews,” with the individuals being more willing to provide creative criticism knowing their job was not on the line.

Another possibility is the idea of tutoring students on an informal level. Would past faculty want to do this, and is there a present format to enable them to volunteer such activity?

Also at Executive Committee meetings, it has been stated that some faculty review committees have difficulty in raising a quorum of people to serve. The question raised over mealtime was could retired faculty (assuming they might have an interest) serve on such committees, and equally, would they be wanted?

At a more mundane level, the present activity planned is a repeat of last year’s hike/walk/stroll in the Peninsula watershed area; the day would be Saturday, August 1. It was an easy, flat four miles in; a picnic lunch; and four miles out. As last year, interested individuals should contact John Searle (searle@my.smccd.edu) if they would like to attend the walk. The access to the watershed area was a page one feature in the Saturday, April 18 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle. I would like to think we collectively could put Tom Stienstra’s green page Chronicle articles to shame.

As always, DART would love to hear from you on your suggestions for social activities.

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ducing a solid remix of Appendix D that a majority of faculty can support. Hard to say how successful these forums would be. But it’s worth a try. In the meantime, on a more micro level, let me invite faculty to have a look at the document, and send any ideas to your AFT reps or senate presidents.

In the spirit of articulating the problem before discovering the right solution, let me float another angle on the topic. Administrators seem to genuinely encourage faculty to “participate” in “governance” (i.e., “participatory governance”). Such “participation” often involves attending numerous meetings, reading voluminous materials, engaging in countless email exchanges, generating and reviewing proposals, coordinating appointments… Yet we’re supposed to do all this on top of our full teaching load, and all our other Appendix D duties and responsibilities. Let’s consider the inverse, saying to an administrator, “yes, you have your full-time workload of 40 hours a week, but we thought you’d also like to teach a couple classes here and there, just to show your support for student success. What’s that? Compensation? No, sorry…” Can you imagine?

Without intending to suggest some kind of malicious conspiracy, it does feel at times like a way for the administration to get more (and more) work out of us, in the guise of “including” us in the governance process. Has there ever been any serious institutional discussion of compensation for such participatory governance? We need to have that discussion. Administrators are paid to manage, govern, administer; it’s part of their duties. In contrast, faculty are “allowed” to participate in governance processes—but on their own time and at their own expense. Sure, the participating faculty suffer from exhaustion; but so too do our students suffer from being handed overworked faculty. Faculty absolutely should have a voice in the decisions of the college. But such inclusion can only be authentic if it is treated fairly as workload—not unfairly as overworkload.

Lastly, and most emphatically: a spontaneous hallway conversation a few days ago zeroed in on the most pressing lynchpin: the need for more full-time faculty. How many of these overworkload challenges would be solved by more movement in this direction? I have no doubt there are all kinds of persuasive answers the administration will proffer to our question, why not more full-time faculty? On the other hand, I believe it’s also an issue of perspective and priorities. There seems to be plenty of financial resources being spent by our community-aid district, funded by probably some of the highest property tax values in the world. Likely most of these expenditures are worthy. But, let’s think again—and let’s keep insisting our administration think again. What, really, could be a more worthwhile expenditure—for our students, our colleges, and our community—than more full-time faculty?