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Causes and Remedies of Overwork Norms in Academia

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For academic researchers, our work is core to our identities. For many of us, it is central to who we are. In this regard, work is for many a calling or a passion as much as an occupation or job. The literature in organization science has much to say about work identity and passion, and I will bring this research to bear on the topic of overwork norms in academia. In preparation for this session, I have also collected qualitative data in the form of interviews with assistant professors who, because of the combination of career and life stage, are particularly prone to feeling the pressures of managing work and family. Interestingly, they reported that while some of the pressures they face are levied externally by deans and department chairs, at least as many are self-imposed. The nature of the work itself – long lead times, limited feedback, demands from multiple constituencies, the need for early success – is complicit in creating this pressure. In addition, the scorecards of success – in the form of article counts, citations, dollars in sponsored research, and teaching evaluations – is always salient, both to the individual and to others. In the session, I will focus on the causes of these overwork norms in academic contexts, as well as possible remedies.