

Email Report
Executive Summary

Anna Curtis, Jen Lundquist, Abby Templer and Joya Misra

During the 2008-2009 year, the Joint Administration-Massachusetts Society of Professors (MSP) Work-Life Committee designed a campus-wide study to shed light on the ways in which faculty at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst negotiate the boundaries between work and life. The MSP, the Provost's Office, and the Office of Faculty Development funded the study. The study included a survey of all faculty, who were not serving in administrative roles, and focus groups. The faculty who participated in the focus groups identified email as one of the more stressful factors of their work responsibilities. Email was frequently identified as a primary culprit causing the "bleed" between work and non-work life, since email "follows" workers home and can lead to burnout. The volume of unregulated email can also reach a point where time spent replying to email becomes counter-productive.

Key findings from this report include:

- Without set email protocols, students' expectations for immediate response from their professors is unrealistically high. The same is sometimes true for faculty-to-faculty email.
- Student overreliance on email to contact their professors sometimes leads to unnecessary miscommunications. Email also lowers the quality of student-instructor communication of the kind that is better suited to face-to-face interaction
- Emails sent by students and colleagues after work hours and over weekends results in frequent feelings of "email invasion." This ubiquitous nature of email is a major factor in faculty work-life boundary blurring.

Recommendations include:

Create an Official, Standardized Email Protocol for University-Wide Email Interaction:

While the university cannot enforce an email protocol, it can certainly publicize its efforts to reduce unnecessary email strain and post a suggested standard protocol for recommended email usage on the university web site. Department chairs, faculty and staff can refer to this protocol as a way to legitimate their own efforts to reduce email overload.

- (1) *For collegial email (professionals within a department):* Expectations should be that faculty responds to emails between 9am and 5pm on Monday through Friday with at least a forty-eight hour lag time, and faculty emails composed during non-work hours should be saved and sent during regular work hours. The protocol can be promoted by Department chairs, through new faculty orientation and through seminars by the UMass Workplace Learning & Development Office. We also suggest a policy whereby attachments necessary for meetings should be sent forty-eight (48) hours ahead of time and the use of "opt-in wikis" in place of large group is encouraged.
- (2) *For student email:* The University should create a guide to class email etiquette for undergraduates, which should be included in all faculty syllabi and as part of student orientation. Suggested etiquette rules include¹:
 - Expect faculty to respond to emails between 9am and 5pm on Monday through Friday with a forty-eight hour lag time.
 - For any concerns about grades, meet with your professor or TA face-to-face.
 - Before sending questions via email, make sure that your question is not answered on the course syllabus or website.
 - Be specific about the subject of the email in the mail subject heading and use proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

¹ Many of these suggestions are adapted from <http://science.kennesaw.edu/~hmattord/email.htm>. [Accessed August 24th, 2009.]