Overworking in HCI: A Reflection on Why We Are Burned Out, Stressed, and Out of Control; and What We Can Do About It

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ABSTRACT

In this alt.chi submission, we explore overwork in academic Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research. We first ask why it is that we overwork: a combination of *external* pressures including cutthroat publication-centric competition, lack of recognition for invisible research labor facilitated by technologies that promote overwork and further hide the labor behind research, and institutionalized overwork norms reified through toxic advising practices; along with *internal* pressures, including information opacity and precarious employment as tools for self-exploitation, intense personal and emotional investment in research, and our relational commitments to each other. We explore overwork's detrimental consequences to individual researchers, the relationships between them, and research integrity. Our analysis of overwork in academia underscores the urgent need to halt our overwork norms and pivot towards reasonable, responsible, and health-conscious work practices—before we burn to a crisp in the name of more publications.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics**;

KEYWORDS

Overwork, HCI, labor, advising and mentorship, research ethics, academic working conditions

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1 INTRODUCTION

Overwork, a seeming prerequisite for research success, has become the unspoken rule of academia. Overwork stands as our elephant in the room – immensely evident, persistently present, yet remains routinely and systematically unaddressed. We see overwork everywhere we go. We see it in our colleagues' tired eyes and in their hollow souls, their vitality depleted by long hours of cognitively demanding, emotionally draining, and physically sedentary research labor. We see it in ceaseless and burdensome service requests to support the academic publishing machine, freely providing our labor and expertise to author, review, and edit publications; organize conferences and workshops; serve on institutional committees; and mentor junior researchers eager to join the ranks. We see it in the disproportionately high rates of stress and burnout among researchers [36, 51, 72]. We see it in the unsustainable exponential growth of research publications, with rates that outpace the number of practicing scientists [26]. [1] We see it in inflated numbers of PhD awardees, and the consequent hyper-competition [13, 59] that renders entrance to research careers difficult without a number of achievements and demonstrated research experience [37]. Reluctantly resigned to overwork, we endure it, we hate it, and we suffer its ruinous effects at individual and societal levels.

Paid to learn, discover, and innovate to advance our collective knowledge and broaden our possible futures, we as HCI academics hold positions of immense privilege, potential, and responsibility. Yet, the reality of our work lives is far from ideal. How did a role so rich in reward and potential become so fraught with stress and burnout? What has our culture of overwork cost to our personal and relational wellbeing, and to the quality of our contributions to society? Most importantly, what steps can we take to address and reform our deeply-rooted overwork conditions? This alt.chi submission seeks to unveil the hidden tendrils of the insidious overwork monster, examining why we overwork, the severe consequences it brings, and what we can do to resist its pervasive grip.

2 OVERWORKING: THE DRIVERS

Unequivocally, quality research takes work. The issue is the *excessive degree* of work demanded: unrealistic expectations that deny HCI researchers a balanced commitment to understanding, advancing, and enriching knowledge by making us reluctant participants in a widespread academic cultural fight to publish or perish. To disrupt our entrenched overwork culture and so pave the way for more viable academic futures, we must first identify and challenge its root causes: why do we accept and perpetuate academia's debilitating overwork conditions?

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[1] CHI is not exempt from this trend, with perpetual increases in the number of submissions – boasting 27% more submissions for CHI 2024 than 2023, and 52% more than 2022 [57]

We highlight both *external* factors—(1) cutthroat publication-centric competition; (2) technology-facilitated overworking; and (3) institutionalized overwork norms reified through toxic advising relationships— and *internal* pressures— (4) information opacity and precarious employment as tools for self-exploitation; (5) intense personal and emotional investment in research; and (6) our relational commitments to not let each other down—that shape and enforce overwork's prevalence in academia.

2.1 External Pressures

2.1.1 Cutthroat Publication-Centric Competition. Our pervasive overwork culture is intricately tied to a publication-centric framework, where researcher success is measured with greater weight given to publication and citation count than to our work's quality or rigor. Intense focus on publication volume has been further amplified by the rise of bibliometrics, facilitating instant quantification of a researcher's publication record as a reductive proxy for our worth. Compounding the challenge for inter-disciplinary fields such as HCI, which include demographically diverse, disparately resourced, and geographically dispersed researchers across academia, industry, and government to address high-impact global issues, is the cutthroat research environment. We face pressures to publish prolifically while also targeting top-tier venues like CHI to maximize our impact and advance our academic careers. Indeed, the rate of scientific publication is surging [7, 34, 35], CHI included. These prestigious publication slots necessitate research output of nearly flawless quality, resulting in a dynamic where the oppressive demand for publication quantity is matched only by unrelenting expectations for continuous research excellence. Escalating research performance expectations to unreasonably high levels, particularly for those less-resourced, our unrealistic standards for competition fuel overwork.

With no feasible alternative metric for evaluating research success in our culture's paradoxically skewed emphasis on high-volume *and* high-impact publishing, the labor required to constantly produce high-quality research is overlooked as we are compelled to produce more, faster, and better regardless of the cost to stay competitive. We're trapped in a continuous state of overwork for the sake of academic survival. Our minimum bar for academic success is unreasonably high, disparately burdensome, and must change.

2.1.2 Technological Advancements Promote Overwork and Neglect Invisible Labor. Technological advancements have significantly transformed research practice. Tools including scholarly search engines, citation managers, remote communications, and data analysis software have facilitated easier and quicker access to collaborators, participants, data, analysis tools, and related literature. These technologies have made outputting research easier and more efficient; however, as a consequence, researchers are now compelled to keep pace with this unsustainable rate of rapidly increasing academic output [1, 22]. The need to stay current with ever-growing publications in our field is a problem particularly salient in HCI, where expectations to maintain multi-disciplinary expertise, combined with the personal stakes tied to publication, can fuel a constant fear of professional scrutiny lest one be 'called out' for not having read the most recent paper in a field.

Simultaneously, digitally-mediated research practices promote overwork. As labor histories have shown us, labor-saving technologies change work in ways that maximize output and efficiency, rather than in ways that benefit workers [16]. Time that a researcher saves through technology is reinvested into producing more work, without a corresponding reduction in research workloads — in other words, once it is easier to produce more work, we are expected to produce more work, meaning that no time is saved *for us* at all. Used to facilitate greater research engagement (e.g., participant outreach, research collaboration) and simplify mundane 'shallow work' [44] tasks (e.g.,organizing emails, managing references, automating analyses), our technology-mediated work practices become redistributed to not only demand higher output, but require greater effort, with expectations that we remain constantly connected [62] while filling our time with more 'deep work' [44]. Less simple to automate, this deep work requires intense periods of concentration that push our cognitive limits. Though deep work can be profoundly fulfilling and has undoubtedly served many of our most important innovations, it is simultaneously exhausting, requiring creative, physical, and social counterbalances to restore our overworked neural circuits, renew our capacity to return to deep work engagement, and maintain healthy relationships to our labor. A constant expectation of continuous deep work only diminishes its returns.

The dispersed and remote nature of digital research practice exacerbates the challenge of recognizing the substantial amount of invisible labor already involved in producing, disseminating, and collaborating on research. What remains out of sight often remains unnoticed. As a result, despite the researcher's increased workloads, digitally-mediated research labor remains largely invisible and unacknowledged. Meant to aid research, research technologies instead heighten the pressures of academic life, intensifying not only overwork pressures, but the invisibility of research labor itself—leading to unreasonable demands of researchers' time and effort. We must reevaluate our reliance on technology in academic research to ensure that these tools serve to enhance, not exacerbate, researcher productivity and wellbeing; promote environments conducive to intellectual engagement and innovation; and do not become inadvertent catalysts for an escalating cycle of academic overwork that further obscures researchers' invisible labor.

2.1.3 Institutionalized Overwork Norms and Toxic Advising Relationships. A major source of overwork is driven by both top-down institutional pressures and toxic advising relationships. Research institutions, driven to enhance their prestige and financial standing through publications and grants, inadvertently set unrealistic research norms that prioritize output over the wellbeing of researchers, and create an environment where overwork is not just expected but required for academic survival and success.

This systemic issue is further magnified by the decentralized nature of academic labor management, where employing institutions shift responsibility for labor management onto individual faculty [40] who wield significant power over researchers and work conditions in their labs, often without adequate oversight or checks against abuse. Responsible for setting the tone and culture within their research groups, these faculty lab leaders, mentors, and advisors—many of whom secured their position by adhering to

overwork norms—often enforce the same blueprint for their own success, normalizing a culture where excessive work hours and relentless pursuit of research output becomes standard [23]. Far too common, advisors set excessively high expectations for their students and postdocs, either through explicit demands for excessive work hours or by implicitly setting productivity standards that can only be achieved with overwork [23].

Our institutional overwork norms and detrimental advising practices shape an environment where academic success is tightly bound to harmful and unsustainable work habits [36]. The rare advisor who does challenge these exploitative standards exposes themselves to professional vulnerability, further limiting possibilities for change. Upholding overwork norms erodes the wellbeing of current and future academics, and threatens the integrity and sustainability of the academic enterprise as a whole. To dismantle these harmful practices, it is imperative that research institutions foster a culture where balanced workloads and supportive mentorship are benchmarks for academic excellence and success, and implement adequate protections for researchers of all career stages to challenge and resist the status quo.

2.2 Internal Pressures

2.2.1 Information Opacity and Precarious Employment as Tools for Self-Exploitation. While overwork is rooted in external pressures like institutional norms, advising practices, and hyper-competitive environments, academic overwork is further reinforced by internal pressures that stem from within the researcher. These external and internal factors interact to create an entrenched ecosystem of overwork.

Central to this dynamic is information opacity, where researchers engage in their work uncertain about how much work is needed to succeed due to a lack of accessible and transparent information, coupled with precarious employment conditions—a hallmark of hierarchical academic structures. Research expectations are often shrouded in obscurity; rarely do administrators, departments, or advisors explicitly state the de facto requirements (e.g., number of publications) to secure a PhD, faculty position, or tenure. Higher-ups often adopt a commitment to *flexibility* instead. While this vagueness (in theory) allows for personalized evaluations of individual researchers, flexibility also operates as a double-edged sword: without clear guidelines or benchmarks for when their work is enough, the information opacity leaves researchers grappling with the constant fear of falling short, enforcing overwork standards by default as researchers strive to produce as much high-quality output as possible.

Opaque success metrics disproportionately affect early-career researchers, given the precarity of their insecure employment contracts [25, 45]. Further, these harmful effects can compound for researchers from historically marginalized backgrounds, including first-generation researchers who may be constrained in navigating institutional challenges, researchers with caregiving responsibilities and/or from poorer socio-economic backgrounds who may have insufficient support systems to contend with high academic demands, disabled researchers whose conditions are often incompatible with excessively long and strenuous work environments, and researchers from cultural backgrounds who may face unique pressures to endure exploitative academic conditions [24, 41, 55, 67]. Without sufficient institutional knowledge, appropriate supports, and independent (e.g., not self-interested) guidance to know when their work is good enough, early-career researchers are compelled to continuously push beyond reasonable limits in an effort to meet undisclosed expectations by 'playing it safe.'

In the absence of clear benchmarks for career success and security, information opacity promotes overwork among our most precarious researchers. The need for clear, equitable, and explicit success metrics in academia cannot be overstated. Establishing transparent minimum benchmarks and fostering an environment that values the wellbeing of *all* researchers is crucial to overhaul our overwork culture and promote a more inclusive academic landscape.

2.2.2 Intense Personal and Emotional Investment in Research. Widespread toxicity and challenges within academic work conditions raises a fundamental question: why do so many of us sustain these working conditions instead of seeking alternatives? While some researchers transition to non-academic careers in response, a critical factor that compels many to remain and endure academia's challenges involves the intense, personal process of *aspiration*—the transformative, emotionally-involved journey to becoming an academic that (as per philosopher Agnes Callard) compels us to shift our priorities, purpose, and very sense of self in the process [12]. When we aspire to be academics, we find ourselves in a cutthroat research environment that demands the majority of our time, exploits our intellectual labor, and requires intense personal investments and emotional commitments. As we conform to the rules of becoming an academic researcher, deep changes occur within us that can perversely affect our futures selves. We may wish to become academics for different reasons—prestige, legacy, making a real and lasting impact on the world—but by fundamentally shifting who we are, what we are willing to do, and what we care most about in order to become academics, the end result is too often the same: academics who seek to expand and deepen knowledge primarily not for the social good, but as a commodity to enhance one's personal brand [47].

Our personal and emotional investments in research both enable and hide self-exploitation, as our desire to become academic researchers leads us to endure overwork and the incessant demands of academic life. The process of becoming an academic *should* be a journey of intellectual and personal growth, but is marred by pressures that exploit our emotional investments to conform us to a broken system that prioritizes productive output over all. The duality of being both a contributor to and a product of the exploitative academic machine highlights a critical need for change. The emotional aspects of academic work—the passion, dedication, and aspiration that drive researchers—should be acknowledged and nurtured, not exploited. As Callard reminds us, this requires a continuous reflection upon the qualities and values we inherit in our aspirational journeys, and their relationship to the self we endeavor to be. Creating an academic environment supportive of our emotional journeys to becoming academics is critical—only then can we preserve the integrity of academic careers, and foster an enriching academic landscape truly worthy of our early aspirations.

2.2.3 Relational Responsibility: Not Wanting to Let Others Down. Our personal and emotional investments in research extend to our relational commitments. The drive to publish collaborative work stems not only from self-interest, but from a deep-seated commitment to support each other's endeavors. The collaborative nature of research means that slowing down or stepping back from work doesn't just affect us: it can also have ripple effects on our collaborators', colleagues', and students' contributions and career prospects. As we strive to uphold our collaborative responsibilities, our commitments to each other can lead to self-imposed overwork. Not rushing to a deadline doesn't just mean *we* don't publish a paper, it means our *collaborators* don't publish a paper—or must pick up the work that we don't do in order to get the paper published. Driven by an internal sense of responsibility to each other and a genuine desire to contribute meaningfully—intensified by social pressures and a dash or two of shame—we overwork and overextend ourselves to meet collective goals. Moreover, seeing each other overwork can serve as a subtle yet powerful reinforcer to follow overwork norms: constantly reminding us that if we don't overwork, we are not pulling our own weight—and so we overwork even harder, unwittingly applying pressure to our collaborators to work harder as well.

Our interconnectedness, while fostering a strong sense of community, can inadvertently contribute to our cycles of overwork. However, this commitment and responsibility to each other should be cultivated as a strength of academic collaboration, not exploited for increased productivity. It is imperative to actively safeguard this ethos of mutual responsibility and support within academic collaborations to ensure it remains a source of collective strength and advancement, rather than being distorted into a justification for unsustainable research practices.

3 OVERWORKING: THE EFFECTS

Having explored the causes of overwork in academia, it's essential to understand its consequences—what overwork has done and will continue to do if we don't enact change. The consequences of overwork extend far beyond late nights and stressful deadlines: it harms researchers' wellbeing, damages their personal and professional relationships, and undermines the quality and integrity of research scholarship.

3.1 Depleting Researcher Wellbeing: Mental Health Distress, Burnout, and Relational Strain

Contrary to common misconceptions, academia is far from a stress-free environment. Research shows that academic researchers, particularly PhD students, face a significantly elevated risk of psychological distress [36] including conditions like anxiety, depression, and burnout [5, 8, 17, 38, 49, 51]. These challenges are even more pronounced for researchers from marginalized groups, who disproportionately face compounded pressures and barriers to establish and maintain their position in the academic system [6, 14, 30, 32, 42, 48, 65, 69, 70].

While it's well-documented that overworking involves high personal emotional costs, less acknowledged is its impact which extends beyond individual wellbeing and into how we treat each other—affecting the very nature of our interpersonal relationships within academia. Our perverted academic incentives and intensely competitive work environments cultivate an extractive culture where collegial interactions become transactional. Researchers aiming to maintain or raise their academic position often view collaborators and research participants more as resources than as collaborative partners—mere means to benefit their own personal end. This extractive approach fosters a culture where personal gain is prioritized over authentic care and collaboration. Our collegiality degraded, our trust in one another eroded, and our sense of community weakened, such relational strains not only intensify overwork's detrimental effects, but undermine the collaborative and supportive spirit essential for a healthy and innovative academic environment.

3.2 Harming Research: Low Quality Work, Questionable Integrity, and Compromised Peer Review

HCI researchers are under intense pressure to publish not just *any* paper, but novel and high-impact papers, in top-tier venues, that address hot topics, have sexy findings, and will be cited a gazillion times. But even the best researcher, using the most rigorous methods, cannot guarantee their work will be so attractive. When you study the unknown, the unknown sometimes spits boring answers back.

Thus, temptation comes in to 'ensure' that our publications have high visibility and are turned out quickly. Overworked researchers may: gravitate towards answering 'easy' questions on 'popular' topics, exploiting societal need for knowledge to get lesser quality work published; avoid replication studies due to their perceived lack of 'novelty' and minimal impact to one's CV; overpublish results by piece-mealing research findings into individual least publishable units [9, 61], contributing to field-wide challenges in keeping pace with new research (which ultimately fragments research communities [1]); inflate authorship with unwarranted credit, often either as a favor or incentive to junior researchers [66]; inflate citations with inappropriate references, either through excessive self-citation practices or through peer review requests to cite one's own work [20]; take shortcuts in study methodology [58]; and/or report findings disingenuously, slightly skewing results to make data more impressive than it is or in order to fit a narrative that is more likely to get published (e.g., p-hacking [10], HARKing (hypothesizing after results are known) [29], cherry-picked literature reviews); and outright falsifying data [21].

Overworking doesn't just compromise research integrity. It also compromises the peer review process by supporting over-publishing practices. The high volume of submissions, driven by overwork, often results in rushed and inadequate reviews, as reviewers struggle to keep up with the sheer quantity of papers needing their attention and expertise [1]. This burden on the peer review system – especially in top venues like CHI – compromises its effectiveness and quality, contributing to a cycle where overwork pressures undermine the very integrity and societal value of academic research [20]. *"Don't cut corners when doing research since it is unethical"* is a fine motto, but as long as we are overworked and compelled to overpublish, these temptations to save time and maximize output

will persist. And the more overworked we are, the more tempting those siren calls will sound.

3.3 Bleeding Talent

Academia's imperative to overwork is unsustainable for most, leading to a significant talent drain as researchers leave for careers that offer better working conditions and align more closely with communal goals [18, 19, 54, 64]. This exodus is particularly pronounced among marginalized groups, exacerbating the lack of diversity in academia [24, 55, 67]. Those who remain often become disillusioned, adopting self-serving unethical research practices that privilege publication metrics over the societal value of their work [15, 20, 47, 63]. This perversion of research's primary value, from a public good that expands our knowledge, deepens our understanding, and enriches our futures, to a personal instrument to enhance one's professional standing [47], corrupts the core purpose of academic work.

3.4 Losing Track of What's Important

Prioritizing academic publication at the expense of everything else degrades the very structure of our priorities, compelling us to deprioritize any and all activities, both professional and personal, that do not directly contribute to one's publication record [53]. The whole point of our jobs is to publish. We pick up (and discard) projects based on their likelihood of publication. We organize our lives around publication deadlines. The societal impact of these professional constraints bleeds beyond the borders of research: it deepens public mistrust in scientific research, erodes the value of higher education, and adversely affects not just personal researchers, but their loved ones, too [33].

As Alessandro Fabris aptly summarized, *"Before, publishing used to be a means to an end: spreading knowledge. Now publishing is the end."* This perspective shift underscores the need for a critical reassessment of academic priorities to ensure that the pursuit of knowledge remains at the forefront of academic endeavors. With so much of our attention focused on publishing, have we now lost track of who we are, what's important to our lives, and why we even want to publish in the first place?

4 HOW TO SOLVE OVERWORKING

While it's tempting to dwell on our frustrations as overworked academics, we choose to focus on a path forward: one that encourages critical reflection on the ethical implications of our research norms and their broader impact on the academic community. Confronting the monumental challenge of overhauling societal and institutional structures to eradicate overwork, we, as members of the HCI community, recognize our agency in this endeavor.

Academic jobs are unique in their working conditions. Compared to traditional workplace environments, academics tend to enjoy a relatively greater degree of autonomy over their everyday activities – including flexibility over work hours and (barring PhD students and postdocs) freedoms associated with having no direct supervisor. Although, as we've argued, this decentralization has made possible (and invisible) exploitative demands for unreasonably high academic output from ourselves and fellow researchers, we can—and should—leverage our freedom to stop perpetuating norms that necessitate overwork in our daily practice. We have the capacity to initiate meaningful change through smaller, pragmatic actions that shift our decisions towards ones that actively promote improvements to the daily lives of researchers in academia—especially those with limited power to resist overwork pressures.

Combating overwork is more than a question of capability; it is fundamentally about embracing our moral responsibility. We owe it to ourselves, our colleagues, and society to transform academia into a viable, equitable, and sustainable path for all. This transformation requires us to confront the roots of overwork, critically examine our behaviors, and actively pursue change within ourselves and across our academic communities. Real progress is driven by concrete action, not just words. To that end, we advocate for a proactive, practical strategy: a collective call for grassroots (in)action that rallies the HCI community to reject the norm of overwork by consciously refusing to engage in overworking practices. Collective effort is necessary to ensure we promote research for the benefit of society—not for the personal benefit of individual researchers. Accordingly, we need *dis-incentive* systems to resist the perverted academic incentives [20] that compel us to overwork. By taking this stand, we can start to dismantle the culture of overwork at its core, and pave the way for a more balanced and healthy academic environment. We conclude with targeted recommendations to support and sustain this cultural shift.

We note that the solutions we propose have not been empirically tested or evaluated for effectiveness—some of them may seem banal and boring, others too radical or 'out-there' to be feasible. We will be the first to admit we don't know whether they will solve overwork. But by proposing these solutions, we hope to spark a discussion around what are the best ways to solve overwork in HCI. Ambitiously, we call on the community to help test out these approaches (both on an individual and collective level) and see what are effective and ineffective ways of addressing overwork. Together, this can be a jumping point from which we can construct a community we want to be a part of.

4.1 Take a Leap of Faith through Collective (In)action: Stop Publishing So Much, Starting with the Giants

The most direct solution to combating overwork in academia is simple yet challenging: to collectively reduce our publication output—a researcher boycott, if you will [27]. Understandably, a conscious choice to reduce our publishing rate could threaten our career prospects, tenure, and job security, negating our hard-earned overwork efforts. These anxieties make our proposal particularly challenging to enact and enforce. Furthermore, collective action is fraught with its own complexities. Mistrust within academic communities, coupled with the worry that some researchers may exploit others' reduced output to advance their own interests, creates a barrier to unified action. This classic prisoner's dilemma that plagues collective action efforts [28] is further complicated by the collective ask to *stop* reaping gains from our overwork efforts at a scale as large as ours; the lack of obvious, immediate, and tangible personal benefits would pose additional barriers to successfully improving our working conditions—precluding this call for collective (in)action from starting up in the first place [39]. Thus, the initial

step in halting overwork requires that we tackle its psychological barriers at individual and collective levels.

At an individual level, recognizing that we as free agents are both complicit in our overwork practices *and* bear responsibility to stop them can stoke a paralyzing level of fear and anxiety that can occlude possibilities for change. Drawing on Kierkegaard's exploration of agency in the face of existential dread [31], we consider practical examples of how researchers can overcome fears that can stop us from halting overwork by choosing to take a leap of faith anyway. [2] We can exercise our agency through small, yet potent decisions aimed at promoting a more sustainable research environment and maintaining personal authenticity, even in the face of prevailing overwork norms. For instance, we can commit to carefully examining every request for research collaboration, peer review, or service work, and say no to requests that do not align with our personal needs or aspirations. Instead of succumbing to the pressure to publish as much as possible, we can commit to personal goals for a maximum number of submissions to aim for each year. We can prioritize work-life balance with strictly defined and adhered to work schedules. We can speak up about our overwork experiences and push back against unreasonable workloads. These individual changes would serve to resist prevailing overwork norms by prioritizing our wellbeing and extending our relational commitments to care for each other.

Yet, the significant risks associated with taking these leaps can disincentivize individuals from acting on them in the first place—what sociologists of collective action term the "start-up dillemma" [39]. To overcome it requires a critical mass of influential, resourceful, and connected early adopters with fewer personal stakes implicated by the collective goal [39]. This means that tenured faculty and senior academics, stopping overwork *starts with you*. Your instrumental role extends beyond personal changes; your actions and decisions shape our HCI culture and influence the attitudes and practices of the broader academic community. We urge you to leverage your power and increased job security to stop perpetuating overwork norms: instead, model and expect sustainable work practices, including through commitments to halt overpublishing. By refraining from overwork yourselves and for those under your influence—and intervening in their overwork practices —you can reduce the perceived personal risks associated with conscious efforts to stop overworking, and pave the way for a healthier, more equitable academic future for us all. By collectively limiting our publishing output, we can shift norms toward a more balanced, ethical, and sustainable academic environment.

4.2 Openly Talk About Overworking – Do Not Stigmatize It

We advocate for increasing visibility and transparency around working norms. Consider: how well do you understand the working patterns of your colleagues, collaborators, or students? Are you aware of the personal sacrifices they make for their research, including impacts to their family lives, hobbies, health, and overall wellbeing? The fact that we simply accept the weeks leading up to CHI will involve a number of researchers abandoning their loved ones and neglecting their wellbeing to work until whatever-o-clock in the morning to make the deadline normalizes such practice as permissible. The lack of transparency around the extent of overwork in our environments conveniently allows overwork to persist unaddressed.

Shifting overwork culture then requires open, honest conversations about workloads and overwork norms. One approach is to encourage academics to fully acknowledge the breadth of labor involved in research, including not only visible outcomes but also the often invisible and undervalued work efforts: searching for, reading, reflecting on, and discussing relevant research; the indeterminate and iterative process of writing; the network-building efforts and mundane administrative tasks involved in making it happen. All these tasks require significant time and effort before any paper is published, and it's crucial that they are appropriately attributed and explicitly recognized. [3] Other approaches to foster transparency around overwork could include personally documenting work activities, implementing policies that identify and discourage overwork, and engaging community efforts to hold each other to accountable to ethical and balanced work practices. Certainly, these approaches should be considered and implemented carefully so as not to contribute to overwork in ourselves, our peers, or to the broader toxicity of academic culture. However, it is crucial that we take meaningful steps to create an environment where transparency around overwork is normal and non-stigmatized to strengthen visibility around overwork's prevalence and reach. These and other ways that enhance visibility and transparency around overwork would help to combat overwork by modeling reasonable and responsible work practices as an expectation, not a lofty goal, and shifting norms toward them with regular normative reinforcement that conveys overwork is a practice we ought to actively and collectively resist.

Part of that involves collective discussion of what constitutes overwork. Defining overwork is tricky— literally interpreting it as "too much work" raises questions such as too much of what, and for whom? Hours-based approaches would likely insufficiently accommodate the academic's variety of scheduling needs (e.g., preferring to work late or on weekends) and fails to recognize the cadences of our workflows (e.g., around conference deadlines, teaching calendars). While we aim to define overwork, it is important to keep in mind that the frustration we feel at overworking can inadvertently paint all research work as bad and soul-crushing. This is far from the case. There can be genuine joy to be had in conducting research. How can we create a community where researchers are empowered to get joy from work as we both face and resist overwork pressures?

4.3 Reclaim Our Time so the Robots Aren't Used for Evil

In acknowledging the paradox of technological efficiencies (Section 2.1.2), even those of us with a techno-optimist bend must then admit that technologies alone can't rescue us from the clutches overwork—but it could be harnessed to aid in resisting it. As we continue to embrace technological innovations aimed at making work more 'efficient,' it's important for the HCI community—at

[2] A precursor to existentialist thought, Kierkegaard's work laid the philosophical foundations for the existentialists' role in promoting resistance movements [4]

[3] Surely, this recognition should extend to the academic's non-research responsibilities like service roles and teaching commitments

the forefront of these efforts—to leverage these technologies responsibly to ensure that our current and future work practices are reasonable and sustainable.

Consider this: an AI-driven email assistant is found to significantly reduce the time a researcher spends on mundane tasks like email correspondence. If the researcher averages 5 hours per week on emails, and this new tool reduced that to just 1 hour, how should the 4 hours saved be utilized? Instead of falling into the trap of historical labor exploitation where technological advances lead to more work rather than less, we ought to consciously correct this pattern. The traditional expectation would be to redirect those 4 hours back into additional academic work. Instead, the researcher should be free—explicitly—to spend that their newfound 4 hours for personal benefit. This approach would respect the individual's wellbeing and holistic needs, and challenge the ingrained logic that all time saved through technology must be reinvested into further work—a step toward resisting the academic overwork machine.

Many efforts could be taken to promote technological efficiencies for researcher benefit. For example, AI-assistants could estimate time saved and encourage users to reallocate it to personal endeavors. Institutional, departmental, and lab policies could explicitly encourage researchers to use these tools to improve their work-life balance. Workshops and lines of research could be created to explore and validate how researchers can leverage technological efficiencies for personal gain. By consciously redirecting the time saved from efficiency gains back to researchers themselves, we can start to redefine our unhealthy and exploitative relationships to overwork and technology in academia, and foster cultures conducive to deeply rewarding, and even joyful, intellectual innovation.

4.4 Explicit Minimums and Alternative Success Measures

A key driver of overwork, as discussed in Section 2.2.1, is information opacity: uncertainty around what constitutes 'enough' work that feeds a perpetual overwork cycle. In order to stop this self-exploitative maximalization, we need the complete opposite: explicit minimums. What are explicit minimums? Explicit minimums are a defined minimum threshold of work that assures performance satisfaction. Introducing explicit minimums for both students and faculty is thus vital to effectively tackle overwork in academia.

Instead of the nebulous mandate to 'work as hard as you can,' what if we defined a specific minimum workload that guarantees satisfactory job performance (and by extension, strengthens job security)? If students and faculty meet this requirement, they can be assured of their job's safety. This minimum principle could be applied to hiring decisions as well, for example, by instituting a number of papers or citations for new or promoted faculty. The actual unit and amount for minimum thresholds would require cross-collaborative applicability, consideration, and agreement of course, but you get the idea.

Adopting explicit minimums would mark a systemic shift. Critics might argue that this solution is mere "bean counting," reducing complex academic performance to simplistic metrics. We agree: ideally, we should aspire to more nuanced evaluations of academic performance. However, departments already informally utilize minimum thresholds for academic performance evaluations; formalizing them would add a layer of transparency needed to alleviate the perpetual fear of under-performance that drives overwork. Still, others might argue that our proposal is outdated, as academia aims to move beyond its limited quantitative measures for success. Yet, experience tells us that these minimum thresholds implicitly remain even in institutions that explicitly claim otherwise. [4] If academia's approach is to adopt ambiguous, flexible standards that still covertly rely on problematic metrics, the information opacities that propel overwork will persist. Unless and until we develop and implement alternative viable and widely adopted standards for evaluating academic success, it is imperative that we make the current ones—whether explicit or implied—more transparent in order to combat overwork. Yes, quantitative measures for academic success are ambiguous, misleading, and ripe for abuse. Our point is not to try to *solve* the ambiguity that plagues academic evaluation standards, we are simply advocating for more *transparency* around that which was previously hidden. Making the current implicit standards for academic performance explicit and visible can be a powerful and meaningful step towards a more transparent and fair academic environment. Ambiguity often benefits those in power by disadvantaging those in weaker, more vulnerable positions [56], and, in our experiences, more often leads to more exploitation than providing any work relief. Making the hidden visible empowers researchers to know how they are faring and, by allowing for community critique of these academic metrics, creates the necessary generative conditions for real change.

Alongside transparency, we should also continue working towards alternative metrics for successful academic performance. This could include alternative research assessments and success metrics [3] or improvements to existing measures [50, 68, 71] with more diverse recognition for the qualities that are critical to research advancement and societal impact; alternative publishing models, such as moving to open-ended papers [1]; implementing reporting systems to track and correct unethical research behavior, rather than relying on the myth of self-correction [60]; and rewarding responsible and sustainable research efforts and mentorship practices [2]. These and other alternatives aiming to recognize research quality, research impact, and service work, and promote more responsible research practices would be compatible with and supported by an 'explicit minimums' approach. Perhaps by adopting explicit minimums, we can make space to meaningfully and safely conduct alternative forms of research practice (e.g., community outreach, education, policy advocacy) and our attendant academic responsibilities (e.g., teaching, service) that remain under-recognized.

4.5 Unionize

Our susceptibility to overwork and reluctance to stop it are rooted in the precarity of our academic positions. To effectively counter this, we must collectively strengthen career stability for researchers in order to fight for better work and employment conditions. A potent tool for this is unionization, which provides a platform for collective bargaining to advocate for improved work conditions in academia. We advocate unionization for all researchers.

[4] We don't want to name names, but we have heard credible stories of departments saying "we don't consider any applicants with less than X published papers at top tier venues".

Students and postdocs in precarious career stages may more immediately recognize the value of unions in providing stability and enacting work improvements. In contrast, the relative comfort and security provided by faculty positions can breed a sense of complacency about academic working conditions, and discinentivize union support. However, the ongoing consequences of higher education neoliberalization [43]—increasing erosion of faculty autonomy [46, 52], heightened barriers to researcher unionization efforts, particularly in the US [11]—demonstrates the need for collective action is more pressing than ever. We must mobilize together to instigate systemic changes that enhance working conditions for all academics, setting a positive precedent for future generations of researchers. The power of individuals to spark a revolution is limited, but united as a collective, we can embody the revolution.

4.6 Don't Exploit Your Students and Post-docs

Lastly, we cannot overemphasize that a significant source of overwork stems from academic advisors and mentors. As highlighted in Section 2.1.3, advisors play a crucial role in shaping the work habits of their students and post-docs. Even where overwork expectations are not overtly enforced, the presence of broader external drivers of overwork means that advisors who fail to actively discourage and consistently counteract overwork habits can, unintentionally or not, promote it within their research groups. And, given the power dynamics involved, students may be reluctant to raise issues of overwork with their advisors, making the problem less visible and harder to tackle. It's essential for advisors to actively foster a healthy work environment that consciously avoids exploiting their graduate workers and post-docs. Here we propose a few actions advisors can take to promote reasonable and responsible academic work efforts:

- **Regular Holistic Check-ins:** Meet regularly to discuss student and post-doc wellbeing, workload, and aspirations. Explicitly prioritize their holistic wellbeing. Jointly establish goals to ensure alignment between work efforts and personal aspirations. Be mindful that authentic connection is reciprocal.
- **Honor Personal Needs and Boundaries:** Explicitly identify and discourage student and post-doc overwork behaviors. Clearly expect them to *not* work during holidays, personal tragedies, injuries, weekends, after hours, or any other times that could encroach upon their personal lives and wellbeing.
- **Promote Open Dialogue for Advising Improvement and Self-Advocacy:** Provide students and post-docs with encouragement and tools to communicate their limits; know them well enough to recognize and discourage when they've reached them. Genuinely solicit, listen, and respond to their open feedback, including on your advising style and their workload concerns. Avoid dismissing or invalidating their experiences.
- **Power-Aware Guidance:** Take action to narrow the power imbalance inherent to your advising relationship. Appropriately credit their contributions, and show appreciation for their unique perspective. Recognize your 'suggestions' can contribute to excessive work; be aware they might be perceived as demands. Clearly distinguish between what's required for their role or progress and what's optional for their improvement or growth.
- **Lead by Example:** Take seriously your role in fostering a positive and sustainable work environment. Model healthy work-life balance, ethical research practice, and authentic mentorship yourself.

As we commit to halting academia's overwork norms and pivot to more reasonable, responsible practices, our recommendations aim to realize new academic realities in a culture where intellectual rigor harmonizes with wellbeing and ethical responsibility. Our collective mission is to end overwork in academia, and nurture an academic culture that holistically values and supports every community member. We hope you join us.

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