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E-Mail: the Third Shift

By Mary Ann Mason

Many academics have a love-hate relationship with e-mail. We know it has made communicating with colleagues in our own departments and around the world far, far easier. But we are also aware that e-mail is devouring a great deal of our time.

For faculty members, it is not just e-mail messages from professional associates, friends, family, and spammers that demand our attention. Students, sometimes by the dozens, e-mail their instructors daily, seeking an immediate response. For faculty mothers and fathers, e-mail eats up the extra hour or more a day after they have put the children to bed and prepared for the next day's teaching—or perhaps the hour before the children or the sun rise.

It is the third shift in an already overcrowded day. It means less sleep, or less time for weekend activities with the family away from the computer. Many faculty members enjoy the easy communication with students online. The problem is, there are no guidelines for how to hold the beast to reasonable limits.

The heightened concern about the demands of the third shift was brought home to me at a recent visit to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. According to a 2009 survey at the university, faculty members there are putting in between 60 and 70 hours a week on teaching, research, and service; including mothers and fathers, who simply added their second shift of housework and child care to their 60-plus hours of university work.

Our 2003 survey of faculty members at the University of California showed a similar second shift for faculty parents, but the time devoted to university and professional activities averaged about 10 hours less in the California survey than was reported at the University of Massachusetts six years later. A spirited discussion led to the likely culprit: students' growing use of e-mail to contact professors, often with trivial or inappropriate questions, like "Sorry I missed class today, can you send me the lecture notes?"

There is no doubt e-mail use is exploding. According to the Radicati Group, a company that publishes statistics on the use of e-mail and instant messaging, worldwide e-mail messages totaled 247 billion a day in 2009. By 2013, that figure is expected to double to 507 billion messages a day.

Today's students were introduced in grade school to instant messaging and Facebook; immediate access is the new cultural norm. The formal barriers between student and instructor in the university world have come down, with no real etiquette to replace them. Students expect instant replies, not a five-day wait until office hours on Tuesday.

What are universities doing to deal with this communication revolution? My quick survey revealed that many universities (including my own) have set up policies over the past few years to guarantee e-mail access to students and teachers, and to insist that much university business will be conducted in this mode. In addition, there are stern warnings about inappropriate behavior. The policies also warn that confidential and obscene messages are a bad idea.

The policy of Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York, provides more detail than most. It defines inappropriate e-mail as: chain mail that misuses or disrupts resources, or e-mail sent repeatedly from user to user, with requests to send to others; virus hoaxes; spamming or e-mail bombing attacks or intentional e-mail transmissions that disrupt normal e-mail service; unsolicited junk e-mail that is unrelated to university business and is sent without a reasonable expectation that the recipient would welcome such mail; e-mails that seek to defraud the recipient or misrepresent or fail to accurately identify the sender; and messages containing obscene material or offensive language.

Beyond those kinds of rules, however, colleges offer little guidance. No campus policy that I could find, for example, specifically states that it is inappropriate for students to e-mail their instructors several times a day.

A few campuses have attempted to present vague rules about appropriate use of e-mail in the context of a course. The language for those rules seems to have been copied from the same model, or perhaps it developed virally on the Internet. As the student e-mail policy at the University of Colorado at Boulder states: "Faculty may determine how e-mail will be used in their classes. It is highly recommended that if faculty have e-mail requirements and expectations they specify these requirements in their course syllabus."

In other words, you're on your own.

On the same visit to Massachusetts, I asked female faculty members at Mount Holyoke College, most of them mothers, to tell me how they deal with the excess of e-mail from students.

First I heard the cautionary tales. "I just don't allow e-mail," a senior professor said. "They can come to office hours if they want."

That comment elicited a low gasp from the other faculty members. "But the students will certainly knock down your evaluations, if you do that," a younger woman said. "Access is something they really care about."

A third woman offered, "I just say I will answer within 24 hours, not immediately."

Then the group grew quiet as Melanie Guldi, an assistant professor and mother of triplets who are now toddlers, spoke up. "I rarely check my e-mail after I leave the office at 5:30 and before I return the next morning," she said. "If I do check it at night, I generally do not respond to student e-mails until the next day. Almost the only exception I make to this rule is that I will answer e-mails at night if I am traveling."

One way she limits e-mail messages, she said, is to direct students to an electronic blackboard where she posts general answers to common questions—or sometimes other students do. She also explains the course requirements to students upfront, including the e-mail guidelines spelled out clearly in her syllabus. Finally, she said, "I know how to say no, and I'm not afraid to do so."

By necessity, this mother of three has figured out how to tame the e-mail beast. But she and other faculty members—parents or not—could probably use some help from their institutions.

Shouldn't it be routine university policy to promote clear guidelines about the use of e-mail between faculty members and students? That would benefit not only parents, of course, but, particularly for mothers, limiting the third shift may make the difference between academic survival and burnout.

Mary Ann Mason is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Law Center on Health, Economic & Family Security and the author (with her daughter, Eve Ekman), of Mothers on the Fast Track. She writes regularly on work and family issues for our Balancing Act column, and invites readers to send in questions or personal concerns about those issues to careers@chronicle.com or to mamason@law.berkeley.edu.