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Societal impact and faculty burnout in business schools: A demands–resources–meaning framework

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ABSTRACT

Societal impact expectations are reshaping business school faculty work. While accreditation standards require integrating sustainability, ethics, and community engagement, little research examines their effects on workload, resources, and well-being. This article introduces the Societal Impact Demands–Resources–Meaning (SI-DRM) framework, integrating Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources theories with meaningful work research. The framework identifies three pathways: role demand overload, meaning-driven overinvestment, and resource-buffered engagement. Five propositions guide empirical testing and offer practical insight. The SI-DRM framework explains why similar expectations produce divergent outcomes and how well-intentioned initiatives may unintentionally undermine faculty capacity.

KEYWORDS

Societal impact; faculty burnout; business education; conservation of resources theory; AACSB accreditation

Introduction

Business schools face intensifying pressure to demonstrate societal impact. AACSB's Standard 9, Engagement and Societal Impact, now formally requires accredited schools to document how their curricula, scholarship, and activities contribute to broader societal goals (AACSB International, 2025a, 2025b). The response has been widespread: empirical research shows business schools redesigning curricula for sustainability and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) alignment, expanding community-based learning, and developing new assessment and reporting systems (Godemann et al., 2023; Kabadayi & Jason-DiBartolo, 2022). Strategic accreditation processes have similarly intensified, with institutions investing significant effort in aligning mission, curriculum, and faculty activities with Standard 9 expectations (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2020). Yet despite broad institutional activity, AACSB's own accreditation reports consistently flag Standard 9 as an area for improvement, with schools flagged as deficient in this area in over 90% of recent peer-review decisions (AACSB International, 2024).

The reason may be simpler than strategy: societal impact is implemented by faculty. Every SDG-aligned course, every community partner project, every assessment framework and reporting requirement lands on a faculty member's desk, typically alongside an unchanged teaching load, advising queue, and service calendar. Faculty workload is already complex and expanding before these demands are added: scholars document workload creep, in which new responsibilities accumulate without reducing existing duties, limiting recovery and increasing chronic overload risk (Long et al., 2020). Burnout in academic settings stems not only from individual stress but from structural conditions, including expanding role expectations and uneven labor distribution (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Maslach et al., 2001). Research on invisible labor shows that women and faculty from marginalized groups disproportionately perform service, mentoring, and community-related work that remains unrecognized in formal workload systems (Gordon et al., 2024). When societal impact initiatives cluster among faculty who already carry the heaviest invisible loads, they risk compounding existing inequities.

Yet research on societal impact in business education focuses primarily on institutional strategy and curricular design, with far less attention to the faculty work conditions these initiatives create (Griffin, 2022; Taylor & Frechette, 2022). A parallel literature on faculty burnout and workload documents rising strain and chronic overload, but rarely connects these conditions to the specific demands generated by societal

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impact requirements (Balkin et al., 2022; Pace et al., 2021). This gap raises a central question: how do societal impact expectations shape the role demands, resources, and meaning structures of business school faculty, and what are the consequences for their well-being and engagement?

This article bridges that gap. To illuminate how societal impact expectations shape faculty outcomes, we develop the Societal Impact Demands–Resources–Meaning (SI-DRM) framework, drawing on Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory as our primary lens, with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory explaining resource-loss dynamics and meaningful work functioning as a moderator. The framework identifies three pathways (role demand overload, meaning-driven overinvestment, and resource-buffered engagement) and advances five propositions for empirical testing.

Literature review

AACSB's 2020 standards introduced Standard 9, Engagement and Societal Impact, as a formal requirement for all accredited schools, calling for mission-aligned, evidence-based approaches to documenting societal contributions across curriculum, scholarship, and stakeholder engagement (AACSB International, 2025a). Rather than prescribing specific activities, the standard creates practical ambiguity: schools must develop their own frameworks for identifying focus areas, integrating relevant content, and demonstrating outcomes. Scholars argue this mandate reflects a broader shift requiring faculty to prepare graduates who can address sustainability, equity, and complex social challenges (Doherty et al., 2015; Dyllick, 2015). In practice, societal impact activities introduce multiple types of demand: curriculum redesign requires substantial cognitive effort, community partner projects involve sustained relational and coordination labor, and assessment and reporting add administrative burden. Research consistently finds these activities are absorbed into existing workloads without formal recognition, compounding existing pressures (Godemann et al., 2023). Table 1 summarizes these demand types and their resource implications, drawing on evidence regarding accreditation documentation (Üçok Hughes et al., 2024), curriculum redesign (Doherty et al., 2015), workload accumulation (Long et al., 2020), invisible and emotional labor (Gordon et al., 2024), and meaning-based overcommitment (Bailey et al., 2019).

The SI-DRM model is grounded primarily in JD-R theory, which distinguishes job demands from job resources such as autonomy, support, and recognition, and explains how their balance shapes faculty well-being and performance (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When demands consistently exceed resources, individuals enter a health-impairment process marked by sustained effort, reduced recovery, and progressive exhaustion, a state that, when sustained, contributes to burnout broadly defined as emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). COR theory clarifies the mechanism underlying this process: resource losses are psychologically more potent than gains and can trigger loss spirals,

Table 1. Societal impact expectations as faculty role demands.

Societal impact activity	Type of demand	Resource requirements	Unsupported outcome	Supported outcome	Citations
AACSB reporting, assurance of learning, and impact documentation	Administrative and time demand	Data systems, staff support, workload recognition	Overload and role strain	Efficient documentation and role clarity	Üçok Hughes et al., 2024; AACSB International, 2025a
Community-engaged teaching and external partnerships	Relational and coordination demand	Partnership infrastructure, logistical support, and course releases	Relational strain and coordination fatigue	Sustainable engagement and community impact	Üçok Hughes et al., 2024; Taylor & Frechette, 2022
Curriculum redesign for sustainability, ethics, or SDG integration	Cognitive and developmental demand	Training, instructional design support, and collaboration time	Cognitive exhaustion and course quality decline	Instructional innovation and professional growth	Doherty et al., 2015; Godemann et al., 2023
Expectations for mission-driven societal contribution	Meaning-based demand	Recognition, alignment with evaluation and reward systems	Overcommitment and self-exploitation	Increased purpose and value alignment	Bailey et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012
Public visibility, assessment, and accountability for impact	Emotional and reputational demand	Leadership support, clear expectations, and psychological safety	Performance pressure and emotional depletion	Professional visibility and confidence	Long et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2024

Note. This table summarizes common forms of societal impact expectations and illustrates how they introduce multiple types of role demand that vary in their resource requirements and potential consequences for faculty. Consistent with the Societal Impact Demands–Resources–Meaning (SI-DRM) framework, alignment between demands and institutional resources can promote sustainable engagement and instructional innovation, whereas misalignment may contribute to resource depletion, role strain, and burnout.

particularly when individuals continue investing personal resources under conditions that cannot sustain that investment (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Within JD-R, then, COR explains why insufficient job resources do not simply fail to buffer demands but actively accelerate depletion once a loss spiral begins (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011). Recent empirical work applying COR theory to workplace dynamics confirms that chronic social stressors deplete psychological resources and contribute to burnout through sustained strain (Woodard et al., 2026).

Meaningful work operates as a third element within this JD-R framework, functioning as a moderator of the demands-resources relationship rather than a parallel theoretical pillar. Faculty who experience societal impact activities as aligned with their values are more likely to invest additional effort despite structural constraints (Bailey et al., 2019; van Loon et al., 2015), and this meaning can amplify either outcome: when job resources are adequate, meaning strengthens engagement, but when resources are insufficient, meaning sustains investment past the point of recovery, functioning as a driver of overinvestment rather than a buffer against it (Steger et al., 2012). Together, these frameworks converge on a common insight: faculty responses to societal impact expectations depend not on commitment or competence alone but on whether job resources are sufficient to meet demands, and on how meaning shapes investment when they are not.

The SI-DRM framework

The SI-DRM framework applies JD-R theory, with COR theory explaining resource-loss dynamics and meaningful work functioning as a moderator, to explain how societal impact expectations shape faculty outcomes in business education contexts. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework organizes three interacting elements, role demands, institutional resources, and meaning structures, whose interaction predicts faculty engagement and burnout along a continuum. Three pathways, described below, illustrate reference configurations along this continuum rather than an exhaustive typology; Proposition 5 specifies how these configurations map onto the framework's dimensions.

Consider a mid-career faculty member asked to redesign a course around Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) content, coordinate a community partnership, and contribute to AACSB impact documentation, all while maintaining an existing teaching load. Whether this becomes energizing or depleting depends not on how much she cares but on what her institution provides. Without course release time, logistical support, and evaluation recognition, even strong commitment becomes a liability.

Role demands

Role demands encompass the additional time, cognitive effort, relational labor, and coordination required to meet societal impact expectations, including curriculum redesign, coordination of community-engaged learning, accreditation reporting, and the emotional labor of sustaining external partnerships. When layered onto existing obligations without workload adjustment, these demands increase role complexity and reduce recovery opportunities (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Pace et al., 2021).

Institutional resources

Institutional resources are the structural supports that enable faculty to meet societal impact demands: course releases, administrative assistance, instructional design support, professional development, and recognition in evaluation systems. Within JD-R, these institutional resources determine whether high demands produce engagement or depletion: when resources are sufficient, they activate motivational processes that directly support sustained engagement as well as buffering the strain that demands create (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When such resources are insufficient, faculty draw on personal resources, time, energy, and discretionary effort to meet demands, and COR theory predicts that this substitution accelerates depletion because personal resource losses are not easily replenished (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 2011; Taylor & Frechette, 2022).

Meaning structures

Meaning structures reflect the extent to which faculty perceive societal impact work as aligned with their professional values and identity. Many faculty view sustainability, ethics, and community engagement as central to their role, making societal impact expectations intrinsically motivating (Lindgreen et al., 2021). Meaning functions as a motivational amplifier: when resources are adequate, it deepens engagement; when resources are insufficient, it sustains investment beyond the point of recovery, accelerating loss spirals rather than buffering them (Bailey et al., 2019; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

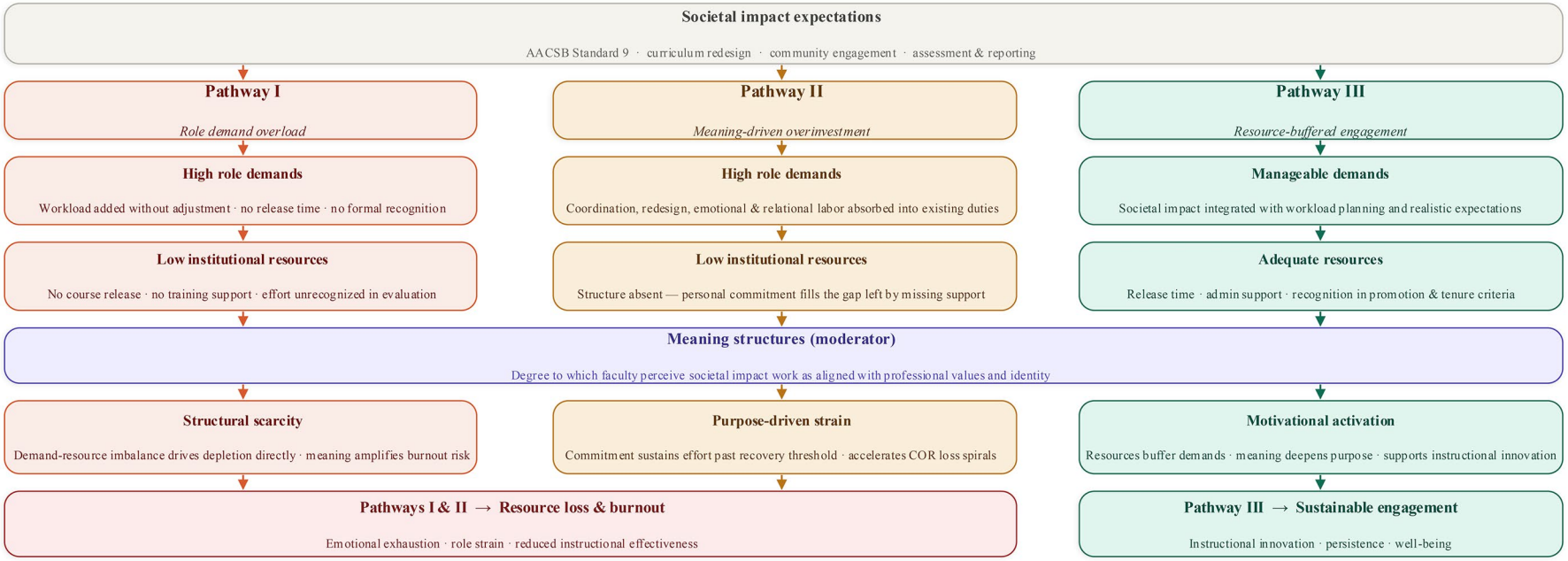


Figure 1. The SI-DRM framework: Pathways from societal impact expectations to faculty outcomes. *Note*. Meaning structures moderate pathway intensity throughout. Mechanisms draw on JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), and meaningful work research (Bailey et al., 2019). See Table 2 for demand–resource–meaning combinations and predicted outcomes.

Faculty outcomes

The interaction of role demands, institutional resources, and meaning structures shapes two primary faculty outcomes: burnout and sustained engagement. Burnout is understood here as a multidimensional syndrome encompassing emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy that develops in response to chronic demands that exceed available resources (Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion is the central component in this context, as it most directly reflects the resource depletion process JD-R and COR theory predict under conditions of sustained demand-resource imbalance. Sustained engagement, by contrast, is characterized by energy, dedication, and persistence in societal impact work, and emerges when adequate resources buffer demands and meaning reinforces investment. These two outcomes anchor the continuum the SI-DRM framework describes, and the three pathways below represent reference configurations predicting where faculty are likely to fall on it.

Pathway I: role demand overload

At one end of the continuum, when societal impact expectations substantially increase workload without corresponding support, faculty experience role demand overload. Responsibilities are added without formal recognition of workload, resulting in a health-impairment process characterized by sustained effort, reduced recovery, and progressive depletion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Over time, this yields emotional exhaustion, role strain, and reduced instructional effectiveness, reflecting a chronic structural mismatch between what institutions demand and what they provide (Maslach et al., 2001).

Pathway II: meaning-driven overinvestment

A related but distinct configuration emerges when faculty are both highly purpose-driven and structurally unsupported. A strong sense of mission does not buffer strain; it sustains investment beyond the point at which recovery would otherwise occur. Faculty who experience societal impact as a core professional commitment are more likely to take on additional responsibilities and maintain effort despite growing resource loss (Bailey et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012), making overextension harder to recognize until depletion is already advanced.

Pathway III: resource-buffered engagement

At the opposite end of the continuum, when adequate resources support societal impact demands and the work aligns with faculty purpose, educators are more likely to experience sustained engagement characterized by energy, instructional innovation, and persistence. Sufficient resources buffer demands and activate motivational processes that support well-being (Bakker & de Vries, 2021), allowing societal impact to deepen professional identity and produce the outcomes AACSB accreditation is designed to reward.

Table 2 summarizes how combinations of demand, resources, and meaning map onto these pathways and their predicted outcomes.

Table 2. Demand–resource–meaning pathways in the SI-DRM framework.

Demand level	Resource level	Meaning level	Predicted process	Likely outcome
High	Low	Low or moderate	Resource loss and overload	Burnout, withdrawal, and reduced instructional quality
High	Low	High	Overinvestment driven by purpose	Self-exploitation, burnout, risk of loss spirals
High	High	High	Resource buffering and motivational activation	Sustainable engagement, innovation, persistence

Note. This table presents the three reference configurations of demand, resource, and meaning levels described in Proposition 5 and depicted in Figure 1: Pathway I (Role Demand Overload), Pathway II (Meaning-Driven Overinvestment), and Pathway III (Resource-Buffered Engagement). Configurations involving moderate demand levels or intermediate resource and meaning levels fall along a continuum between these reference points rather than constituting additional discrete categories. Consistent with JD-R and COR theory, high demands paired with insufficient resources increase the likelihood of resource depletion and burnout, while resources and meaning aligned with demands increase the likelihood of engagement and sustained instructional innovation.

Propositions

The five propositions below translate the SI-DRM framework into testable relationships and offer diagnostic guidance for program leaders evaluating whether societal impact initiatives are structured to support or strain the faculty who implement them.

Proposition 1. Societal impact role demands will be positively associated with faculty strain, and institutional resources will moderate this relationship such that the association is weaker when resources are high and stronger when resources are low.

Proposition 2. Over time, sustained exposure to high societal impact role demands under conditions of low institutional resources will be associated with progressive resource loss and burnout, consistent with a loss spiral process.

Proposition 3. Institutional resource availability will be positively associated with sustained faculty

engagement, and perceived meaningfulness of societal impact work will strengthen this relationship such that the positive association between resources and engagement is stronger when meaning is high.

Proposition 4. Perceived meaningfulness of societal impact work will strengthen the positive relationship between high role demands and burnout when institutional resources are low, such that meaning amplifies strain rather than buffering it under conditions of resource scarcity.

Proposition 5. The three-way interaction of societal impact role demands, institutional resources, and perceived meaning will produce distinct configurations of faculty engagement and burnout. Specifically, high demands paired with low resources and high meaning will predict the highest risk of overinvestment-driven burnout (Pathway II), high demands paired with low resources and low or moderate meaning will predict role demand overload (Pathway I), and high demands paired with high resources and high meaning will predict resource-buffered engagement (Pathway III). Configurations involving moderate demand levels or intermediate resource and meaning levels are expected to fall along a continuum between these three reference points rather than constituting distinct categories.

Implications

The SI-DRM framework carries practical implications for faculty and institutions alike. Faculty can navigate societal impact responsibilities more strategically by recognizing the full scope of demands, coordination, instructional redesign, assessment, and relational labor, and by leveraging existing course content rather than building entirely new components. Peer collaboration and shared assessment tools distribute cognitive and relational labor, building the resource caravans COR theory identifies as protective (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Faculty who find this work deeply meaningful should recognize that strong commitment also creates vulnerability to overextension when structural support is absent. Meaning is not a substitute for resources.

For institutions and program directors, the most direct implication is resource alignment: societal impact expectations should be paired with adjustments to workload, administrative support, professional development, and recognition of evaluation systems. Even modest supports may shift faculty from Pathway I or II toward Pathway III. Invisible societal impact labor should be formally recognized in promotion and tenure criteria rather than absorbed as service (Janke et al., 2023). Societal impact responsibilities also tend to cluster among women and faculty from underrepresented groups who already carry disproportionate invisible labor (Gordon et al., 2024), and transparent workload guidelines help distribute these responsibilities more equitably. Schools that pursue Standard 9 documentation without resourcing the faculty doing the work undermine the very capacity needed to sustain it.

Limitations and future directions

The SI-DRM framework operates at a broad conceptual level. Empirical research is needed to operationalize its constructs and test the proposed pathways across institution types, disciplines, and career stages. Established instruments are available for this purpose: role demands and resources can be assessed using JD-R survey measures (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, with particular attention to the emotional exhaustion subscale as the component most directly predicted by demand-resource imbalance (Maslach et al., 2001), and meaningful work using the Work and Meaning Inventory (Steger et al., 2012). Longitudinal designs would be well-suited to tracing how faculty move between engagement and strain across accreditation cycles, and would allow the five propositions to be tested directly using these measures.

Conclusion

Societal impact will not be realized through accreditation reports alone. It will be realized in the classroom through faculty who are adequately resourced and supported to do this work well. The SI-DRM framework suggests that sustainable engagement depends less on individual faculty members' depth of personal mission and more on whether institutions provide the resources that allow any faculty member, regardless of how much meaning they personally derive from societal impact work, to meet these expectations without depleting their capacity. Aligning societal impact expectations with adequate resources, equitable workload distribution, and meaningful recognition is not merely good faculty policy. It is the precondition for the business education outcomes accreditation is designed to produce.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude Sonnet 4.6 (Anthropic, claude.ai) to assist with organizational and clarity-related aspects of

manuscript development. All content was reviewed, edited, and finalized by the authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Cassandra L. Ward**: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Charles C. Woodard**: Conceptualization, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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