

Abrupt Adaption: A Review of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Faculty in Higher Education

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Abstract: *The unprecedented impact COVID-19 has had on college and university faculty, with particular emphasis on the instructional process, is discussed. Included in the narrative are the challenges and opportunities precipitated by the pandemic related to equity and privilege of choice, the tenure and promotion process, quality of life concerns, evolving financial burdens, and new opportunities for work/life balance. Finally, how the virus has accentuated and magnified gender issues is examined, especially in relation to the intrinsic barriers women have traditionally faced throughout the history of academia.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, pandemic, work/life balance, professors during a pandemic, women in academia*

Introduction

The effects of COVID-19 on all aspects of higher education, including the personal and professional lives of faculty, staff, student affairs professionals and other administrators, have been devastating (Cox, 2020; Eisner, 2020). When the pandemic hit the United States

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shortly after the beginning of the spring semester of 2020, most colleges and universities quickly moved to a variety of online formats, ranging from the use of platforms such as Blackboard and Canvas, which are asynchronous, to Zoom and Microsoft Teams, which allow for synchronous videoconferencing (Burke, 2020a). As the pandemic stretched through the summer and into the fall, institutions adopted a wide range of teaching options for the fall 2020 semester, including primarily online, primarily in person, or some combination of the two, generally known as a hybrid arrangement (Burke, 2020b; Smalley, 2020). Transitions are always stressful, particularly if they involve moving to instructional strategies and pedagogical techniques that are outside the knowledge base of those who are required to move to an alternate delivery form (Minbiole, 2020). This article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the personal and professional lives of faculty in higher education.

Obviously, the arrival of the pandemic has precipitated enormous challenges for faculty as institutions endeavor to fulfill their educational obligations to society while simultaneously attempting to ensure that a safe environment is maintained for everyone involved (Dynarski, 2020). Lack of experience and short time frames have caused institutions to make decisions that impact large numbers of people with little knowledge on which to base these decisions. Additionally, the adjustment was made even more difficult as COVID-19 has been viewed as a politically-charged topic.

Parameters for Higher Education

Before proceeding with a more in-depth discussion of the impact COVID-19 has had on college faculty and the instructional process, it is important to note the parameters that have a direct bearing on the ability to teach effectively and efficiently within the constraints imposed by the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). The pandemic is difficult in itself as it is the first of its kind in modern history. The financial burden to colleges and universities as a result of the pandemic have been enormous, with institutions reporting fall semester 2019 to fall semester 2020 tuition revenue declines ranging from \$1.1 million to \$13.5 million and room and board declines ranging from \$4.3 million to \$28 million (Whitford, 2021). In May 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(2020) issued guidelines for colleges and universities that ranged from lowest risk to highest risk as it pertained to class delivery.

Whereas these guidelines have continued to evolve, the impact of the pandemic on enrollments has been dramatic. Amour (2020) reported that, overall, college enrollments decreased about 2.5 percent for the fall semester 2020, which translates to about 400,000 students, with community colleges seeing the largest declines. Rapiere (2020) notes that a significant portion of this decline can be directly attributed to the aversion to virtual instruction that has been well documented among incoming college students.

Indeed, the rush to virtual and/or hybrid forms of instruction as a response to the pandemic has caused some within the professoriate to question their competence as educators (Dhawan, 2020). For example, some faculty voiced concerns that online environments mandate an entirely new approach to the pedagogical process, requiring knowledge, skills and other competencies that they have not been exposed to or mastered (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020). Faculty have also expressed concerns over class sizes and requirements to teach additional courses and/or sections in an attempt to keep productivity levels comparable to pre-pandemic levels even though financial resources have been severely restricted (Kelly, 2020). As Lederman (2020) noted, many faculty members were not looking forward to the challenges associated with returning to face-to-face instruction during the 2020 fall semester:

As academics in recent months envisioned how this strangest of fall semesters might unfold for themselves and their students, their scenarios didn't paint a pretty picture. Students in the physical classroom unable to hear their masked professor unless he practically shouted. The instructor standing as close to the blackboard as possible to try to put six feet between herself and the front row of students. Professors and students overwhelmed as they juggled virtual courses and family and work responsibilities at home. (paras. 1-2)

In general, Lederman (2020) found that instructors reported being much more comfortable with their 2020 fall semester teaching responsibilities than those of the 2020 spring semester, primarily because they had more

time to prepare their course delivery methods. Moreover, faculty members indicated that the first week of fall semester classes went better than they had anticipated, although they did have to adjust their approach to compensate for the new “normal” (Rodriguez, 2020). For example, one professor had a double teaching load due to having to split a course in half to accommodate social distancing; another employed a hybrid approach, meeting the class twice a week and providing supplemental materials online to support the face-to-face sessions (Lederman, 2020). Some instructors no longer employ small group discussions, while others had to redesign their classrooms to allow for social distancing, although leaving room for the faculty member to stand in the front of the room was often challenging (Lederman, 2020). Other instructors would utilize a hybrid model by having some students who were comfortable attend in person while other students attended virtually through the use of platforms such as zoom.

Challenges and Opportunities

Bell et al. (2020) identified a number of challenges and opportunities inherent in mounting an effective response to the crisis. These challenges include potentially redefining the role of students/trainees in face of the realities of evolving realities, maintaining program integrity as traditionally in person activities are moved to a virtual environment, preserving research agendas and clinical experience requirements, supervising students who are completing practicum, internship and other field experiences using videoconferencing, and responding to student emotional and mental distress as a direct consequence of heightened anxieties.

In addition to these hurdles, Bell et al. (2020) also highlighted multiple opportunities embedded in the response to the pandemic that could enhance the instructional process post-pandemic, including developing and implementing more effective and efficient distance education strategies and delivery systems; i.e., faculty should be able to incorporate what was learned during the pandemic to augment educational processes in the future, fostering educational and training experiences that are inherently richer and more diverse through distance collaborations that were not even considered before COVID-19, and modifying accreditation requirements to make them more flexible by expanding definitions of what constitutes acceptable practice. Additional

opportunities include adopting more robust competency evaluations, modifying admissions and screening protocols, addressing issues of access and equity in a more realistic and inclusive manner, relying less on standardized tests as admissions criteria, reconsidering the relevance of the experiential components of degree requirements as well as re-evaluating degree timing altogether, and reconsidering core values associated with educational requirements in general as well as on a more localized disciplinary basis (Bell et al., 2020).

The relatively rapid transition to alternative instructional delivery methods also had a deleterious effect on faculty's attitudes, dispositions and mindsets (Thompson, 2020). Specifically, some faculty report a lack of support from the institution manifested through uneven enforcement of established guidelines for keeping the campus safe (mask wearing, social distancing, etc.), a general ambiguity in the plans developed to maintain a safe campus environment, and the feeling that some administrators are more interested in creating a perception that safety is a top priority than actually giving it the priority it deserves (Krantz & Fernandes, 2020).

In some cases, these perceptions have led to an aura of suspicion around campus leaders regarding the decision-making process; for instance, faculty at some colleges and universities have reported that they feel the need to be somewhat careful in what they say or do (especially if they do not have tenure) and they suspected that the institution where they are employed planned to move to a completely online format once the drop/add deadline had passed for the fall 2020 semester (Petersen, 2020). These kinds of acuties, valid or not, have even caused some faculty to advocate for the formation of unions and other coalitions in response to the alleged lack of transparency from administrators (Foster, 2020).

Personal/Professional Challenges

Equity and the Privilege of Choice

Lederman (2020) found that a few faculty members reported they would have lost their health insurance if they did not agree to teach in person. Petersen (2020) reported other instances of inequality in how faculty have been treated since the onset of the pandemic, including less

flexibility and accommodation for those not meeting a list of conditions deemed to make them “at-risk,” and no recognition of the special circumstances facing underrepresented faculty, including women and those with small children. In some instances, faculty who were given more flexibility with respect to how they wanted to structure course delivery methods (primarily virtual formats) seem to be less vocal than those who felt forced to teach in the more traditional in-class arrangement (Petersen, 2020). Moreover, according to Douglas-Gabriel (2020), many graduate and adjunct instructors may not be given a choice regarding their teaching modality; i.e., those compensated the least and receiving the fewest benefits (such as no health insurance) are potentially at greater risk than their more established counterparts.

Loss of Benefits and Impact on Salary

Colleges and universities across the country have been and are continuing to make adjustments to their financial budgets. Using a sliding scale for salary reductions has been a strategy that administrations have used to help offset the impact of the pandemic. Pettit (2020) reported that while instructors may be encouraged to be flexible, institutions are not always returning the favor. Johns Hopkins University announced that salaries would be frozen and retirement contributions would be suspended for the next fiscal year, while at Hampshire University, faculty members agreed to progressive salary reductions, with the largest cuts felt by senior faculty (Pettit, 2020). Salary inequities for female faculty, especially women faculty of color, are compounded by reductions related to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the recession, causing an increase in financial stress (Malisch et al., 2020).

Additionally, faculty and employees have experienced layoffs, non-contract renewals, and furloughs (Sultan, 2020). Pettit (2020) found that job security and institutional trust traditionally shared by tenured professors have fallen as the number of furloughs and layoffs increase. According to a survey done by The Chronicle of Higher Education, more than 40% of the college faculty surveyed had lost trust in their college leaders (Pettit, 2020). Adjunct faculty work part time, sometimes on multiple campuses. Due to the limited number of hours they work on each campus, they typically do not qualify for health insurance (Zahneis, 2020). During the pandemic, lack of access to healthcare is unpalatable and an additional stressor.

Changes in the Tenure and Promotion Process

When it comes to tenure and promotion deadlines, which can add to the stress many faculty members are already experiencing as a result of the pandemic, there seems to be a lot of variation (Scungio, 2020). Similar to how some universities responded to the 2008 recession, institutions extended deadlines for an additional year for those who were slated to go up for tenure and/or promotion during the current academic year (Turner, 2014; University of Washington, 2020). Others, however, feel it is important to maintain current tenure and promotion deadlines, as well as research agendas and schedules in order to maintain the integrity of the system, although individual circumstances could still be taken into account (Cox, 2020a; Htun, 2020). Consider the following from Khamis-Dakwar & Hiller (2020):

Given all this, we should examine how these pauses might hurt the very faculty members they are meant to help. For example, consider a hypothetical case where a tenure-track faculty member starts at a university and receives annual raises of 3 percent with \$5,000 raises upon promotion -- a fairly typical compensation structure. Let's assume that the faculty member receives promotion to full professor after five years of service as an associate professor. In this case, a single one-year pause could lead to decreased earning of almost \$18,000 over a 30-year career, according to our estimates. If the faculty member takes two yearlong pauses -- perhaps for family leave and then separately for COVID-19 -- that person would lose more than \$35,000 in income over the same period, according to our estimates. (para. 8)

Some institutions have implemented tenure clock extensions to minimize some of the effects of COVID-19 on faculty. While the extensions are meant to aid faculty, some have voiced major concerns regarding their use. Malisch et al. (2020) pointed out that the extensions keep faculty from receiving an increase in salary or furthering their careers by applying for larger research grants, since these opportunities require a tenure position.

New Opportunities for Work/Life Balance

One potential advantage precipitated by the pandemic has been the heightening of compassion for colleagues, especially within campuses that have struggled to keep their family and work responsibilities separated (Vaillancourt, 2020). According to the United States Census Bureau the average American spends 52.2 minutes a day commuting for work. That adds up to over 4 hours a week and over 200 hours a year sitting in a car (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Working from home allows for control of a person's work environment, creates a better work/life balance, removes a potentially stressful commute and reduces the cost of traveling to and from work (Tuten, 2020).

Employees working from home may take longer breaks compared to those who are currently working in the office, but productivity may be higher at home than in an office setting. Bloom et al. (2014) found that people who worked from home during a nine-month period had a 13 percent increase in their performance, which amounts to nearly an extra day of work a week. Additionally, they reported a 50 percent drop in employee-quit rates. It is important to note that this study was conducted prior to the pandemic. Employees new to working from home as a result of the pandemic also had to unexpectedly balance childcare and other demands, so the results may not be replicated under the current conditions. Matheson and Rosen (2012) found that when faculty were provided the freedom to have a flexible schedule, work and family conflict decreased while a balance between their personal life and work increased. Damiano-Teixeira (2006) reported that individuals with the highest educational achievements and income have fewer problems with their job interfering in their personal lives as they are able to control the events of their lives outside of employment and have more flexibility. While flexibility has been an important component, staff and administrators reported needing to be on campus more and not having the same flexibility of working from home that faculty members did (Vaillancourt, 2020).

Unique Challenges for Women in Academia

Advancement through the Ranks

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women faced unique barriers to their career advancement compared with men. For example, while universities mostly value research and teaching over service, women are often expected to take on service responsibilities that require significant time investment. Women are often assigned more advisees and take on more service or have higher teaching loads, which in turn impacts their productivity and potential for research achievements (Malisch et al., 2020). Women professors also experience increased demands for special favors from academically entitled students, adding to the emotional labor of their positions (El-Alayli et al., 2018).

With professors of all genders having even less time to pursue and maintain their research activities due to increased teaching loads and service expectations related to the pandemic, women are at risk for falling even further behind in their career advancement (Flaherty, 2020; Malisch et al., 2020). As of April 2020, submissions to the journal *Comparative Political Studies* were up 25 percent compared to last year. However, the increase was entirely contributed to submissions made by men. Rates of submission by women remained the same (Flaherty, 2020). Reduction in research productivity has the potential to affect both men and women's careers and long-term aspirations.

Motherhood

In addition to the gender differences found to be present in academia, being a mother can impact a person's career success. Women faculty members believe that the current climate in the university setting seems to be less than welcoming to mothers (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). The perceived lack of faculty support for mothers may cause some women to leave academia, delay tenure or promotions or accept positions at teaching focused universities as opposed to research focused ones (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). While this lack of support was perceived prior to COVID-19, the changes in job function due to the pandemic have not necessarily made it easier for working mothers. Minello (2020) shared how she has had to alter her life to make

accommodations for working from home with small children, describing how she has to record her lectures very early in the morning or late at night while her children are sleeping to eliminate background noise.

While being a mother in academia can be a challenge, the pandemic has also exacerbated gender and racial inequities in academics. These barriers include economic compensation disparity as well inequity in the three major categories for academic evaluations: teaching, service, and research (Malisch et al., 2020). According to Gibson et al. (2020) COVID-19 is exacerbating documented discriminations that affect academic science. Women, parents, and individuals who identify as racial or ethnic minorities leave STEM fields as early career researchers at an excessively high rate during normal conditions. With the pandemic, it is expected that there will be an increase in these rates due to the closure of labs used for research.

Women and Work-life Balance

While effects of COVID-19 have rippled throughout all or mostly all aspects of a person's life, trying to find a work/life balance for professors has been particularly challenging. When examining gender differences, women appear to have a more difficult time adjusting due to increased responsibilities they are facing such as work commitments and childcare issues. Additionally, professors are experiencing pay cuts and changes to their retirement and promotion as well as an increase in work responsibilities. Women professors in all fields are trying to balance working from home and teaching with increased caregiving responsibilities.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the gender inequities that have always been present by eliminating the support women were receiving to assist them with their extra responsibilities such as childcare (Flaherty, 2020). Matheson and Rosen (2012) found that amongst marriage and family therapist professors, men that were older and had been in the profession longer felt like they had a better balance between personal and work life. Women faculty members reported carrying more emotional weight related to students than men faculty members did. Faculty stated this was due to the fact that when students were struggling with emotional issues, they would most often go to a woman faculty member.

Future Implications

Due to the nature of the pandemic being the first of its kind, people had to make adaptations to their professional and personal lives without having current research or guidelines to follow. Future research should aim to examine how the pandemic impacted higher education. This should include institutional leaders, faculty, staff and students. By exploring the impact, new policy development should occur to assist for possible future pandemics or similar scenarios that affect public health and safety. Additionally, much of the current research focused on the impacts of balancing motherhood and academia. Future research would benefit from exploring fatherhood and other gender roles.

Conclusion

The impact COVID-19 has had on college faculty members has been profound. Professors were forced to transition quickly to different instructional modalities such as virtual and hybrid learning. The swift transition created some personal challenges such as mistrust amongst faculty within the institution, lack of choice in the modalities being offered for instructors, and adjuncts, as well as finding a new normal with balancing work life and their personal life. Matheson and Rosen (2012) found that when faculty were provided the freedom to have a flexible schedule, work and family conflict decreased while a balance between their personal life and work increased.

While personal challenges were present, financial burdens also arose. Professors experienced loss of benefits, salary reductions, and changes in the tenure and promotion process. Damiano-Teixeira (2006) reported that individuals with the highest educational achievements and income have fewer problems with their job interfering in their personal lives as they are able to control the events of their lives outside of employment and have more flexibility.

Additionally, gender differences that were present prior to the pandemic became exasperated under the new circumstances. Women and mothers in particular, had a more difficult time managing the balance between work and home life due to the extra responsibilities they had such as childcare and the lack of support with school and daycares closing.

Professors who are women, parents, and individuals who identify as /racial or ethnic minorities within the STEM field are having to have ended their careers early (Gibson et al., 2020). Lastly, being a woman impacted movement through the ranks, making it more difficult to be promoted.

In order for faculty to feel supported through the unknown transitions, it is vital that university leaders are communicative, offer flexibility, and institutional support to help reduce the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these challenging times, it can be easy to focus on the negative aspects of an experience, however, professors have the opportunity to grow from these forced changes and create new modalities of teaching courses, conducting research and fulfilling service requirements. It also provides professors the opportunity to model adaptability and creative thinking for their students. Once the pandemic is considered more under control, professors are able to utilize the adaptations made that assist them in creating a better work/life balance.

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