

The Effect of COVID-19 on UM Faculty Life
Results from a Limited Survey conducted by the ADVANCE Program
September, 2020

INTRODUCTION

In August, 2020 the ADVANCE Program sent short surveys about faculty experiences responding to the COVID-19 pandemic to members of four faculty networks administered by or having an association with ADVANCE: the Network to Advance Women Scientists and Engineers, the Network to Advance Faculty of Color, the UM-LGBT Faculty Alliance, and the Single Faculty Network. It was hoped that these groups of engaged faculty could provide a window on the many new demands and difficulties faculty face as the University works to address the particular challenges of the pandemic.

The survey asked the faculty four open-ended questions:

1. How has the pandemic affected your ability (or your colleagues' abilities) to do your work?
2. What strategies or resources have you or others used to help mitigate any negative effects?
3. What policies, programs, or other supports could the University put in place to help faculty manage the negative impact of the pandemic on their work?
4. Are there changes related to your work that have already been implemented due to the pandemic that you would like to see continue post-pandemic?

Surveys were anonymous to expedite the data collection process and encourage faculty to be as candid as possible. Thus, we have no information about respondents beyond their affiliation with these four faculty networks or the extent to which these faculty respondents represent the faculty population more broadly. Moreover, the response rates to the survey are low¹; this is not surprising given the increasing demands on faculty time this summer. Nevertheless, many faculty (238) took the time to respond thoughtfully and in some detail. We are grateful for their time and appreciate the important information they have shared with us.

OVERVIEW

A key finding from this study is that many faculty are experiencing serious impediments to their work productivity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic stemming from both a lack of access to key resources and other serious demands on their time (e.g., online teaching, family care). Many also described their own and others' psychological stress and/or anxiety associated with the pandemic; however increasing demands on their time, as well as a desire to provide support others (family, students, junior colleagues), often means that their well-being is not being addressed. Faculty recommended that the University be responsive to the inevitable change in faculty productivity and suggested additional administrative and financial support to address some of the current impediments to faculty scholarship and student training.

Following is a more detailed summary of what faculty reported to us, organized by the four questions they were asked.

¹Response rates ranged from 8% to 15% for the four faculty networks; it is worth noting that faculty can be members of multiple networks. Faculty in multiple networks likely only responded to one survey.

FINDINGS

How has the pandemic affected you and your colleagues' abilities to do your work?

Reduced Productivity

Three-quarters (77%) of the faculty responded to this question by describing their reduced work productivity. Some simply described an **inability to get as much done** as they had previously and that they had to prioritize efforts. One explained, "Most of what has suffered for me is scholarship - I have found it impossible to get the chunks of deep thinking and writing time." Another noted, "My concentration just isn't there [and] working from home at times interferes with productivity." A third reported, "Lost time and lost cognitive and emotional energy has led to less of all things.... I've had to reduce my research output, I hit burnout."

Others reported serious constraints on their ability to pursue their work due to **limited resources** including loss of library access and/or inability to travel to archives, no ability to do field work, halting of human subjects research, closing of labs thus prohibiting work and creating other serious problems (e.g., inability to maintain animals or equipment), more difficulty collaborating with colleagues including challenges associated with managing online meetings, inability to travel to seminars and conferences, inability to hire staff or bring students into labs, and loss of ability to rehearse and perform. Some faculty described frustrations related to their lack of access to University resources including their offices, labs, and funding. One commented that "not having access to all of my files, books and other resources in my UM office has been tremendously challenging."

Moreover, faculty noted other obstacles to their work including seriously **inadequate home workspace** (such as noise, challenging Wi-Fi, and deficient equipment). For instance, one noted, "I do not have a productive workspace at home; I have always tried to strike a work/life balance by only working ... in my office. But doing so has not been possible with the pandemic." Another commented, "Personally, I am more efficient working in my office than at home - psychologically, internet speed, and lots of access reasons." And a third reported that "creating the home office and solving the connectivity problems have been the most difficult for me."

Several more junior faculty also expressed **concern about their career development**, including tenure and promotion, related to the longer term impact of their lessened productivity and/or inability to submit grants for future work.

Increased Workload

A large percentage of faculty respondents (37%) also reported a significant **increase in their workload as they moved from in person to online teaching**. One respondent commented, "teaching online takes 3-4 times as long to do versus teaching in-person; similarly, for advising undergraduates." Some described the specific technological challenges associated with this transition and the limited resources and support from UM to help them make the change. Others found online teaching more challenging, less rewarding, and a more difficult venue for engaging with students. Some described the increased time necessary to rework courses for online teaching and found that certain subjects are not easily transferrable. Work also needed to be put into rearranging class schedules and adapting to online exams, groups projects and presentations. Some faculty regretted not being able to pay guest speakers.

Several faculty (15%) also specifically noted **additional increased demands on their time** including new COVID-related service demands, other administrative demands, meeting creep, and increased emails.

One summarized it this way: “My work life has become a little more cumbersome. Getting work done seems to take more time, and more meetings. Additionally, my home life has increased in need as well.”

Family Care Demands

One-third of the faculty (33%) described the additional burden of caring for family members at home (e.g., children, elderly parents) while also trying to work². For many parents this includes managing their children’s online education. Several described the challenges of blurred work and home life boundaries and the stress resulting from trying to be productive under these difficult circumstances.

One respondent commented:

I am at home with my young children. My partner is an essential worker. I'm trying to manage my research, submit manuscripts and grants, prepare teaching materials, run online conferences, and [work on] a book while watching the children full time.

Another noted,

Increased childcare responsibilities (which are still ongoing) greatly limited my time and mental energy to devote to teaching, scholarship, and mentorship. Also, the continual interruptions from children have resulted in less productive days, reduced ability to have conference calls, and less ability to focus for long periods of time.

Mentoring Students Online

One quarter of the faculty respondents (24%) reported about challenges they faced trying to mentor students during this period. Many regretted the lack of ability to have face-to-face interactions with students that they felt were key to successful mentoring. Others described the difficulty in continuing to motivate continuing students and train new ones. They also noted specific challenges for the students (e.g., lack of reliable internet, feelings of isolation, and needing more support) and delayed doctoral defenses.

Stress

A similar percentage (24%) discussed their own psychological stress related to the pandemic including increased anxiety, concern about others (e.g., children, students), less opportunity for sleep and relaxation, the loss of joy associated with their work, and feeling pushed to their limits. One reported that they “work more and have less family time, which adds to my personal stress.” Another described being in “survival mode most weeks, living day to day, and calling it a night early most nights.... [I]t's pretty miserable.”

What strategies or resources have you or others used to help mitigate any negative effects of the pandemic on your work?

Attend to Well-being

The most common responses to this question (from 29% of the faculty) were related to things they and others have done to address their own well-being or the well-being of others. Many reported that they made **special efforts to connect with others** and check-in to see how family, friends, colleagues and students were doing over zoom, email, and through virtual potlucks or get-togethers at local coffee shops. For example, one mentioned, “I have tried to maintain a Slack conversation channel with a subset

² As a point of reference, ADVANCE’s 2017 campus-wide climate survey data indicate that 48% of tenure-track faculty have children they care for (and 13% are caring for another adult).

of faculty in my department. This has helped to stay connected and commiserate.” Faculty found these connections good ways for them to provide support to others, but also to feel supported themselves. One commented, “My biggest resource has been departmental support and my own decision to focus on health and family being more important than productivity right now.”

Many faculty mentioned other ways they **addressed their own wellness** such as through physical activity and exercise; mindfulness, meditation and/or prayer; ensuring they got the sleep they needed; and being careful to take regular breaks or vacations from work. Some pursued **professional support**; others described trying to be positive and/or patient, go with the flow, and be realistic about what they can accomplish. One noted, “I am trying to accept the fact that I cannot control what is happening. I am also prioritizing support for students and colleagues over productivity.” Some **expanded the scope of their concern** to work on anti-racism agendas and contribute to mutual aid funds. For one faculty member caring extended to the needs of a new pet. For others it was engaging with leadership to help address faculty and student needs.

Strategize about Scholarship

Nearly as many faculty (28%) reported about strategies they used to address challenges with their scholarship. Many described shifting to work that could be done remotely, such as using online resources, conducting secondary analyses, and learning new skills. For several it meant simplifying their work, trying new strategies, and improvising and being creative. Some tried to find others (such as volunteers or staff) who could help them with their work. Others worked to identify other budget neutral ways to gain support. Several noted the importance of teamwork and checking in with other project members by phone, emails, regular zoom meetings and Slack.

One reported,

I've used apps like Trello and Slack to organize my and my lab's to-do lists, organized literature discussions for my lab group and happy hours, lots of online meetings and rapid email responding instead of office drop-bys.

Others actively sought out colleagues for help strategizing about work and creating writing communities. And, similar to what was noted above, some broadened their work to reflect issues associated with a commitment to diversity.

Manage Time Effectively

In addition to the focus on their scholarship, several faculty discussed the importance of **time management and work structure** (15%) as well as their schedule (18%) while working. Many stressed the importance of being organized, developing regular work schedules and routines, and/or using time efficiently. One respondent tries “to hold meetings for research and mentorship during the day in blocks of ~1 hour; longer than that and the kids go crazy without supervision.”

Many faculty talked about needing to work more or being forced to work less and that they often **have to shift their schedules** (e.g., work early mornings, evenings and/or weekends) or stagger work with a partner to accommodate other demands on their time. One described their day as “getting work done while our child naps, doing work at night and waking up early in the morning to write before [my child] gets up for the day.” Some received paid time off to help alleviate the pressure on their time; others have to let other things in their lives go (e.g., sleep, self-care time).

Some described **resetting their career goals** and/or being more realistic about what they can accomplish. One respondent commented that they “[lowered] expectations and prioritize. I’ve been completely disconnected of all the extra meetings that my departments have been doing because of the pandemic.... [A]t this point I cannot afford to lose even one hour of my time in meetings.”

Unfortunately, faculty did **not necessarily find these efforts were fully successful**. For example, one commented, “I’ve tried to protect time through various means, but mostly I just work longer days.”

Improve Work Environment

Several faculty noted efforts to create a better functioning work environment (8%). They set up dedicated workspaces at home and invested in ergonomic equipment, noise cancelling headphones, and larger monitors to accommodate needs associated with Zoom meetings. They also have to prioritize themselves within their homes for access to Wi-Fi. Some appreciated the financial support from their departments for technical equipment as well as the IT support they received; other noted the need for them to learn skills associated with new necessary technology.

Focus on Teaching and Mentoring

Some faculty specifically discussed their teaching efforts (8%) as well as the support they provide students (6%); some reported prioritizing their students’ needs (as well as those of more junior faculty in some cases) over other work and found the need to check-in with them regularly. One faculty member commented, “I have also been trying to advocate for students as much as possible; their material conditions need to get better, and I know that any step in that direction will be good for me in many ways.”

Faculty reported that they work to be kind and accommodating with their students; one reported being “flexible with my students and staff who have childcare struggles.” They also described using different strategies to create communities for students and facilitate their socialization (e.g., happy hours over Zoom, using YellowDig and Slack to create learning communities and space to connect). Faculty organized more advanced students to mentor newer ones and hired undergraduates to help with courses. Several appreciated and took advantage of teaching resources (Nexus, web design for courses, CRLT, webinars for Canvas, and teaching consultants). They also looked to colleagues for team teaching opportunities and to share teaching ideas.

Address Childcare Needs

Faculty parents also shared how they address their children’s needs during this time (12%). Many hired nannies or babysitters, sometimes requiring them to take out loans to do so. Others juggle care with a partner, have the benefit of other family members available to provide childcare, or they share child care support with other families. Still others were able to enroll their children in programs that allowed them time to work. Few indicated that this was a challenge they had satisfactorily met. One faculty member, for example, reported that they hired a nanny but that it was not “financially sustainable.” Another laments, “All my parent-colleagues are **staying up too late, hemorrhaging money** for unanticipated costs, and still sad about how little they are currently able to accomplish in their career.”

Other Supports

More generally, a few faculty (5%) noted other resources that were supportive of them. Some appreciated virtual town halls; other appreciate those in leadership working to prepare for the coming semester. A few valued their ability to use personal and/or discretionary funds to address some of the challenges they faced.

What policies, programs, or other supports could the University put in place to help faculty manage the negative impact of the pandemic on their work?

Help with Family Care

By far, the most common faculty response to this question was the desire to have help with childcare or supplemental leave (22% of faculty respondents mentioned this). Many faculty noted the particular problems the pandemic created for faculty with children at home. Suggestions to address these problems included increased resources for childcare either within the University or larger community. In addition, faculty recommended other potential solutions to faculty childcare needs such as an expanded Kids Kare program; a forum where parents of similar-aged children could interact and perhaps form education "pods" to share teaching duties and/or hire educators; a listing of resources for childcare options, teachers, tutors, etc.; as well as stipends, paid time off, teaching relief, or modified duties for faculty who are also handling childcare needs during this time. It was also suggested that the University work with AAPS to help facilitate a workable solution for students, teachers, and parents.

Recognition of Productivity Loss

Nearly as many faculty (18%) addressed factors associated with their lack of productivity during this period; particular concern was expressed for junior faculty. Many suggested that the tenure clock should be automatically delayed 1-2 years. Some also suggested specific **infrastructures** to support those early in their careers through collaborative work and senior faculty mentoring. In addition, **expectations** for performance around service, teaching and scholarship should be flexible, deadlines should be relaxed and administrative burdens should be reduced. Other administrative suggestions included limiting emails from administrators to work hours (as LSA already does), limiting all meetings to one hour or less, instituting a four-day work week, allowing faculty to go into their offices and access printing and copying resources as well as provide safe places to record or teach online courses. It was also noted that lifting the hiring freeze, especially with grant-related efforts, and keeping essential staff on would help. The administration was also encouraged to discontinue new programs and redeploy administrative personnel to more critical issues. Faculty also encouraged the administration to allow faculty who were scheduled for a sabbatical during this period to fully enjoy their sabbatical at a later date. They also asked that lost benefits be re-instated. In all cases, faculty were concerned that **policy changes be made at the institutional level**, and not be left to the schools and colleges which would result in disparity across faculty.

Financial Costs to Faculty

Several faculty noted the financial costs to them, beyond increased childcare needs, resulting from the pandemic. These included enhanced Wi-Fi at home, setting up home offices with an ergonomically appropriate equipment, additional equipment and other supports (e.g., iPads) for online teaching. Several suggested internal funding to defray some of these costs, additional internal grants, technical support from the University, the ability to access and use discretionary funds, and bridge funding. Other suggestions included a creation of best practices for different types of online teaching, help and expertise for developing online pedagogy, support for faculty discussions of online teaching, and engaging graduate students to support online teaching. One suggested access to reliable Wi-Fi for their online teaching.

Student Concerns

Faculty also noted concerns about students. For example, it was suggested that students without access to computers or Wi-Fi should be supported with those resources. It was also recommended that efforts be made to establish programs to support students and provide them with a community and opportunities for social interactions. Concern was also expressed for students who would now be unlikely to graduate on schedule and suggested that their deadlines be extended.

Responsive Administration

Some faculty expressed concerns that the administration was not listening to all voices when deciding how to handle the pandemic. They wanted the University to understand that things are fundamentally different and won't look like it did pre-pandemic. At the very least, they looked for frequent COVID-19 testing as well as clear guidelines and key resources so people could go back to work safely. Faculty noted that all of these suggested actions on the part of the administration would go a long way toward acknowledging the enormous new demands put on faculty as a result of the pandemic; they are looking for a work environment that is truly supportive of their needs.

Are there changes related to your work that have already been implemented due to the pandemic that you would like to see continue post-pandemic?

Working from Home as a Continuing Option

Several faculty reported that there was nothing in their current experiences that they would like to have continued post-pandemic. However, many noted changes that they appreciated. By far, the most common response to this question was that faculty wanted to continue to work from home (26% of the faculty mentioned this); moreover an additional group of faculty (11%) wanted to maintain flexibility in where they worked. The advantage of a flexible work location was underscored for faculty with children at home; a few also found it helped increase their productivity. Some also described additional advantages in terms of reduced commuting and parking time, minimizing traffic, and reducing carbon emissions; it was thought this flexibility should extend to staff as well for similar reasons.

Continue Virtual Meetings

Similarly, many faculty (24%) wanted to continue holding meetings and/or office hours virtually and a few mentioned holding remote seminar talks; they also appreciated more thoughtfulness about the necessity of some meetings and noted that attendance at meetings has improved. Several of the faculty in health-related fields wanted to continue virtual clinics, telehealth visits, and other remote options.

Online Teaching as a Continuing Option

Similarly, several faculty (8%) appreciated the ability to teach online; others also valued the access to technologies and resources that allowed for that and other remote activities (e.g., recording training sessions, online recruitment programs, better access to digital research and library materials).

Continue New Administrative Policies/Expectations

A few faculty also appreciated some administrative changes such as tenure clock extensions, lighter service expectations, reduced expectations for travel, changes in the academic calendar (including a later commencement), and more transparency. However, one was unhappy about the increased scrutiny over spending and did not want that to continue.

Continue Increased Collaborative and Compassionate Community

Finally, some faculty recognized the increased opportunities for collaboration as well as increased understanding and compassion from the administration and colleagues and increased community outreach.

CONCLUSIONS

Most faculty reported serious impediments to their work productivity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond limited access to all kinds of resources necessary for their scholarship they also face increasing demands on their time including those related to online teaching and mentoring, service, and family care. Child care was reported to be a critical need that, for most faculty parents, has not been successfully addressed and many looked to the University for that assistance. Faculty also noted a psychological toll from the pandemic (and other societal concerns) that they work to address through their own self-care as well as the active support of others (particularly family, students, and junior faculty); however, they also reported that increasing demands on their time often meant that their own well-being is not being addressed.

Some noted a few positive changes to their work as a result of the pandemic including some flexibility in where they work and more online options for their work, including online teaching. Nevertheless, the faculty respondents to this survey generally describe an enormously challenging period. They face serious impediments to pursuing their scholarship including both lack of access to resources and collaborators as well as other demands on their time that limit actual time for work. This, coupled with concerns for their families, their students, their junior colleagues as well as disturbing social unrest has left them feeling frustrated, stressed, and anxious about the future. As one faculty member related, “I am mightily overwhelmed.... At moments, it all seems unsurmountable.”

Faculty recommended that the University be responsive to the inevitable lack of productivity in the midst of what for many is increased work and family demands; in particular, the tenure clock, support for junior faculty, and expectations for performance should be adjusted accordingly. Other suggestions included administrative and financial support to address some of the current impediments to faculty scholarship and student training. **Faculty are looking for a work environment that is truly responsive to their needs. Further, faculty worried that administrative responses clearly need to be University-wide to ensure equitable treatment of all faculty and students.**