

The Impacts of 2020 on Faculty Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

The months following the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic were mired in uncertainty. As cases began to rise and global health officials frantically engaged a daily routine of issuing new recommendations upon receipt of new data, the nonlinear relationship between the effects of pandemic-related uncertainty emerged. Early on, it was clear that the pandemic would not be the only major event of the year. Devastating in their own respective rights, natural disasters such as hurricanes, wildfires, and flooding and such sociopolitical disasters as the killing of unarmed Black people, upswings in particular patterns of racism, and economic decline exacerbated the mounting distress and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic. Leader (in)action resulted in vacuumed and widespread approaches to addressing the combined effects of the novel SARS-Cov2 virus and other events.

For many academic institutions, early efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 were swift. Several institutions across the globe shifted to virtual learning, shuttering their halls if not the entire campus. In addition to the general sense of uncertainty felt by so many throughout the world, many faculty experienced a pronounced sense of job-related powerlessness but also opportunity to support the common good through timely public scholarship and social justice advocacy. Adopting a Conservation of Resources (COR) theory framing (Hobfoll, 1989), this paper briefly reviews the effects of direct and indirect leadership on faculty in 2020. Whereas I centrally focus on issues within academe, I also address peripheral and potentially intersecting issues that affected faculty in their work and personal lives. Further, I present ambient psychological stressors (Catalano and Dooley, 1983; Shoss and Penney, 2012) as a looming factors for faculty attempting to directly address immediate stressors.

COR THEORY, THE ECONOMIC STRESS HYPOTHESIS, AND FACULTY LEADERSHIP IN 2020

Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory focuses on psychological stressors, distinguishing between threats (i.e., stressors) and resources. Threats are stressors, environmental or internal, that draw upon one's resources to reduce potential strain. In the workplace literature, threats are often

referred to as job demands because of domain-specific effects on workplace experiences and outcomes. Resources are those conditions (e.g., relationships or employment), objects (e.g., a home), personal characteristics (e.g., personality traits), or energies (e.g., time or knowledge) that individuals direct to combat perceived threats (i.e., stressors) or invest to increase one's resource repertoire. Hobfoll (1989) positioned resources as key to managing daily resource threats, navigating acute or novel events, and acquiring additional resources through investments.

Per COR theory, investment is most likely in the absence of threats. Because conserving resources becomes most salient when facing resource-threatening stressors, the likelihood of investment decreases when stressors are either chronic or novel. Moreover, COR falls short in describing the compound effects of indirect threats to resources such as large-scale events that are threatening but do not currently pose an immediate threat. For example, the economic stress hypothesis (ESH) argues shifts in the ambient environment may induce health threats by causing disruptions in routine or normal daily living (Bruckner et al., 2014). In addition to economic shifts (e.g., difficulty paying bills or increasing unemployment), health-threatening events may also be noneconomic (e.g., loss of a loved one or a change in one's living situation). To better describe the potential intersection of more domain-specific stressors, I also draw upon ESH to describe *ambient stressors*.

Prior to 2020, faculty were less vulnerable to changes in economic markets. This is not to say changes in state budgets or federal disbursements had no bearing on how faculty conducted work. Indeed, strained state budgets and reductions in external funding have always posed threats to research support. However, these factors were part of the normal ebb and flow of academe. Leaders often readied faculty by providing timely updates of administrative plans, sharing such proposed cost-saving actions as smaller cohorts of funded graduate students, reduced internal travel or research funds, and hiring delays that absorbed costs through attrition (e.g., retirement). At the heels of the pandemic, faculty leadership and faculty resilience were challenged in new ways that may have lasting impacts on leadership, research, and teaching throughout the academy.

The sections below segment these challenges using Hobfoll's resource framework. Additionally, I present and describe intersecting, ambient stressors that further strained faculty. The goal is to foster an understanding as to how the COVID-19 pandemic posed a unique threat

and how decision-making surrounding the pandemic and other events adversely affect faculty lives and livelihood.

A NOVEL THREAT TO FACULTY RESOURCES

In March 2020, following guidance from the WHO, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), and state officials, college and university leaders delayed returns from the spring break holiday, many shifting to emergency remote learning through the close of the academic year. In like fashion, daycares, K–12 education systems, and millions of nonessential workers quickly moved to virtual learning and remote work. These public safety decisions ushered in a new era of remote learning through videoconferencing and learning management platforms. For faculty accustomed to working in the protected halls of the ivory tower, this meant sharing a work environment with partners, children, roommates, and pets or living and working in isolation for extended periods of time.

During the summer of 2020, it became clear that the pandemic would not end as quickly as most hoped. As the national unemployment rate climbed to an extraordinary 13 percent during the second quarter of the year (Smith et al., 2021), the notion of an “essential worker” began to fade, and national and local leaders were embroiled in negotiations pertaining to benefits for those most affected by the pandemic. Academic institutions adopted long-term remote policies and proposed budget cuts to absorb the costs of declining enrollment. Whereas decisions to maintain the virtual environment were appropriate, many academics faced more pronounced challenges. Not only did the pandemic impose a demand on such energy resources as time, but it required faculty to display heightened levels of resilience, emotional stability, and conscientiousness in learning and adapting to life at home with others or working in a new isolation. This often included being separated from such university resources as spur-of-the-moment informal mentoring from colleagues or access to lab space and essential equipment.

In some regions, faculty faced these challenges as well as the need to evacuate due to hurricanes (Kumar, 2020) or wildfires (Freedberg, 2020). In addition to posing a threat to one’s working conditions, these natural disaster events posed threats to such valued objects and resources as homes, land, and vehicles. Consequently, faculty in these disaster areas faced yet

another unplanned adjustment because of university plans for hybrid starts that were forced to return to the virtual environment due to student and personnel displacement. Although the summer of 2020 provided a sense of security as the number of positive COVID-19 cases declined across the country, this feeling quickly changed as cluster cases began to increase through community spread in schools, universities, grocery stores, and places of work. As the pandemic continued, displaced faculty faced direct threats on multiple fronts as they searched for shelter and suitable work arrangements.

Faculty serving as caregivers also faced relevant displacement challenges. As educational leaders began closing the doors of daycares and K–12 schools, parent/guardian caregivers found themselves providing round-the-clock childcare, often taking on virtual learning responsibilities. Just as college students often found themselves bringing children to class when their usual childcare options failed, the cries and presence of small children became fixtures in the background of virtual meetings. While many faculty reported the family-supportive and collegial nature of their colleagues, work-life balance was further hampered during this time.

AMBIENT STRESSORS

As the world watched the pandemic unfold, all were given a front seat to sociopolitical disasters. The killing of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd gave rise to the largest social justice movement in history. Masked protests took place in cities across the country, and Americans seeking justice for unarmed Black citizens were joined in local protests by supporters across the globe. Corporations joined the movement, funneling money into diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, and media networks aired calls for justice, boldly stating “Black Lives Matter.” For faculty, leader decisions to engage this point in social justice were welcomed but daunting. For many Black citizens and supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, it seemed as if issues of systemic injustice were finally part of the primary conversation. Unsurprisingly, diversity, equity, and inclusion researchers were called upon for their expertise. Hundreds of journals across disciplines launched calls for articles that addressed issues of systemic injustice faced by historically marginalized groups. University leaders also

called on these faculty members to join committees tasked with understanding and addressing social justice issues.

Unfortunately, faculty leaders often neglected more nuanced issues faced by faculty during this time. For example, to many, anti-Asian racism took a backseat due to a lack of media attention. Although the 45th president of the United States frequently used anti-Asian language to reinforce negative attitudes toward China—comments that were followed by increased acts of violence toward people presumed to be of East and Southeast Asian descent—calls for justice and action on the national level appeared to go unheard by many leaders until President Joe Biden signed a bill with specific protections that addressed acts of anti-Asian hate. To date, aside from grassroots efforts driven by community-based social activists, conversations surrounding anti-Asian racism remain dwarfed by other social justice issues. On many campuses, Asian faculty and allies seeking institutional support were met with neutrality at worst and performative emails at best. The work to address anti-Asian racism and other issues faced by marginalized groups was left to faculty public scholarship and committee efforts.

THE NARROWER IMPLICATIONS OF FACULTY LEADERSHIP

So far, this paper has focused on the general effects of leadership in and beyond academia. If not already evident, the theme of leadership during the pandemic was reactive and often less considerate than the moderately considerate leadership prior to March 2020. This is not to say that faculty leaders intentionally ignored the needs of faculty, staff, and students. Overall, institutions that shifted to emergency remote learning at the front of the pandemic and before or during the fall 2020 semester undoubtedly made the right decision. Still, between archaic policies, decades-old issues of gatekeeping, and novel leadership challenges, the current system of academia failed many faculty members across the country.

The hallmark (and in some cases the bane) of the academy is its tenure system. In addition to denoting a high degree of scholarship in teaching or research, tenure provides a level of job security known to few jobs outside of academia. Termination of tenured professors is rare, and attempts to do so are usually burdened by lengthy legal battles (Gordon, 2012; Jaschik, 2012). Still, there are situations in which the tenure system affords more limited protections of

employees, especially those within the system that have yet to receive tenure status. As the ambient stressor of a highly transmissible public health threat loomed and faculty scrambled to deal with more direct issues of displacement, lack of access to resources, potential financial loss, and managing seemingly untenable childcare responsibilities, faculty leaders began issuing double-edged policies.

One of the earliest policies to emerge during the pandemic was the tenure-clock extension. Opt-in policies allow faculty to request 1-year extensions due to disruptions from the pandemic, and opt-out policies provided additional time for all tenure-track faculty without extra steps. Unfortunately, these policies also featured downsides. For example, 1-year extensions were not solutions for faculty that experienced complete losses of time-sensitive research. These policies were also less supportive of women with children who already faced unique challenges on the tenure track. In addition to not providing enough time to account for the needs of women that continued to assume the role of primary caregiver for young children, these policies lacked criteria to correct future losses in pay due to delaying tenure applications.

Compensation and job security also became immediate threats for many faculty. Hundreds of institutions across the country issued salary furloughs to offset the expense of losses from lower enrollment, and several campuses announced layoffs of faculty across ranks and complete dissolutions of programs, departments, and colleges. Some smaller institutions that entered 2020 at the brink of failure shuttered their halls permanently, leaving their faculty to fend for themselves in a flailing job market and with limited notice. Although government pandemic benefits became vital supports to many in need, institutions receiving federal dollars included, the net impact on institutional budgets remains.

MOVING FORWARD WITH FACULTY LEADERSHIP

Faculty leadership requires consideration of faculty job demands (direct stressors), resources, and ambient stressors. Moreover, faculty leadership must consider the net effects of direct threats to faculty resources, ambient stressors, and how these stressors may intersect. Whereas the leadership literature indicates that leader charisma results in higher evaluations of effectiveness during times of crisis (Bavik et al., 2021; Davis and Gardner, 2012), effectiveness

does not guarantee that faculty needs are met during times of acute or chronic stress. In addition to charismatic support, leaders should consider developing flexible emergency plans to support faculty during times of crisis. Such plans may include rainy day funding for temporary instructors to help reduce teaching loads and allow caregivers the necessary time to adjust. Other considerations may include customized and flexible modified duty assignments that allow faculty to restructure their time to complete work more effectively during times of distress. Last, faculty leadership will benefit from input systems that frequently monitor changes in faculty experiences by giving voice to faculty, especially those from marginalized groups.

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