

The Impact of COVID-19 on Retention and Support of Faculty

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LOOKING BACK

The year 2020 was like no other, bringing prolonged forced isolation and perhaps (hopefully) reflection. Certainly the global COVID-19 pandemic encouraged many to reassess their lives and the critical importance of not only individual but also community health. In our focus on health, the significance of mental health became immediately clear as we dealt with the anxiety and depression connected to the physical health of ourselves and loved ones, experiencing lengthy isolation, and the daily and economic uncertainty of what the future holds.

Yet COVID-19 was not the only crisis of 2020. Early on in the national shutdown, we were reminded that racism does not pause for a pandemic when a series of police executions of Black men, women, and children came to light. The world witnessed the slow and painful murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin and his colleagues. His murder shocked much of White America, served as a reminder to Black Americans and many other People of Color of how little Black lives matter, and sparked months of protests nationwide and around the world. Latinx children and families were detained at the southern border under dangerous conditions, especially given the pandemic. Those of Asian descent were subject to random assaults and attacks as the nation's leadership implied that they were responsible for the pandemic. Horrific weather events plagued 2020, including raging uncontrollable wildfires, the derecho in the Midwest, unprecedented tornados in the South, and flooding in the South and Midwest, further exacerbating feelings of a lack of control experienced by many. These weather events also exacerbated challenges to internet access in addition to restricting access to basic necessities such as electricity and water. Lastly, 2020 was one of the most contentious times in the modern U.S. political landscape, with unfounded allegations of a stolen election culminating in a violent siege on the nation's capital on January 6, 2021.

At the beginning of the pandemic, many faculty were forced to rapidly pivot not only their instruction and research but also every aspect of their personal lives. Attempting to offer courses online for faculty who had never used that modality heightened stress. For untenured faculty without job security, attempting to fulfill workplace obligations while confronting the fear of lost income, lack of access to labs and research participants, all while trying to meet family obligations, including homeschooling children for some, was often overwhelming. Faculty also worried about the continued progress of their students, health and safety practices

on campus, and what the new normal might look like as a 2-week quarantine persists into the next year and likely beyond. As institutions also faced financial uncertainty, many forced faculty to take on more responsibilities with fewer institutional supports, leading some faculty to consider leaving academia, especially more senior faculty who were eligible for retirement. Likewise, faculty whose work had direct applications outside of the academy, considered careers in areas of pressing national need such as those in data science or in strategic roles for corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

These crises and their impacts on students were quickly communicated. However, these crises also revealed significant gaps in the support and retention of faculty and revealed that higher education was largely unprepared. These events highlighted institutional norms and practices that failed to live up to organizational ideals and aspirations, especially around equity and inclusivity. The typical focus of diversity efforts as being on recruitment, for example, does little to support the development and retention of diverse talent. Faculty began to publicly discuss their needs connected to work-life balance and integration, career stress and burnout, the marginalization of adjunct faculty, and the broader workplace climate for diversity, inclusion, and belonging. The ways in which the pandemic affected families of color heightened awareness of the ways in which faculty of color still face disparities despite their education. Faculty of color are underrepresented in more secure tenure-track positions and overrepresented in precarious adjunct faculty positions that were at risk of being eliminated to balance budgets affected by COVID-19. Certainly, the overrepresentation of Black and Brown lives affected by COVID-19 demonstrated the ongoing challenges of racism. Access to education and money failed to lessen the impact of race-based discrimination within the medical establishment, which added to the vulnerability that many scholars of color had to confront. These and other questions linger about how universities will move forward and if the post-COVID faculty experiences will differ substantially from their experiences prior to, and during, the pandemic (Gonzales and Griffin, 2020).

We identify four critical areas for institutional consideration and investment related to faculty support and retention: defining and setting expectations for faculty support, attending to the onboarding experience, the changing nature of academic work, and creating climates for diverse faculty success. For each issue, we discuss what has been and what could be while offering suggestions for future university policies and practices.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR FACULTY CAREER SUPPORT

Across industries, many workplaces are confronting what is referred to as “The Great Resignation.” The pandemic and shelter-in-place orders forced many to reflect on and reconsider their priorities and career paths. This reflection occurred for faculty as well. Personally, we have seen our colleagues leave tenured positions at competitive institutions to pursue lucrative positions in corporate environments or set up their own practices. They were fortunate in that their disciplines provided them with ample career opportunities within and outside of academia. In these cases, it was also evident that the academy could not compete with the level of career support and mobility provided elsewhere. How can institutions retain successful and productive faculty in light of growing competition?

Prior to 2020, the career support of faculty was largely a local, departmental effort as opposed to a large-scale institution-wide strategy designed to create and sustain an inclusive campus culture. Too often, retention is neglected until there is a threat of losing a highly valued faculty member. In many cases, strategies for faculty career support and retention efforts have been limited to preemptive or counter offers to retain star faculty. Many campuses rely on their Center for Teaching and Learning or Faculty Development Office as the vehicles for faculty support. Although these offices may be helpful in improving teaching or helping faculty to identify and write grants, these efforts are focused on job performance, not career support. Support efforts go beyond job performance to include ensuring faculty feel valued and heard and experience a sense of purpose and belonging.

There is growing evidence that support and retention efforts are differentially utilized to retain faculty by academic institutions. Faculty of color, specifically, report that they are less likely to receive preemptive or competitive counteroffers when being recruited (Settles et al., 2019; Settles et al., 2021b), which is supported by multi-institutional data on faculty retention (COACHE, 2018), and both women faculty and faculty of color report that their scholarship is devalued by colleagues, which contributes to their feeling unsupported and considering leaving their institution or academia altogether (Jayakumar et al., 2016; Lawrence et al., 2014; Settles et al., 2021a). Women of color face particularly daunting challenges navigating support and

retention in higher education (Buchanan, 2020; Thomas et al., 2013), and their vulnerability is exacerbated when they embody additional potentially marginalized identities, such as being fixed-term faculty, lower rank, or having a disability (Museus and Griffin, 2011; Williams, 2019). Research demonstrates that Black women frequently confront stereotypes that question their credibility in academic spaces (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008) and position them in ways that limit their contributions and opportunities to influence, and move into, leadership (Thomas et al., 2013; Thomas, 2019). Moving forward, institutions will need to reconsider how to listen to, support, value, and retain faculty, particularly those from historically excluded and marginalized groups. The pandemic is going to require new efforts to support and retain faculty at risk of leaving due to increasing opportunities in the private sector and opportunities that allow hybrid and remote work with greater support for faculty to thrive.

Policy/Practice Recommendations:

1. Institutional strategies for career support and retention should shift from acute, emergency, short-term efforts to long-term practices that extend beyond helping faculty succeed in their roles to efforts that foster a sense of belonging and ownership of the institution and its mission for all faculty.
2. At a minimum, faculty, regardless of rank or title, should have a formal meeting with their supervisor every year in which they are expected to express professional needs rather than solely focus on the past year's performance. Tyler (2021) refers to these as *stay interviews* rather than exit interviews. The meeting invitation should set the expectation that the meeting will be a supportive conversation to foster a safe and equitable climate in which faculty professional and personal needs can be addressed.
3. Institutions should review their policies and institutional data on past efforts to retain faculty (preemptively and through counteroffers) and exit data to ensure that they are equitable across gender, race, and rank and consider how these practices contribute to faculty feeling valued within the institution. Intersectional analyses (e.g., looking at race-gender groups, such as Latina women or Black men) are warranted in order to best understand the experience of the most severely underrepresented groups.

4. Institution-wide, data-driven retention strategies should be implemented in order to limit opportunities for bias to interfere with the career support and retention of faculty; especially underrepresented faculty.
5. Department heads, chairs, and deans should be asked to explain the reasons why productive faculty leave, what they did to proactively retain the faculty, and be held accountable for creating institutional cultures that prioritize faculty career support and retention.

DEFINING AN ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE

The initial support structure that many faculty encounter is delivered through the onboarding and orientation experience, which, in many ways, is when the implicit contract between faculty and their institution develops. Many institutions have formal faculty orientations that focus primarily on policies, institutional rules, compliance, resources, and a description of the process for promotion and tenure review. Typically faculty attend one of these orientations when hired, and at some institutions, newly tenured mid-career faculty have a session on how to be successful as they work toward promotion to professor. While orientations are essential for communicating rules and expectations, informal exchanges give newcomers a better and more personal understanding of what it means to be part of a campus. These faculty trainings have often been delivered from a colorblind (Plaut et al., 2009) and “one-size-fits-all” perspective without attention to the changing nature of the faculty role or the needs and experiences of individual faculty. In some cases, orientations can be vehicles for pigeonholing faculty careers when informal socialization is delivered by colleagues pushing new faculty to conform rather than contribute in innovative ways. Prior to 2020, orientations and training typically were delivered in person. Now, when delivered virtually, how does newcomer socialization occur without more personal, informal, and unscheduled face-to-face experiences? Might the lack of informal, hidden, and one-on-one onboarding create healthier and more productive onboarding experiences that empower new faculty?

Fall 2020 offered a unique opportunity to examine the impact of onboarding and socialization practices on faculty engagement, retention, and subsequent promotion. Quarantine

removed the ability to engage in formal socialization activities such as receptions, organizational imprinting, as well as informal coffee hours and happy hours among new colleagues. As a result, new faculty navigated their campuses without a map of the informal culture of the organization, likely extending their newcomer experience while working under others' expectations that they would function as if they were more seasoned faculty. Similarly, faculty who join in 2021 and beyond will likely have different expectations of how they will interact with their campus, and how their campus will/should support them. It will be interesting to examine the average years of campus retention for faculty entering the professoriate during the pandemic compared to those who entered before the pandemic and those who launch careers after the pandemic has concluded. For those who begin careers working remotely, how will they transition to campus when there is no longer an option for remote work?

Policy/Practice Recommendations:

1. All units should articulate plans for the onboarding and socialization of new faculty as an opportunity for community building and collaboration rather than conformity to established norms. Fostering a sense of value and belonging is essential for retention during this era of the “Great Resignation” (Tyler, 2021).
2. Formal orientation and socialization meetings, whether in person or virtual, should include options for customization so that faculty can gain access to information most germane to their lives, such as information on eldercare, working with a chronic illness, and being in a dual academic career partnership.

ATTENDING TO THE CHANGING NATURE OF ACADEMIC WORK

The pandemic generation of faculty may have radically different expectations for the nature of work (e.g., desiring flexible scheduling and hybrid work), the importance of prioritizing their mental health and well-being, and the legitimacy, and celebration, of scholarly work addressing social justice concerns and public advocacy. This generation of faculty may be focused on faculty positions that keep them near family or known communities where they have support as opposed to taking a great job in an undesirable location. Given these realities,

campuses, particularly those in remote locations, will need to create more possibilities for faculty to teach and conduct research without living locally and will have to work harder and offer more in order to recruit and retain outstanding faculty.

In many ways, the 2020 faculty experience revealed a lack of connection with one another at work and a lack of knowledge department chairs and deans have about the people they employ. Although many institutions anticipated that childcare accommodations were needed, many quickly learned that faculty caretaking responsibilities sometimes extended to parents, siblings, and extended family members. First-generation students who are now faculty often have multigenerational responsibilities that were largely unknown to organizational leadership. Further, many live in multigenerational households that might have been an asset to academic couples in need of built-in childcare during pre-pandemic times, but these now became sources of new concerns as younger household members brought COVID-19 into the living spaces of older and more vulnerable generations.

Policy/Practice Recommendations:

1. All institutions should consider the role of remote work in their workforce. This will require significant time (and expense) to consider which faculty can work remotely and which disciplinary content can be delivered effectively via online platforms. Likewise, institutions will need to consider the opportunity for fully online academic programs, especially as the traditional 18–22 college-age population is projected to shrink considerably by 2025 (Othot, 2021). Looking toward the future, institutions can intentionally frame remote delivery of content as modeling job skills for students who themselves will enter a workforce in which they may be expected to work in a variety of contexts.
2. All institutions will need to expand their employee assistance programs and hire multiculturally competent professionals to address the psychological and career needs of the pandemic generation of faculty and beyond. For example, one institution provides 15 hours of psychological therapy and 15 hours of life coaching a year for each faculty member. We suggest adding concierge services be contracted to support faculty navigating their new location and help identify assistance with common challenges such as caretaking. This is particularly important given that remote work

can blur the boundaries between work and one's home life and result in increased professional work-role strain. Employee assistance programs can help create effective and healthy boundaries while supporting faculty in minimizing the impacts of remote work on feelings of isolation, stress, and burnout.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CLIMATE FOR THE SUCCESS OF DIVERSE FACULTY

Underrepresented faculty on predominantly White campuses encounter persistent, blatant discrimination, bearing the minority tax of being role models for their campuses while facing questions about their credibility and the merit of their work (Thomas, 2019; Zambrana et al., 2017). Many minority faculty encounter barriers in conducting and disseminating their work (Buchanan et al., 2021), including epistemic exclusion (Settles et al., 2019; Settles et al., 2021a, 2021b), which diminishes the value of their scholarly contributions simply because they are the contributors, while majority group faculty are rewarded and celebrated, even when contributing less novel scholarship (Hofstra et al., 2020). Others suffer the lack of institutional investment in their career development due to benign neglect (Ballard, 1973) and impolite hostilities (Cooke, 2019). A mutual colleague in a business school commented in a *New York Times* article that she was not ready to return to work because she did not want go back to being the only Black professor in her department; she was becoming accustomed to not having to deal with objectification (e.g., people wanting to touch her hair), bias, microaggressions, and the stress and burnout they produce (Tulshyan, 2021).

Underrepresented faculty working remotely have quickly realized that the pandemic presented an unexpected benefit of not having to deal with “everyday racism”; not having to confront exclusion and racial microaggressions directed to oneself or one's students (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2019), and their absence makes work more pleasurable. Nevertheless, remote work heightened self-awareness for many faculty of color that they are tired and burned out from these repeated indignities. The fatigue is often expressed as emotional; the result of navigating organizational cultures that were founded on exclusion and negative academic stereotypes of the very groups they represent.

The movement to remote courses and meetings provided Black faculty with a clear path to “calling in Black” (McCluney et al., 2017)—eliminating the daily strain of visibility performances (Buchanan and Settles, 2019) often required when working in predominantly White institutions. Faculty of color also seized the new wave of opportunities outside of the academy that provide salaries commensurate with their years of education and achievement and healthier work-life balance and integration. We have personally witnessed junior and tenured faculty leave the tenure track or relinquish tenure to accept senior DEI positions in the corporate sector. Others returned to the academy while negotiating new roles that allowed them to continue service as a corporate advisor and moving forward college DEI goals with large corporate foundation gifts. These faculty used the “pandemic pause” to reexamine their careers and negotiate new opportunities and professional identities that are healthier and more sustainable for themselves and their families.

Policy/Practice Recommendations:

1. Letters of offer for all faculty should be customized to highlight and validate the disciplinary areas and research directions the new faculty member is likely to pursue. This statement can be updated on a regular schedule in order to evolve as one’s career evolves. These statements can become critical pieces of information to protect faculty as they are considered for annual, third-year, and promotion and tenure reviews.
2. Institutions must demonstrate the courage to hold people accountable for creating hostile work environments for members of underrepresented groups. Training is not enough. Leaders who allow microaggressions, epistemic exclusion, and bias to persist in their work units have to be educated, corrected, and/or removed from positions of leadership. Finally, campus leaders, especially chief diversity officers and their staffs, must also be prepared to understand that as the nature of work evolves, so will the ways in which antisocial behavior, like harassment, discrimination, and bullying, will present themselves in hybrid and remote workplaces.
3. The annual evaluation of chairs and deans should extend beyond credit-hour production, fundraising, and grant activity metrics to include diversity-relevant data that reflect priorities to maintain an equitable, safe, and inclusive work and learning environment.

4. Departments need to establish expectations for faculty to engage in allyship, and these expectations should be reflected in faculty recruitment and annual evaluation efforts. Demonstrating success in being an ally to marginalized groups (peers as well as students) should be considered essential to being a good department citizen.
5. Faculty service units, such as Centers for Teaching and Learning, Employee Assistance, and the Office of Faculty Success should ensure that all faculty-facing professionals are multiculturally competent and reflect the diversity of the faculty they serve.
6. Faculty who are community and/or entrepreneurially focused should be able to identify a valued space for themselves on our campuses rather than experience constant resistance and discounting. In order for these faculty to receive the comparable levels of rewards and recognition as others in their unit, annual evaluation and promotion and tenure criteria must be developed that allows the value these faculty offer to be captured in evaluation metrics.

Although we have centered our discussion and recommendations on four topics related to faculty retention and support, we recognize that the multiple pandemics and crises have motivated many important equity-focused promising practices that should be considered permanently. We offer a close consideration of these practices below:

- The adoption of a data-driven assessment strategy that targets the problems similar to those in the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) faculty exit survey, with a focus on examining job satisfaction and engagement data that will drive the creation and implementation of future faculty support systems.
- The opportunity to submit impact statements for all evaluation mechanisms, be it annual evaluation, third-year reviews, and promotion and tenure. Of course, their availability is not enough. Evaluation studies of their utilization and influence on faculty retention and the potential for stigmatization is critical. Likewise, the opportunity for the automatic implementation of tenure-clock extensions for any Family and Medical Leave Act event should be considered and its intended and unintended impacts and utilization examined.

- The reconsideration and elevation of community-engaged academic work as important and critical to meeting many institutional priorities, especially public and land-grant institutions, as well as individual faculty needs to connect with and serve *their* communities and apply their knowledge for a greater good that goes beyond one's CV.
- The positioning of networks and affinity groups as support systems for faculty success rather than internal threats to organizations. These groups can also provide critical feedback to leadership about challenges to inclusion and be utilized as sources of fellowship, award, and leadership nominations.
- The improved integration and use of technology to promote more efficient and creative teaching and research that can meet broader institutional, community, and societal needs.
- Embracing the entrepreneurial aspects of faculty life that work for the benefit of *both* the individual and the organization rather than asking individuals to choose one over the other.
- Easy access to culturally sensitive support systems, such as remote counseling, that protect faculty well-being and career success.
- Continued attention and pressure on professional organizations, funding agencies, and national organizations that can assert influence on higher education institutions to document and achieve standards of inclusive excellence, like graduation rates of diverse students or the retention of underrepresented groups in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), in order to be eligible for grant submissions, accreditation, awards, and so forth.

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 elevated ongoing global challenges and offered new ones such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The world is forever changed and so are our faculty and students. The multiple pandemics and crises of 2020 may have provided an opportunity for reflection and reset such that faculty are reconsidering the role of their career in their lives rather than making their

lives their careers. Likewise, ongoing attempts to be productive under circumstances in which there is ongoing uncertainty and stress has elevated feelings of depression and anxiety (e.g., pandemic flux syndrome³) and have left faculty looking for the next and better normal. Faculty expectations have evolved and many recognize there are new roles and opportunities for them. Strategies that were developed for the “cultural default” faculty (Jones, 2002) no longer work, if they ever did. Leaders have an opportunity to reconsider campus expectations of faculty, to provide them with greater opportunities for voice, and perhaps a greater variety of ways in which to educate, research, and discover. We expect that such efforts will be essential to the future career support and retention of faculty in the United States.

³ See “Why this stage of the pandemic makes us so anxious.” *The Washington Post*. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/08/11/pandemic-anxiety-psychology-delta>.

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