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Being a Woman in Academe Has Its Challenges. A Global Pandemic? Not Helping.

Here are the steps professors say colleges must take for equity.

By *Emma Pettit* | MAY 26, 2020

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Courtesy of Seema Mohapatra

Seema Mohapatra, an associate professor of law at Indiana U., turned her bedroom into her workspace when the university went remote. She occasionally puts a chair outside her door, to remind her two children that she's on the phone or doing a video chat.

In the Before Times, before the word “unprecedented” appeared in countless headlines, before professors scrambled to salvage the spring semester, being a college instructor while also being a woman had its challenges.

That’s not to say all women in academe share the same experience. They don’t. But research has laid bare certain disparities. Female faculty members are generally paid less than their male colleagues and are more likely to take on emotionally laborious tasks and to shoulder more service work for their departments. Women of color spend their

time supporting and mentoring students of color and performing other types of “invisible labor,” so called not because no one sees it, but because it's not considered coin of the realm in the faculty-reward structure.

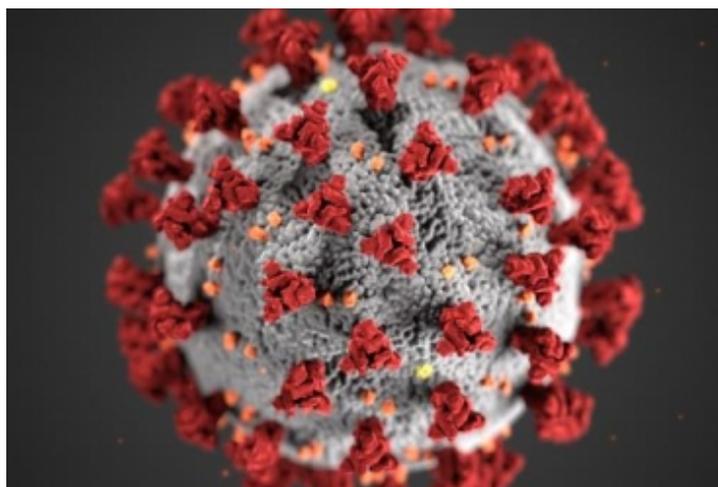
Those were the waters in which the female professoriate swam — sometimes unfair, but at least familiar. Then came the global pandemic.

Amid such a crisis, it stands to reason that female faculty members would bear a distinct burden. Anecdotal evidence already suggests as much. Editors of academic journals told *The Lily*, a part of *The Washington Post*, that women seem to be submitting fewer papers during the pandemic than are men, some of whom are being just as productive, if not more so, than before.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

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While there's no empirical data on the Covid-19 period yet, it's crucial for college decision-makers to think about the potential long-term implications of this disruption, says Kimberly A. Griffin, an associate professor of student affairs at the University of Maryland at College Park, who talked with *The Chronicle* while she prepared lunch for her chipper one-and-a-half-year-old. In that spirit, Griffin and Leslie D. Gonzales, an associate professor of higher education at Michigan State University, put together a guide for how colleges should support faculty members during and after the pandemic.

If previous research holds true, the guide says, dips in productivity are likely to differ across gender and other factors, including race and caregiver status. That makes the pandemic not just “a blip,” says Griffin, but an event that could have ripple effects for years to come.

And it's already complicating some faculty careers.

A Pandemic Outside Her Door

In early May, the *Harvard Business Review* published an article titled "Gender Equity Starts in the Home," about how, despite the fact that women outnumber men in the paid work force, women still do more of the domestic work and child care.

It outlined some recommendations for men who want to help, like, "Be purposeful in prioritizing work and family responsibilities."

When Seema Mohapatra finished reading the article, she sent it to her husband. "He actually does all these things" it outlined, says Mohapatra, an associate professor of law at Indiana University. "And it's still hard."

After the university went remote, Mohapatra turned her bedroom into her office and continued working while also caring for her two teenage children. Occasionally she'd put a chair outside her closed door so they wouldn't walk in during video chats or phone calls. She began to notice a difference between her and her husband. Mohapatra felt that she was spending more time figuring out activities for her children to do, while he took a more laissez-faire approach. He doesn't feel as much need to have a plan for the day, she says.

It's not a "scientific" observation, she acknowledges, but when she spoke with other academic mothers, they said they'd observed the same thing. The women seemed more invested in keeping a sense of normalcy for their children, and felt guilty when they couldn't.

The observation reminded Mohapatra of the parental leave that scholars take when their children are born. Some men on paternity leave, she says, still show up to the office most days to write. That's just not the case for women.

Of course, academic parents of any gender are facing difficulties right now. And the challenges unique to women aren't just because of child care or domestic responsibilities.

Many faculty members are agonizing on social media over their students' well-being, Gonzales and Griffin wrote in their guide, and a look at those stories indicates that women seem to be receiving messages from stressed and grieving students more frequently than their male peers are. Queer and trans women have long written about being a supportive ear for LGBTQ students, a duty made more urgent when many of those students moved home this spring, some back into unsupportive households. Women of color are already expected to take on many "nurturing" service responsibilities, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Natasha N. Croom, who was recently promoted to associate professor of higher education and student affairs at Clemson University, has no children — not even a dog or a fish, she jokes. But as a black woman in academe, she says, she was already overcommitted with service duties before the pandemic began, and that workload has only become heavier. For example, after her interview with *The Chronicle*, Croom had to virtually advise a Ph.D. student who is not even in her department, but who was at odds with an adviser and needed help.



Courtesy of Natasha Croom

As a black woman in academe, Natasha Croom was already overly committed to service-related duties before the pandemic began. That workload has only intensified.

Croom has had time to teach and write, she says. But it's not like she's been able to churn out paper after paper.

For Andrea Roberts, stress wrought by the pandemic feels intimate in a way it might not for many people. Roberts, an assistant professor of urban planning at Texas A&M University, is an African American woman whose work centers on African American communities. In the news she hears that black Americans in places like Atlanta and Detroit are disproportionately getting sick

and dying from Covid-19. Aside from fulfilling her professional duties, she spends her time worrying about her mother, sister, niece, and nephew, who live outside Houston, a Covid-19 hotspot.

“It’s not that anybody cares any less or more” about the virus and the people it infects, Roberts says. But while other groups of people may feel like the pandemic is metaphorically at the curb outside their home, she feels as if it’s outside her door.

Tactics for Leaders

So, with the knowledge that a post-pandemic playing field looks uneven, what can colleges do?

One small solution that lots of institutions have gravitated toward is extending the tenure clock. Young faculty members are “the creative engine” of the university, Ohio State University’s provost, Bruce McPheron, told *The Chronicle* after promoting the pause on Twitter. “I think we owe it to them.”

A tenure-clock pause might take the pressure off, says Cassandra Guarino, a professor of public policy and education at the University of California at Riverside. But it also means that female professors would be putting off raises, career advancement, and career freedom that they might well have gotten earlier. So it’s not a solution to gender disparity, Guarino says.

Tenure-clock extensions are “important, but they are insufficient,” Gonzales and Griffin wrote in their guide. The pauses do nothing for contingent faculty members, they note. And like any policy, without strong safeguards the extensions can be applied unevenly. Previous research on “stop-the-clock” policies suggests that cis-heterosexual men tend to produce more work during those periods because they rarely assume the amount of familial labor that women do.

“When evaluation committees allow cis-hetero men’s inflated productivity to become the norm,” Gonzales and Griffin wrote, “everyone else suffers.”

Committees must “resist comparing and contrasting” faculty members’ relative productivity, the two academics wrote. Colleges should specify to external reviewers and external letter writers the years during which a candidate should be evaluated, rather than just refer to the time frame during which they held the position.

Evaluators should also be reminded of what it has been like to go through Covid-19, and the disparate impact it has had on various groups, Gonzales tell *The Chronicle*.

Committees could be informed through a letter noting all kinds of observed differences, Gonzales says, and not just gender-related ones. For example, black and Native American populations will have experienced disproportionate rates of loss, she says, and Asian American faculty members will have experienced a different form of racism.

Gonzales and Griffin also recommend that college leaders consider how the swift transition to remote teaching might reflect poorly on an instructor's student evaluations. Those evaluations are essential for adjuncts, they note, who are often hired and fired based on the results.

Instead, faculty members should be offered ways to document “how and what they learned while teaching through Covid-19,” the two scholars suggest. Faculty members should be able to detail the emotional labor “they poured into students” during this time, like hosting virtual coffee hours. They should be encouraged to document the ways they mentored or supported junior colleagues.

Griffin says they got a lot of positive feedback when the guide was published. But there’s reason to be skeptical that higher-education leaders will adopt similar policies across the board.

Some colleges have already started cutting their faculty-retirement contributions, imposing furloughs, and laying off or not renewing contingent faculty members.

And — at least in the view of Croom, the Clemson professor — colleges in general haven’t been especially focused on faculty equity before. So why would they start now?

Gonzales sounds more optimistic. Academic leaders now, she says, are making difficult decisions under stressful conditions. She hopes that those decisions will be undertaken with nuance.

It's not just about setting one tenure-extension policy, or issuing a statement about the importance of diversity or equity. It's about considering all the variables that make up people's lives, and giving those variables the space and support to exist.

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