

Addressing and Documenting Pandemic Impacts

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Abstract

Crisis can easily sideline institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, even as it exacerbates inequalities by gender, race, class, and other social locations. As members of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst ADVANCE-IT team, we were alert to the disparate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on caregiving faculty, often women, and communities of color. We partnered with university leadership who, at the highest levels, recognized the importance of diversity, as well as the deeply engaged faculty union. Our immediate efforts have been to think creatively, adapt programming, create tools, and communicate clearly with our stakeholders to ensure that, over the long term, these disparate impacts do not lead to negative outcomes for STEM women regarding reappointment, tenure, and promotion, which would create a less diverse and inclusive university.

Keywords: Higher Education; Gender; COVID-19 Pandemic; Inequality

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Crisis can easily sideline institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Tulshyan 2020). Yet, crisis also often exacerbates inequalities by gender, race, class, and other social locations (Malisch et al. 2020). As members of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst ADVANCE-IT team, we were alert to the disparate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on caregiving faculty, often women, and communities of color (Gonzalez and Griffin 2020; Douglas-Gabriel 2020; Eligon et al. 2020; Gould and Wilson 2020; Goodwin and Mitchneck 2020; Malisch et al. 2020; Minello 2020; Zahneis 2020). ADVANCE Institutional Transformation grants fund institutional approaches to creating inclusive environments in which women STEM faculty, including women of color, can thrive (Stewart, Malley, and LaVaquer-Manty 2007; Rosser 2004; Stewart and Valian 2018; Zippel and Ferree 2019). We partnered with university leadership who, at the highest levels, recognize the importance of diversity, as well as the deeply engaged faculty union. Our immediate efforts have been to think creatively, adapt programming, create tools, and communicate clearly with our stakeholders to ensure that, over the long term, these disparate impacts do not lead to negative outcomes for STEM women regarding reappointment, tenure, and promotion, which would create a less diverse and inclusive university.

Located in a state that was an early hotspot for Covid-19 (CDC 2020), the university shut down in-person activities, including not only teaching but most research labs, quickly, and decidedly. UMass leadership almost immediately changed tenure, promotion, and review policies; adapted teaching expectations and evaluations; and formally recognized intensified caregiving demands (Clark, Mickey, and Misra 2020; Malisch et al. 2020). The Provost also announced in mid-March, eight days after moving activities online, a one-year automatic tenure

delay for all pre-tenure faculty members (with promotion pay raises backdated to the original expected date), as well as additional funding to support caregiving and necessary improvements to technology, developed through discussions with the faculty union. In addition, teaching evaluations, which tend to be biased against women and faculty of color (Goodwin and Mitchneck 2020), were suspended. Students were also allowed to take all courses Pass/Fail, even those required for their major, given the challenges to moving online. Many universities were less responsive to faculty members' needs (Rosen and Lester 2020). Yet, there was more work to do at UMass.

The primary concern for our team was how the pandemic would play out over the longer term. Would administrators and colleagues recognize that all faculty have different experiences during the pandemic? Would those whose research programs were unaffected realize the challenges faced by faculty whose access to research subjects and facilities were halted? Would those without children in need of care understand the enormous burden placed on other faculty members? Would those who were not responsible for caring for and/or losing family members to the pandemic understand the disruption and pain others experience?

Key to our university's response to Covid-19 has been coordination between a number of offices, including the Provost's Office, with a centrally engaged Associate Provost for Equity, the Office of Faculty Development, the Office of Equity of Inclusion, the faculty union Massachusetts Society of Professors, the Faculty Senate, the Deans, and the ADVANCE team (Clark et al. 2020). With leadership buy-in (Bilimoria et al. 2008; Rosser and Chameau 2006), we were hopeful that we could create structural recognition of pandemic impacts to mediate the worst of these impacts on personnel processes

On June 4, 2020, the ADVANCE team held an online session, “Recognizing the Impact of COVID-19 in Evaluating Faculty,” open to faculty across the university with over one hundred in attendance, that brought together the Deans of Engineering and Natural Sciences, and the Provost. While leadership had been responsive and had heard faculty members’ concerns about the pandemic through the faculty union, this session was an opportunity for leaders to interface directly with their faculty members. ADVANCE encouraged faculty members, as they registered for the event, to submit questions, which we asked leaders to consider before the event. Leaders made a few comments reflecting on these questions and spent the rest of the session answering questions posed by faculty members, both privately and publicly. The event helped university leaders understand the fears of faculty members, while they also helped address and quell some of these anxieties.

For example, many faculty members were concerned about how to address slowed research progress as a direct impact of the pandemic, due to lack of access to research subjects or facilities and/or increased caregiving responsibilities. Faculty members conveyed concerns about the need to change their research programs given uncertainty about the length of the pandemic and how the university would recognize these impediments. While faculty expressed appreciation for the tenure delays, they were concerned that these might not be enough to address the seriousness of the disruptions.

Many faculty members raised questions about how to ensure that external reviewers, personnel committees reviewing faculty productivity, and administrators would recognize the enormity of the pandemic impact on faculty workload – including teaching, mentoring, leadership and service, as well as research. They wanted to know how to keep track of these pandemic impacts, discussing with leaders the potential for including pandemic impacts on the

Annual Faculty review form or through Pandemic Impact statements included in personnel cases. This focus on documentation was of particular concern given uncertainty whether external evaluators, members of personnel committee, or administrators would remember the enormity of the impact in several years.

ADVANCE emphasized the research showing that women may be submitting fewer grant proposals and journal articles than men (Cui, Ding, and Zhu 2020; Fazackerely 2020; Kitchner 2020; Malisch et al. 2020) and how this might relate to differences in heightened caregiving expectations, both due to illness and to the closing of childcare, schools, and facilities for adults in need of daily care. As an intersectional project, ADVANCE further noted how these processes might be exacerbated for faculty of color whose communities were most likely to be impacted by the pandemic, including higher rates of illness, unemployment, and death (Gould and Wilson 2020; Eligon et al. 2020).

ADVANCE brought these arguments about the importance of documenting pandemic impact to the STEM Deans and Provost the week following our online session (Malisch et al. 2020). Negotiating with the union, the Provost responded with the addition of an optional Pandemic Impact Statement for faculty to include in their annual faculty reviews, which will likely be extended to personal statements for promotion and tenure cases. ADVANCE then produced a [best practice tool](#) for faculty and for those serving in evaluative roles, a two-page handout identifying best practice approaches to documenting impacts, and how to evaluate faculty fairly in the face of the pandemic (UMass ADVANCE 2020; Malisch 2020). We also developed a plan to train personnel committees in Fall 2020. ADVANCE will be incorporated into the regular training sessions, led by the MSP and the Provost's Office. Dr. Beth Mitchneck will offer two separate trainings on evaluating faculty fairly, first to heads and chairs and again

to members of personnel committees (Mitchneck, Smith, and Latimer 2016). These sessions will incorporate best practices around addressing COVID-19 impacts. Training evaluators in these best practices contributes to our mission of creating long-term cultural changes in our organization.

The adjustments made on our campus reflect urgent equity priorities from institutional leaders who recognize the importance of retaining and promoting white women and women of color in STEM fields. Successful change projects require institutional commitment to values of equity and inclusion (Bilimoria et al. 2008; Hardcastle et al. 2019). Yet, institutional change can also be difficult to achieve given fragmented authority structures (Bird 2011; Ely and Meyerson 2000; Valian 1998; Sturm 2006; Austin and Laursen 2015). However, in this crisis, in part because leaders in a variety of roles remain focused on equity and inclusion as core values and engaged with ADVANCE, the fragmented university authority structure worked favorably, with various campus units partnering to quickly enact policies. Despite ongoing challenges (Fernandes 2020), ADVANCE serves as an “organizational catalyst” for change, leveraging knowledge, strategic relationships, and accountability across domains and levels (Sturm 2006).

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