



WOMEN'S FACULTY COUNCIL

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Best Practices for Supervisors Supporting OSU Faculty, Staff, and Student Caregivers During COVID-19 and its Ongoing Effects

For the past two years, the Oklahoma State University Women's Faculty Council has proposed a set of professional practices and expectations to help supervisors best support faculty, staff, and students who are caregivers. We have revised and updated these guidelines to reflect the ongoing nature of the pandemic situation. Though many of us have found elements of normalcy returning to our work and home lives, we are still feeling the reverberations of the pandemic. Many issues addressed in previous guidelines may still be ongoing for the near future.

While K-12 schools have returned to in-person learning, most children under 12 still are not vaccinated against COVID-19. Given the continued presence of new COVID-19 variants locally and regionally, and school districts' inability to implement masking policies due to state law, many caregivers of school-aged children and children in daycare are still experiencing continued disruptions to childcare due to isolation and illness periods. Caregivers could find themselves overseeing the schooling of children and/or the full-time care of adults in their households; their presence at home will still be integral. Caregivers of infants, children under 12, and immunocompromised people may feel fearful that their return to in-person work on campus may put their loved ones at increased risk.

Additionally, given the disruptions to work and life experienced by all in the last two academic years, students, staff, and faculty continue to experience repercussions, i.e., delayed or interrupted research projects; lengthier waits at peer-reviewed journals, presses, and grant mechanisms; and pandemic-related adverse mental and physical health conditions. Considering the fast pace of tenure-track appointments, this interruption is already having long lasting consequences on the research productivity of caregivers. We encourage supervisors to continue to be flexible, creative, understanding, and compassionate in their leadership and to recognize that this situation will continue to severely disadvantage faculty, staff, and students who are caregivers.

Research suggests that, prior to the pandemic, caregivers have long experienced disproportionate challenges in achieving academic career success in relation to their non-caregiving peers (Sallee, Ward, & Wendell, 2015); there is evidence that this has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Breuning et al., 2021; Staniscuaski et al., 2021; Lightfoot et al., 2021). Further, while all caregivers face challenges in

academia, research suggests they disproportionately affect women faculty, students, and staff (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Drago et al., 2006; Stokes & Patterson, 2020). Given the intensification and uncertainty of caregiving in the pandemic and OSU’s commitment to faculty, student, and staff diversity, it is more important than ever to understand and alleviate these challenges as much as possible.

The suggestions below could help supervisors empower caregivers to succeed as professionals while balancing the care and schooling of their families under the circumstances posed by COVID-19.

Be empathetic during annual reviews

Consider that COVID-19 will affect people differently depending upon their home situation, and be sensitive to such inequities and potential implicit biases when completing future annual reviews. Even as we move further away from these initial pandemic disruptions, annual review documents may still reflect gaps and delays. OSU has offered a one-year extension to the tenure clock for all pre-tenure faculty employed by OSU in the spring of 2020. COVID-19-related disruptions to research projects may not be resolved within that time period and may affect faculty who began their appointments after Fall 2020 and thus are not covered by the one-year tenure clock extension policy.

Give advance notice for required commitments

Provide as much advance notice as possible for required commitments. Consider the preparatory work necessary to attend a meeting or complete a task and negotiate an appropriate timeline with your caregiving employee. We recommend giving a minimum of five to seven business days’ notice when possible.

Support telecommuting arrangements for employees

Supervisors should remain cognizant of resources (e.g. technology, internet, etc.) needed for telecommuting and should afford caregiving faculty, staff, and students the option to work remotely if necessary.

Allow for telecommuting and/or teaching online

Instructor caregivers should continue to have the option of teaching online or hybrid courses to facilitate flexibility in their work schedules and to limit the spread of COVID-19. Decisions regarding online instruction should be made as quickly as possible.

Instructor caregivers should be provided guidance and flexibility for pivoting face-to-face classes to online or hybrid instruction in the event instructors and/or students must quarantine or isolate. Supervisors should remain cognizant of resources (e.g. training and support, classroom technology, etc.) needed for pivoting to online and/or hybrid teaching.

Allow negative course-banking

If possible, supervisors should assign instructor caregivers fewer courses during this period. Caregivers could be given the option to make up those courses in future semesters.

If appropriate, provide caregivers a partial administrative appointment

Allowing qualified caregivers to serve partial administrative appointments (in lieu of heavier teaching loads, for example) could assist in providing flexibility to their schedules.

Allow supportive reassignment

Following discussion, consider reassigning caregivers to courses, tasks, etc. that facilitate flexibility of schedule.

Minimize required synchronous meetings

Consider the necessity of synchronous attendance at in-person or video meetings. If a discussion could be held through email, consider this substitution for all. If the meeting is necessary, consider facilitating the option for asynchronous participation. Faculty, staff, and students should have an online option to participate in required synchronous meetings when possible.

Provide GTA support

Consider providing caretakers with GTA support, particularly in the form of grading assistance.

Be flexible with deadlines

Consider allowing flexible deadlines, such as the removal of penalties for late work for students; encouraging creative approaches to attendance and participation; and reinforcing clarity with students about broader norms regarding attendance policies at the college- and university-level.

Provide Support for OSU-Employed Students

Students experiencing pandemic-related disruptions to their research and coursework may require additional time to complete their degree programs. Consider offering extensions to graduate assistantships (GTA or GRA) or other work appointments to enable students to complete their degree programs.

Provide flexibility and clear communication of responsibilities for caregivers on graduate assistantships

The often additional and unfamiliar workload experienced by caregiving students on research and teaching assistantships during the pandemic requires active listening on the part of their mentors and supervisors. If possible, supervisors should allow for flexibility in students' tasks. If possible, GTA or GRA contracts should be revised to reflect adjustments in students' work responsibilities. Graduate students on

assistantship should be provided open and empathetic communication, appropriate training, and timely feedback.

References

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