



## WOMEN'S FACULTY COUNCIL

UPDATED 2021-2022

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

Last year, the Oklahoma State University Women's Faculty Council 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. While the pandemic situation has evolved in the last year, many issues may still be ongoing for the near future.

While K-12 schools are planning for in-person learning, COVID-19 vaccinations are still not yet available for children under 12. Given the high prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant, 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 will likely experience disruptions to childcare due to isolation and quarantine periods. With increased community spread, some adult care facilities in Stillwater have begun disallowing visitation. Families might still feel uncomfortable sending their loved ones to in-person school, daycare, or live-in care institutions. 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 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 academic year, students, staff, and faculty continue to experience repercussions, i.e., delayed or interrupted research projects, pandemic-related adverse mental and physical health conditions. 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.

### **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.

### **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. Stagger or split employee schedules in shared offices to allow for physical distancing. Limit public access to office space as much as possible.

### **Allow for telecommuting and/or teaching online**

Instructor caregivers should 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.

**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.

**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. 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 in summer 2020 or later and who are not covered by the one-year tenure clock extension policy.

## **References**

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