



Published on *Inside Higher Ed*  
(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)



[Home](#) > Advice to academic administrators for how to best support faculty during the pandemic (opinion)

## Advice to academic administrators for how to best support faculty during the pandemic (opinion)

Submitted by Anonymous on September 4, 2020 - 3:00am

By now, we have realized the myriad ways that COVID-19 has impacted faculty members and their careers, with rushed transitions to online teaching, disruptions to nearly all research activities and added service and mentoring work. COVID-19 has amplified pre-existing inequities among faculty members, creating [distinct challenges](#) [1] for differently situated ones.

Women, for example, have already submitted [fewer papers](#) [2] in 2020 compared to previous years, while articles by men have relatively increased. With K-12 schools and childcare centers closing, women have been more likely to shoulder greater caregiving and household labor demands. And as COVID-19 takes [disproportionate health and financial tolls](#) [3] on racial minority and immigrant communities, faculty of color -- especially [Black faculty and Black women](#) [4] -- are more likely to be coping with family illness, unemployment or the loss of loved ones while simultaneously providing more [emotional support](#) [5] to struggling students.

Some colleges and universities have outlined plans for the [safe return of students](#) [6] this fall, but [many of us are left wondering](#) [7] how institutions will support diverse faculty members both in the immediate future and over the long term. As members of the [University of Massachusetts ADVANCE](#) [8] team, funded by the [National Science Foundation](#) [9], we are focusing on offering equitable campus support for faculty members and fostering inclusion amid major shifts to higher education and deep uncertainty about the future. We are working to develop systemic solutions to increase the participation and advancement of women and underrepresented racial minorities in science and engineering faculty. And, in the midst of COVID-19, it's clear to us that the need for equity projects is more urgent than ever.

Institutions must enact [responses](#) [10] to the pandemic that will retain and promote diverse women faculty. As examples of some effective ways that colleges and universities can do that, we'd like to offer our own university's efforts -- recognizing that much more must still be done, both here and at institutions across the nation.

## Structural Changes and Shared Commitment

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst has responded to COVID-19 with important structural changes in policy and procedure. Key to that response has been collaboration across campus units, paired with a shared commitment to sustainable equity.

On March 19, our provost, [John McCarthy](#) <sup>[11]</sup>, announced a series of concrete changes regarding faculty evaluation. In developing those changes, he consulted with senior administrators and faculty liaisons, including the [provost's office](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, the [Office of Faculty Development](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, the [Faculty Senate](#) <sup>[14]</sup> and most notably the faculty union (the [Massachusetts Society of Professors](#) <sup>[15]</sup>). That joint effort represents an important best practice for other universities working on COVID-19 concerns. Top leadership buy-in ensures structural changes, while transparent communication and trust across units maximizes input from diverse voices.

We at UMass ADVANCE have since worked with campus partners to facilitate follow-up policy implementation. We seek to support colleges and departments in adopting inclusive evaluation practices that recognize the impact of COVID-19 on faculty careers, both in the short and long term. Here, we offer some specific suggestions, drawing on a summary of adjustments made on our campus.

**Automatically delay tenure, promotion and reviews.** Institutions should immediately slow the timing of decisions on tenure and reappointment to account for the new and unexpected tasks faculty members have had to shoulder. COVID-19 has affected research productivity in [many ways](#) <sup>[16]</sup>, resulting in reduced access to labs, travel cancellations and suspension of human-subjects research, among other issues. Tenure delays can help mitigate such negative effects of COVID-19 on women faculty, who are already navigating [gender biases](#) <sup>[17]</sup> in evaluation processes.

Our university announced an automatic one-year delay for all pretenure faculty members, meaning that faculty members now have to affirmatively *ask* to be reviewed on schedule. Automatic delays tend to have an equalizing effect because they make being reviewed on schedule outside the norm. The provost also included an unusual addendum: once a faculty member is tenured, the promotion salary increment will be made retroactive to when that person was supposed to begin the tenure process, thus ensuring they do not face an economic disadvantage from delaying their tenure.

The provost has also promised to issue forthcoming guidance to personnel committees who review tenure and promotion cases as well as external letter writers. That guidance will recognize the special contributions faculty are making to support the campus

community during the pandemic, including advancing online teaching or taking on additional service.

**Change teaching policies.** Given the abrupt shift to online learning, institutions should suspend students' teaching evaluations and replace them with holistic teaching assessments [18]. Researchers and administrators have long recognized gender and racial biases [19] built into evaluations by students, as students often evaluate women faculty more harshly for failing to meet gendered expectations. The current, extraordinary teaching circumstances brought on by the pandemic may further such biased evaluations.

The new policies will allow UMass faculty to benefit from feedback by requesting ad hoc evaluations through the Center for Teaching and Learning [20]. While the faculty member will receive the evaluations, the university won't keep them for use in a formal assessment. The provost has also changed grading policies to allow students to make a choice to go pass-fail at any point in the semester. Only grades benefiting students' GPA will be counted toward their GPA for the semester, further reducing the likelihood of negative teaching evaluations.

Recently, the university has provided additional support for fall teaching, making in-person teaching the exception rather than the rule and providing funds, via the faculty union, for technology to support remote teaching. Given the continuing risks, all faculty members are assumed to be working from home unless they have agreed to teach on the campus or have identified their courses as essential for face-to-face learning, such as some studio, lab or clinic courses. Faculty members have also been incentivized to create online versions of their pre-existing courses that enroll more than 12 students, with later course releases or credit toward sabbatical.

**Recognize intensified caregiving demands.** Institutions must acknowledge that the pandemic has drastically altered the family and personal lives of faculty members, taking enormous health and financial tolls and negatively impacting their work.

In his message to the faculty, our provost noted, "Even high achievers, such as our UMass Amherst faculty, have limits, as they balance exceptional demands at work and home, particularly with schools closed." By declaring faculty members "high achievers," while also acknowledging their increased demands due to school and childcare center closings, he effectively avoided any impression that those facing caregiving demands, particularly women faculty members, are less excellent than their colleagues. Additionally, through the faculty union, the university is providing emergency funds for caregiving assistance, including childcare and eldercare.

**Allow for open dialogue between faculty members and administrators.** Institutions

must create spaces -- such as virtual town halls -- where faculty members can convey to administrators their concerns about COVID-19's impact on their careers. Administrators should also encourage faculty to reach out to them with questions or concerns. To facilitate this, campus units such as the Faculty Senate or faculty union can serve as conduits between faculty and administrators and can create transparency across organizational levels, without requiring individual faculty members to publicly disclose the challenges that they're facing.

UMass ADVANCE hosted a virtual panel titled "[Recognizing the Impact of COVID-19 in Evaluating Faculty](#) <sup>[21]</sup>," with the provost as well as the deans of the natural sciences and engineering colleges, who gave faculty more information about how the university will evaluate faculty work, given the challenges the pandemic is posing. Faculty who registered for the workshop could pose questions for the panelists ahead of time and through the chat function, which the moderator then read out loud. This session allowed ADVANCE to ask those leaders specific questions from faculty members in ways that clearly illustrated the anxiety that faculty were feeling.

Additionally, the union continues to respond to faculty members' concerns, including through a new one-year contract. It also communicates with faculty consistently through a comprehensive [Frequently Asked Questions](#) <sup>[22]</sup> page on its website that covers topics like tenure and promotion, dealing with illness, and support for remote teaching.

**Document impacts to ensure institutional memory.** Universities should establish procedures that allow faculty members to document the impact of COVID-19 on their careers. Those impacts will be long-lasting for many people, but institutional memory may not be. Memory loss will only further marginalize and hinder the careers of women faculty and those from underrepresented racial minority groups -- potentially reversing any progress made in recent years.

At the panel we hosted, a key question faculty asked was, "What kind of documentation should we keep as part of our personnel record to track ongoing impediments to our research and teaching programs -- or the added expectations for teaching, mentoring and service work?" Since the panel, ADVANCE has worked with the provost's office to communicate ideas about impact statements and how they might appear, while passing along resources shared within the national [ADVANCE network](#) <sup>[23]</sup>. In July, the provost announced that the annual faculty review would include sections where faculty could describe the effects of COVID-19 on their research, teaching, mentoring and service -- thus informing their official personnel record.

We with ADVANCE are now working to put that policy into practice. Our [best practice tool](#)

[24] shares specific steps on how faculty can document the pandemic's impact on their careers, and we will host workshops on documentation this fall. We will also be providing antibias trainings for personnel evaluation to chairs, heads and members of personnel committees, as well as trainings to help faculty members respond effectively when bias occurs. Those trainings will include information on how COVID-19 has exacerbated inequities among faculty.

Our university has made a commitment across campus units to collaborate to support faculty while remaining mindful of equity. Other universities can adopt similar practices. Having a centralized sounding board for faculty to voice concerns, paired with transparent communication across organizational levels, can shape your administration's structural response. Fostering buy-in from community members at various levels, including department chairs and committees tasked with evaluating faculty, will ensure the effective implementation of those policies throughout the institution. While the pandemic is challenging universities at many different levels, it is possible to respond to its impact on faculty while still maintaining a focus on equity.

#### **Author Bio:**

*Ethel L. Mickey is a sociologist and postdoctoral research associate at the University of Massachusetts ADVANCE program. Dessie Clark holds a Ph.D. in community sustainability and is the research collaboration coordinator for the University of Massachusetts ADVANCE program. Joya Misra is a professor of sociology and public policy at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she is also a member of the ADVANCE team.*

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/09/04/advice-academic-administrators-how-best-support-faculty-during-pandemic-opinion>

#### **Links**

- [1] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Covid-19-Crisis-Widens-Divide/248276>
- [2] [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3623492](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3623492)
- [3] [https://communitychange.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Race-and-Gender-Inequality-Makes-COVID-19-More-Dangerous-for-Black-and-Brown-People-and-for-Women\\_41620.pdf](https://communitychange.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Race-and-Gender-Inequality-Makes-COVID-19-More-Dangerous-for-Black-and-Brown-People-and-for-Women_41620.pdf)
- [4] <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>
- [5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/13/ensuring-pandemic-doesnt-negatively-impact-women-stem-especially-those-color>
- [6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/15/student-conduct-codes-and-pledges-promise-good-covid-19-habits>
- [7] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/30/faculty-concerns-about-fall-are-mounting>
- [8] <https://www.umass.edu/advance/>
- [9] [https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm\\_summ.jsp?pims\\_id=5383](https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383)
- [10] <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/27/15378>
- [11] <https://www.umass.edu/provost/about/john-mccarthy>

- [12] <https://www.umass.edu/provost/>
- [13] <https://www.umass.edu/faculty-development/>
- [14] <https://www.umass.edu/senate/home>
- [15] <https://umassmsp.org/>
- [16] [https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/suppl/2020/06/17/2010636117.DCSupplemental/pnas.2010636117.sapp.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1UmoVYqwwqYxnVrTFgPtO9Yj3SOj3LCWwM7QyxAY\\_dOAwpvIXKx8sCwrw](https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/suppl/2020/06/17/2010636117.DCSupplemental/pnas.2010636117.sapp.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1UmoVYqwwqYxnVrTFgPtO9Yj3SOj3LCWwM7QyxAY_dOAwpvIXKx8sCwrw)
- [17] <https://academic.oup.com/sf/article-abstract/96/2/529/3897008>
- [18] <https://teval.net/resources.html>
- [19] <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-005-8292-4>
- [20] <https://www.umass.edu/ctl/home>
- [21] <https://www.umass.edu/advance/events/workshops>
- [22] <https://umassmsp.org/campaigns/covid-19/>
- [23] <https://www.equityinstem.org/>
- [24] <https://www.umass.edu/advance/sites/default/files/inline-files/UMass%20ADVANCE%20COVID-19%20Tool%20August%2017%202020%20Final.pdf>