

Introduction

COVID-19 Special Issue

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Introduction

As we write this introduction to our special issue on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, the United States is currently experiencing the worst spike in coronavirus cases since its inception in March of 2020. According to the *New York Times*, the beginning of November 2020 saw an average of 150,265 cases per day and more than 11 million people in the United States have been infected with the coronavirus to date (Times 2020). Globally, there are over 58 million COVID-19 cases and 1.3 million deaths from the disease (John Hopkins 2020). As the virus rages, its impacts are not equally distributed. In the U.S., COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted Black, Native American, and Latinx communities, both in infection rates and deaths (Tai et al. 2020). In May and June, the country saw massive mobilization around the movement for Black Lives, following the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade and Ahmaud Arbery. Regina McClinton and Tenisha Tevis offer personal reflections on the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst racial violence in their essays, “It is Time to Move the Needle” and “By Obligation and By Choice: Taking on extra responsibilities during COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement” published in this issue. Protests not only spurred predictable racist backlash, but also gave rise to an increased public awareness of structural racism and its myriad impacts on communities of color. In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak came a wave of renewed xenophobia and anti-Asian racist speech and violence around the world, but particularly in the United States, fueled by President Trump’s anti-Chinese rhetoric. The politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic and deep-seated resistance to basic public health measures such as the use of masks and social distancing in the United States have contributed to the tensions and difficulties in containing the virus. Partisan gridlock has seen only one significant national aid package passed, causing severe economic,

health, and policy struggles across the country. This special issue addresses the current situation, focusing on how the pandemic is affecting women in higher education, and particularly women in STEM. It discusses how the pandemic has shaped both personal lives in terms of gendered labor, stress, and isolation, as well as professional lives, including research, publishing, teaching, and service. The essays here address these issues and offer strategies and solutions for personal and structural change.

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are wide ranging, from the disruption of global supply chains, to a boom in profits by some corporations, to budget cuts at colleges and universities, to devastating impacts for the food-service industry and small family-owned businesses. Workers face unequal risks and consequences during this pandemic. Not only have healthcare workers in hospitals, clinics, and long-term care facilities had to deal with personal protective equipment (PPE) and staff shortages, low-wage service industry workers, farmworkers, and factory workers – particularly at food production facilities – also face a lack of worker-safety protections and workplace outbreaks. The disproportionate impacts of the pandemic can be seen across gender lines as well. In the U.S. between August and September, 865,000 women dropped out of the labor force, a rate that was four times that of men in the same time period (Ewing-Nelson 2020). For Latinas and Black women over the ages of 20, unemployment rates are over 11%, double what they were before the pandemic. In Fall 2020, the unemployment rate for women with disabilities was over 16% (Ewing-Nelson 2020). These statistics underscore the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding and confronting the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond the sheer impact of job losses, mothers are also dealing with the consequences of radical changes to the ways that schooling is happening during the pandemic. As childcare

centers have closed and K-12 schooling has shifted to remote learning, mothers are shouldering the vast majority of childcare and managing online learning for their school-aged children. Not only are mothers taking on more household responsibilities, working mothers worry that their work performances are being viewed negatively as a result of their caregiving responsibilities (Cooper 2020). These responsibilities also extend to care of aging parents as the virus disproportionately affects older family members. Several essays in this special issue underscore these points about gendered labor. In “Attending to Silence,” Emily Yates-Doerr, for example, illustrates the many difficulties of leading elementary aged children in online learning and the structural barriers that silence caregivers in academia. Carrie Baker also makes this point in “Amplification of Structural Inequalities,” emphasizing that the increase in parents’ caregiving labor, particularly among mothers, has amplified pre-existing structural barriers that negatively impact academic women’s capacity for conducting sabbatical research.

As the essays in this special issue attest, the pandemic has wrought great economic insecurity in the world of higher education. As a result, and with little national guidance or financial assistance, colleges and universities have enacted a wide range of strategies for dealing with the health and economic consequences of the virus. The financial repercussions of the pandemic have hit institutions hard, resulting in layoffs and furloughs (Burke 2020). These layoffs are the highest among the lowest paid members of institutions – adjunct faculty and nonacademic staff such as custodial and dining services staff members (Douglas-Gabriel and Fowers 2020). In March as the pandemic first swept through the country, colleges and universities began pivoting to remote instruction mid-semester and made plans for many students to leave campus housing. Maria Leonor Cadena’s essay, “Teaching in Times of COVID-19,” reflects on the challenges and opportunities of the rapid transition to online learning and offers

strategies for supporting students amidst the pandemic. The abrupt shift to online learning posed many challenges, both technological and social. From students whose homes were not safe to return to, such as some LGBTQ+ students, to students who lost employment, to student-parents suddenly navigating online learning for themselves and their children, people's lives and learning were disrupted.

Some universities made changes to their grading basis, such as allowing for pass/fail designators in lieu of traditional graded structures. For students with disabilities, the switch to online learning created accessibility and accommodations barriers. International students have dealt with a unique set of challenges – from legal uncertainty about their ability to stay in the US while taking exclusively-online classes, to travel restrictions, to housing concerns as universities closed on-campus facilities. Faculty were faced with completely redesigning courses for an online environment mid-term, while navigating how to manage their own research, laboratories, familial responsibilities, and health challenges. Here again, we must look to an intersectional understanding of how the pandemic and systemic racism affect different groups of faculty and students. Faculty and students of color have not only dealt with COVID-19, but also the continuing impacts of systemic racism. As Black Lives Matter protests swept the country in May and June, many universities put out statements of support for diversity, while students and faculty of color know from lived experience the ways these statements fail to account for systemic harm done to them by institutions. The impact of the pandemic on graduate student and faculty women's research has been particularly profound, as Baker's essay explains. The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on graduate students' research in particular is the focus of the essay by Tjorven Sievers, as well as the one by Jeanne Pauline Munganyinka, Fatoumata Thiam, Sylvia Wairimu, Monica Fisher, Robert Skilton, Moses Osiru, Pauline Achoka, and Sagal

Abdulle's essay. In "Fieldwork Interrupted," Sievers outlines the pandemic's implications for conducting transnational qualitative dissertation research. In "Studying Abroad during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Experiences of Three African Women PhD Students," Munganyinka et al. share the first-hand stories of three African women STEM PhD students in their efforts to navigate research, parenting, and other requirements of academic life, while living abroad in the midst of the pandemic.

Labs have been shuttered; travel has been curtailed; funding has been cut. Shortly into the pandemic, academic women, who not surprisingly shouldered more of the home and childcare labor than their male peers, began to submit fewer papers to journals. For example, in astrophysics, from January to April, women's submissions to preprint servers dropped by nearly half (Kitchener 2020). Kathryn Becker-Blease's essay, "Ten Steps to More Equitable Publishing in the Pandemic," provides insight to the barriers in academic publishing for women and people of color and offers ten concrete steps academic journal editors should consider in order to ensure equitable representation in publishing. Despite commitments by institutions to consider the pandemic's impact on scholarly productivity, we can't help but wonder how the drop in scholarly productivity will affect women in the tenure and promotion process, especially when evaluated against men whose productivity may well have gone up during the pandemic. One group of women scientists worry that the impacts of the pandemic will lead to women leaving academic STEM fields (Buckee, et al 2020). Another fear is a "secondary epidemic of lost early career scientists" (Cardel, Dean, and Montoya-Williams 2020). In "Addressing and Documenting Pandemic Impacts," Joya Misra, Ethel Mickey, and Dessie Clark provide strategies for institutional partnerships to provide programming and tools to address the pandemic's disparate impacts and prevent negative outcomes for STEM women faculty members in their

tenure and promotion process. In “Leadership in the Time of COVID-19” Susana Rivera-Mills outlines leadership lessons she has learned as a Latina Provost, arguing for the importance of inclusivity, transparency, self-care, and shared governance by university leaders and administrators.

Despite the myriad challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty, staff, and students at institutions across the U.S. also found ways to help support their communities and health care workers. Mutual aid groups connected individuals to desperately needed supplies and resources. Faculty and student researchers set to work using their labs and materials to help produce needed medical supplies such as hand sanitizer, face shields, and masks. As the pandemic wore on through summer 2020, institutions began making plans for how to re-open campuses for fall. Some campuses, like the California State University system, announced early that they would plan for full remote instruction in fall, while many others moved forward with plans to open their campuses to students and in-person instruction. Institutions that announced full in-person instruction faced backlash from students and instructors. At the University of Michigan in September, the graduate student union implemented a strike over the lack of transparency from the institution around the reopening policy. College sports have proved to be a flashpoint for tensions around COVID-19 with institutions moving forward with fall football schedules and have seen athletes and coaching staff test positive for the virus. With the fall wave of coronavirus upon us and heading into what will likely be a deadly winter, many universities that opened their campuses are now reassessing their instruction plans for Winter and Spring 2021. Faculty, instructors, and graduate students are pushing back on plans for in-person instruction in spring. This is exemplified in Florida, where faculty unions at the University of

Central Florida, the University of Florida, and Florida Atlantic University have filed grievances in regards to in-person instruction policies at the institutions (Flaherty 2020).

Knowing the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on higher education, and in particular its disproportionate effects on women faculty and faculty of color, the *ADVANCE Journal* set out to publish a special issue that would tell these stories and offer suggestions for individual and institutional change. This issue is devoted to brief essays that address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on faculty women across race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, national origin, ability, age, and other forms of social difference from both personal and research perspectives. It also seeks concrete strategies for change. Alongside its personal reflection, McClinton's essay, for example, advocates that these social injustices provide the opportunity for individual and systemic change in the pursuit of social justice. The theme of systemic change is also addressed in Becker-Blease's essay as well as in the essay by Misra, Mickey, and Clark. In all these pieces, authors provide tangible steps and examples of how to promote institutional transformation for great equity.

As the pandemic continues to affect women in the academy, we invite others to join this conversation and submit essays to be considered for inclusion in this ongoing special issue. Specifically, we invite brief essays like those published here that address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on faculty women across race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, national origin, ability, age, and other forms of social difference from both personal and research perspectives. We are open to personal narratives, opinion pieces, and research essays and are especially interested in hearing about successful strategies, areas for improvement, institutional failings and successes, and possibilities for the future. Essays should be 800-1500 words. These

essays, like all ADVANCE Journal articles, will be double-blind peer-reviewed. We look forward to receiving your submissions through [Scholastica](#).

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