



collaborative on academic
careers in higher education

Examining the Impacts of COVID-19 on Faculty Retention & Exit

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Introduction

As higher education leaders plan for post COVID-19 recovery, they must do so bearing in mind a critical lesson unearthed by the pandemic: our need to find community and support in the academic work environment.

Since 2016, the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education has been conducting the [Faculty Retention and Exit Survey](#) to gain a deeper understanding of the academic work environment by examining faculty mobility. In 2020, COACHE included three COVID-19 related questions on the Faculty Retention and Exit Survey to capture the effects of the pandemic. This analysis is based on a phenomenological analysis of these questions. The findings reveal *nine* themes that emerged organically from 291 open text responses to the questions below:

- Q1. To what extent did the global pandemic and its consequences influence your decision to accept an outside offer or to remain at your institution?
- Q2. Describe any ways that the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak influenced your decision to accept an outside offer or to remain at your institution.
- Q3. Describe any impact the COVID-19 outbreak had on your transition to your new institution.

Findings

Participants reported *nine* factors that centered around feelings of disconnection, disruption, and disparate negative impact on particular faculty groups.

First, there are *four* factors that influenced faculty member's decision to accept an outside offer or remain at home institution: 1) delayed site visits influenced decision, 2) family needs remain key in decision-making, 3) degree of confidence in home institution influenced decision-making, and 4) inequity challenges emerged (gender and international status).

Second, there are *five* consequences or impact the COVID-19 had on the transition process: 1) experienced disconnection and isolation in new location due to working remote, 2) experienced anxiety and frustration regarding housing in new location, 3) women faculty

reported delayed research, 4) lack of closure at home institution caused stress and delayed transition of duties, 5) inequity concerns emerged (impact tenure packet of women faculty and transition timeline for BIPOC faculty).

Q1: To what extent did the global pandemic and its consequences influence your decision to accept an outside offer or to remain at your institution?

Participants reported *four* factors: Delayed site visits influenced decision; family needs remain key in decision; degree of confidence in home institution influenced decision; inequity challenges emerged (gender and international status)

1. Delayed site visits influenced decision

Participants reported that the site visit is influential in their decision to either accept the outside offer or remain at the home institution. Importantly, these responses revealed that a delayed site visit was a retention opportunity for the home institution.

- a. “Even though I know the area, I would have liked to have gone to visit and meet potential colleagues in person, which I could not do due to COVID. It made my decision to stay easier since I did not get to fully experience what the environment would be like if I moved.” (Woman)
- b. “Not being able to do a second visit allowed [home institution] to have more time to provide a more compelling counter-offer.” (Latinx)

2. Family needs influenced decision-making, including partner/spouse’s employment status

Participants shared that balancing family needs and maintaining stability during the pandemic was a key in their decision-making. These responses highlighted the interconnectedness of faculty member’s personal and professional lives.

- a. Proximity to family influenced decision to relocate:
“Given the need to rely on our family for support, and to support our elders in the pandemic, relocating to be closer to them was very influential in our thinking to ultimately relocate.” (White)
- b. “The pandemic caused me to reevaluate my unhappiness in my position at [home institution] and how it could affect me professionally in the long term. I also knew that I would need to be present for my teenage [children].” (Woman)
- c. Family stability influenced decision to remain at home institution:
“I was much less interested in moving my child to a new school when they would be online and she would have little opportunity to make new friends.” (Woman)

“The pandemic protracted the decision to move, because it substantively affects my [partner/spouse's] employment prospects in the new location. (White)

“I could not imagine moving my family in the midst of a pandemic. I had to decline.” (Woman)

3. Degree of confidence in home institution's response to COVID-19 influenced decision

Participants reported that the degree of confidence in the home institution's response to the pandemic and ability to maintain job security were critical to their decision-making. These responses highlighted the importance maintaining and/or providing financial and psychological stability during the pandemic.

- a. Poor handling of pandemic influenced decision to accept outside offer
“I did not like the way the university handled the pandemic, nor was I comfortable with the way the [state of home institution] handled the pandemic. I am happy to be going to a state and institution that handles these situations differently.”
(Black or African American)

“The US government did not handle the pandemic correctly. My job offer is overseas and we are leaving in part due to the political climate. I have also not been impressed with the way that [home institution] and the [school/department/clinic] have handled the pandemic. We had many opportunities to be world leaders in how to manage education in the face of the pandemic and we didn't do it.” (Woman)

- b. Sense of stability at home institution influenced decision to stay
“The other offer was in a system that took a more significant hit financially. There was also talk from their president to downsize the number of colleges offering certain programs which would put the offered position in danger. My position at [home institution] was more secure so I decided to stay.” (Woman)

“The COVID-19 outbreak made me more hesitant to leave [home institution]. The reason for this hesitation was a concern that I would be let go due to budget issues and because I would be the most recent hire (lowest on the seniority list).”
(White)

4. Inequity challenges emerged

A participant wrote there were gender inequity in allocation of administrative work and another participant reported increased awareness for visa support. These themes are consistent with recent reports on the impact of [gendered service](#) allocation and existing challenges in processing visas for international faculty.

- a. Gender inequality in administrative service

“COVID killed my research career at [home institution]. I'm sure lots of people also feel that way...unless they are the male faculty in our College of Science, since they were all allowed to stay in their labs and continue working or take early retirement, leaving me as the only person to do all the administrative work and 2/3rds of the upper level teaching.” (Woman)

- b. More visa support for international scholars
“The [COVID] outbreak made me more aware of both the need for strong and proactive support in working toward having visa support and also made proximity to family more appealing.” (Black or African American)

Q2: Describe any ways that the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak influenced your decision to accept an outside offer or to remain at your institution.

Q3: Describe any impact the COVID-19 outbreak had on your transition to your new institution.

Participants reported *five* consequences or impact the COVID-19 had on their transition process: Felt disconnected and isolated in new location due to working remote, experienced anxiety and frustration regarding housing in new location, Reported delayed research amongst women faculty, felt that lack of closure at home institution caused stress and delayed transition of duties, and unearthed inequity concerns (impact tenure packet of women faculty and transition timeline for BIPOC faculty)

1. Experienced disconnected and isolated in new location due to working remote

Participants wrote that working under pandemic restrictions impacted their sense of belonging at their new institution and affected their personal lives as well. These responses showed that working remote delayed and limited faculty's ability to find community at the new institution.

- a. Difficulty navigating culture at new institution; less opportunities to join new academic community and social networks

“I have struggled to figure out how to navigate the culture at the new institution. It has also made the move (and my long-distance marriage) much more complicated.” (Woman)

“Began teaching online; have yet to move in to my office or spend more than a few minutes at my department. Will not have access until 1+ year after my appointment.” (White)

“My transition into my new position has been challenging since everyone is working remotely. I've adapted but miss having a sense of community.

Relationship building is just different or perhaps delayed in this context.”
(Woman)

2. Experienced anxiety and frustration regarding housing in new location

Several participants reported frustration and anxiety around housing and additional expenses needed to secure housing. These responses highlighted that the pandemic created uncertainties in personal lives in addition to transitioning to a new and unfamiliar institution.

- a. Purchasing a home without a walkthrough
“Finding a house was extremely hectic, as the real estate market in [city of offering institution] was closed. This meant we could not physically walk through potential homes before making an offer. We ended up making an offer "sight unseen" (although we did have a Zoom walk-through, this did not allow for us to get a "feeling" of what the house and area were like).” (White)
- b. Added expenses to moving
“It has made it MUCH more difficult. We have had a lot of additional expenses associated with moving, and complications/difficulties/increased financial issues related to both selling our house and buying a new house. It has also made onboarding and meeting new colleagues very difficult. (Woman)

3. Women faculty reported delayed research

Women respondents shared that the pandemic delayed their research. The reported impact varied from making a move to a new and international institution to delay in administrative processes that are essential in setting up labs.

- a. “The consequences from the pandemic delayed my ability to relocated from the [home institution] to [international location of offering institution], so I did not physically move to my new institution until 3 months after my start date. Restrictions on in -person research at my new institution has resulted in a delay in starting up both my [discipline] research program, and [discipline] research. I anticipate a 6 month delay on starting my research lab.” (Woman)
- b. “Research shutdown severely impacted the move, causing a 3 month postponement.” (Asian or Asian American Woman)
- c. “It has slowed down some processes including setting up the lab, ordering supplies and transferring funds.” (Woman)
- d. “I didn't have to move right away because all classes were virtual. I wasn't able to complete some of my research.” (Black or African American Woman)

4. Having no closure at home institution caused stress and delays in transitioning duties

Participants reported that the pandemic disrupted their transition of duties and packing up their office. These responses revealed that having closure at the home institution could have eased worries during faculty exits/transitions.

- a. “[COVID-19] [g]reatly impacted—I had to transition to remote-only work my very last month at [home institution] and was unable to transition all of my duties.” (Woman)
- b. “It made it difficult because I could not pack up my office at [home institution] or really end things- I just went home after Spring break and taught on line and never came back.” (Woman)

5. Inequity challenges emerged

Participants shared that the pandemic has impacted their promotion packet and the negotiation process for transitioning to the offering institution. These responses continue to highlight the nuanced experiences of the faculty transition experience.

- a. Remote teaching impacted tenure packet
“It has impacted my promotion packet and my plan of work. I had to transition from teaching in person to entirely online for the 2020/2021 academic year. It has been very challenging.” (Woman)
- b. Home institution’s inflexible response to transition timeline influenced Woman of Color Faculty decision to accept outside offer

“Actually, my dept. head and dean could've been more understanding about when I planned to submit my letter of resignation and assisted in allowing me to negotiate other terms of departure given the pandemic. I felt pressured to submit my letter of resignation despite communicating transparently with my dept. head that I was waiting until I received the final notification of my tenure & promotion at the new institution, which was delayed due to the pandemic. These are ways that [home institution] could've better assisted with my transition. I was discouraged to consider a leave of absence or something else that might have made me reconsider my decision.” (Black or African American Woman)

Recommendations

The survey responses were reported in the early days of COVID-19. This analysis is conducted with the understanding that these findings are based on the initial impact of COVID-19. This analysis revealed both new challenges and unmasked existing inequities in

the work environment. COACHE offers the following recommendations based on the findings above:

1. Create opportunities for new faculty to *connect* with campus and social communities. Solicit input from faculty candidates early in the recruiting and hiring processes on how they would like to build community at new institution. Recommend both formal professional networks and inform social groups.
2. Provide flexibility and *support* as faculty navigate family responsibilities during and post COVID-19. Include faculty voices in creating policies and practices around work-life balance.
3. Acknowledge and *address* the disparate negative impact that COVID-19 has on women faculty and Faculty of Color. Apply an intersectional and race-conscious mindset when developing policies and practices for [improving faculty culture and climate](#).
4. Provide flexibility and [support](#) during the transition process by practicing an ethic of care for faculty.