

Northwestern | ORGANIZATION OF WOMEN FACULTY

To: Provost Haggerty, Associate Provost for Faculty Sumitrajhit Dhar
From: Organization of Women Faculty
Re: Defining Faculty Productivity in a Global Pandemic
Date: February 7, 2021

We write with concerns about how faculty contributions are being assessed and discussed at Northwestern in this time of extraordinary pressures and shifting workloads. As you know, the pandemic has impacted Northwestern faculty in as many ways as there are faculty. Many types of labor that were already poorly compensated and inequitably distributed have become more time consuming. It is widely documented, for example, that the pandemic has created extra teaching, mentoring and service workloads. This increased workload has adversely impacted research programs and it has not been experienced equally by all faculty. Indeed some faculty have been in a position to adapt to new funding and research opportunities, and they have been extra research-productive. This group disproportionately includes faculty with fewer teaching and caregiving responsibilities. Other faculty with or without caregiving duties have had to postpone research trips or adapt to delayed access to labs or library materials. A subset of faculty—especially female faculty— have been managing increased workloads alongside unprecedented caregiving burdens at home.

Northwestern's leadership has taken steps to address some of the issues the OWF raised last year in its Call to Action, and we very much appreciate these efforts. Yet we remain concerned that pandemic-induced disparities are exacerbating and will continue to exacerbate inequities, with a disproportionate impact on women, minorities, and parents. And we see worrying signs that this concern has not yet been heard or factored in.

Indeed, at this time of year when faculty performance is evaluated, we see concerning signs of returning to "business as usual." We observe that leaders actively laud the extra effort of faculty in ways that fail to recognize that many faculty are simultaneously stepping up and falling behind. For example, at a recent Cancer Center Retreat, the Vice President for Research reported that proposal submissions at Northwestern had increased significantly during the pandemic, concluding that faculty were finding ways to be more productive during the pandemic. It was not until a faculty member on the call pointed out that faculty with extra caregiving responsibilities were being left behind that the VPR acknowledged that challenge.

In another sign of "business as usual," the vita supplement requirement for WCAS faculty ignores this year's unique circumstances. Faculty are being asked to report their accomplishments and contributions as if 2020 were a typical year, with no prompt to report how the pandemic has affected their work.

These recent observations raise concern that leaders do not yet have a strategy to deal with the disparate impact of the pandemic on faculty performance. We know you share our goals of supporting Northwestern's faculty and reducing inequities. We understand that thinking through faculty salaries will be uniquely challenging this year

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due to the issues we highlight, and in the wake of multiple years of negligible salary pools for raises. We nonetheless believe it is time to take bold steps to address pandemic related disparities. A failure to do so will affect faculty career trajectories, research programs and salaries for years to come.

We ask that Deans and all upper-level leaders across the University be urgently tasked with taking a holistic and equity-centered approach to discussing and assessing faculty labor and contributions to the University in this unusual year. Indeed a bold step would be to *not* proceed with the usual focus on scholarly productivity and standard assessment practices, but rather to adopt an institutional equity approach that recognizes that some faculty were able to focus on research productivity in 2020 while others were not, and that caregivers remain highly burdened.

In addition, the OWF asks that the University and its constituent schools implement the following action items:

- Create a streamlined way to collect information about pandemic related work impacts from all faculty members as part of the salary review process for 2020. This approach should collect productivity information (which, given publication timelines, probably reflects pre-pandemic accomplishments) and information about how the pandemic has shifted faculty workloads, impacted scholarly or creative work, and the time available for that work. This information should be taken into account in setting salaries for 2021-22.
- Pay extra attention to how the pandemic in combination with recent salary-pool freezes have disrupted normal recognition processes, including retention and the recognition of career achievements. In other words, a focus on equity might involve a multi-year look at how past salary freezes have already impacted salary equity.
- Design a multi-year process for identifying and addressing the continuing effects of the pandemic on traditional measures of productivity. The consequences of COVID-related research interruptions will be felt for years to come, and must be documented for years to come. We need to also be adjusting tenure and promotion processes to avoid pandemic-induced long-term salary suppression.

We enthusiastically support your intended focus on career recovery. We are asking that you also adjust this year's approach to collecting and digesting information on faculty efforts in 2020, so that those most impacted by the pandemic are not further disadvantaged.

Thank you for your continued efforts and collaboration on these important issues.