

Northwestern | ORGANIZATION OF WOMEN FACULTY

Dear President Schill and Mr. Barris,

October 1, 2022

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The [Organization of Women Faculty](#) (OWF) is excited to welcome you to your new leadership positions at Northwestern. We would like to meet with you this fall to discuss the matters we raise in this letter.

The OWF is a grassroots advocacy organization that is responsible for many of the advances that have helped women faculty at Northwestern. Our membership includes all full-time tenure line and non-tenure eligible women faculty on the Evanston/Chicago and Qatar campuses, except for those in the Feinberg School of Medicine. Feinberg has its own [Women Faculty Organization](#), with which we collaborate. Our ongoing [initiatives](#) include calling for the administration's attention to pay equity, the need for expanding support for parental leave and child care, addressing the concerns of women faculty during the pandemic, and ensuring that the pandemic does not undermine progress towards gender equity within the University.

We are pleased to see inclusion prioritized in President Schill's welcome message to the Northwestern community. We look forward to working together, as President Schill succinctly put it, to "enhance diversity in all of its forms and to foster a sense of belonging and respect." In that spirit, and in this moment of leadership transition, we wish to start a new conversation about advancements for women faculty. In Spring 2022 we solicited feedback from our membership, which suggested there is much to be done. In this letter we identify areas of concern and we offer concrete suggestions that can aid your work to take Northwestern to the next level, and that can be part of an ongoing collaboration for positive change.

Double whammy: a Northwestern financial crisis followed by a global pandemic

The COVID pandemic and the social upheaval triggered by George Floyd's murder created many leadership challenges in our community. Faculty stepped up to meet the needs of students even when it meant putting research and other priorities on hold, even as our own health, childcare, and eldercare situations stretched many of us to our limit. We were patient as University leaders made decisions in a context of great uncertainty.

When the pandemic hit, Northwestern had already been in austerity mode for two years because of financial mismanagement, over-building, and overspending. Northwestern's credit rating dropped. Most departments and schools were required to make painful budget cuts in AY 2018-2019. On the eve of the pandemic, salaries had been modestly rising at rates that barely, if at all, matched [inflation](#). Major merit achievements that would normally have been rewarded financially did not necessarily lead to salary increases. Faculty hiring and retention efforts were limited. Then by late 2019, we received the good news that these extreme measures had led to an easing of the financial crisis, and we were looking forward to the resumption of a more normal state of affairs.

Then the pandemic arrived, and the University's response was to safeguard the budget rather than to draw on the endowment to preserve the University's human resources. This response led to furloughing and firing staff, freezing salaries, and seizing faculty retirement benefits, all while asking faculty and the scaled-back staff to address the exigencies of the pandemic with more (and often uncompensated) work. We did not immediately protest. In fact, faculty and staff demonstrated extraordinary commitment to the University by stepping up quickly to move teaching and research activities online, to support our students within and outside the classroom as their own challenges and needs increased, and to endure a benefits reduction that we were told would limit staff layoffs.

By December 2020, the University reported a budget surplus, which surprised us. The stock market also boomed, resulting in a 7% growth in the endowment in fiscal year 2020, and 37% growth in fiscal year 2021. The University's finances emerged from the pandemic stronger, healthy, and thriving. But this seemed to come at the expense of the wellbeing of faculty, staff, and students who emerged fatigued, underpaid, and unwell. The University remained in austerity mode with salary increases that did not keep up with inflation, and budgetary approaches that hurt hiring and retention.

At the beginning of fiscal year 2021, Provost Kathleen Hagerty announced the following measures as an initial return to normalcy and an attempt to recoup pandemic losses:

- Addressing the decline in faculty salaries by growing the salary pool. The plan was a 6% increase in the faculty salary pool over two years.
- We were told that tax rules made refunding the seized benefits very complicated. We were given a small "bonus" as a thanks for our hard work, but these taxable funds did not make up for the retirement funds that were seized.
- Ongoing efforts and policy changes were being made to fill the unprecedented, yet self-inflicted, staff vacancies.

The Faculty Senate's [May 12, 2021 query](#) as to why the pandemic was exceptional enough to require a suspension of faculty benefits but was not considered a "once in a century" event that would merit a special draw from the endowment has gone unanswered.

As we enter the fourth academic year affected by the pandemic, the University's return to financial health has barely, if at all, translated into the resumption of normal salary, hiring, and staffing levels. A real decline in faculty and staff salaries continues, and recruitment efforts for new faculty and staff are hampered by below-market rate salaries. All of this translates into a reality in which faculty are spending time and energy doing the work of staff who are no longer there to support research and teaching efforts. OWF's Spring 2020 and Spring 2022 faculty surveys show faculty are deferring new and ambitious research and pedagogy efforts because of a lack of support. Faculty are also directly and indirectly burdened by an underinvestment in Northwestern's mental health and accessibility support systems for students. Research has shown that these burdens are typically not felt equally by all faculty, and tend to exacerbate many existing gender, racial, and status inequities.

Meanwhile, the endowment has grown significantly, and the university is poised to invest a significant amount in yet another round of upgrades to sports facilities. Although current inflationary conditions raise fears of loss of endowment revenue, we question whether the 40% increase in the endowment over the last two years will be eaten away completely by inflation. We further note that while faculty raises have not kept pace with inflation, administration salaries have increased above the rate of inflation. The University and top-level administrators may have recovered from years of austerity and the pandemic, but the faculty and staff are still living amid a long chain of losses that affect us professionally and personally every day.

The message that University leadership actions and words have conveyed

Faculty are grateful for the steps the administration took to help the wider community stay safe during the pandemic. Provost Hagerty has been extraordinarily responsive to the [OWF's Fall 2020 Call for Action](#). Communication about needed assistance improved as the pandemic unfolded. The Provost's Faculty Pandemic Impact Response Task Force played a critical role in thinking ahead to avoid even greater future losses.

Yet faculty feel a serious gap between the stated commitment of the University to research and teaching, and the actions and intentions toward growing the endowment and the pattern of quite [lavish investments in athletic facilities](#). While the Provost has introduced concrete steps to address the problems we have raised, we also learned that there is a limit to what can be done given the many deferred maintenance and construction projects that must come from the operating budget. We are concerned that there seems to be no plan to deal with the exceptional situations imposed on faculty, produced first by the University's self-created financial crisis, then by the COVID-19 pandemic, and now because of numerous building and maintenance projects that are taking priority.

It is time to reassess and course correct

The President and the Board of Trustees together set financial priorities and steer fundraising to where investments are most needed. We are asking for a serious reassessment of Northwestern's goals and priorities. It is important that appropriate funding is directed to empowering faculty to do our best teaching and research in an environment that also prioritizes our wellbeing and signals respect from the Board of Trustees and the Central Administration.

Our concrete suggestions include the following:

- A clear statement of academic priorities that is backed with resources to support faculty and staff in their teaching and research.
- A special draw from the endowment so that necessary infrastructure maintenance and ongoing building project expenses do not compete with resources needed to support the University's academic mission and faculty salaries.
- Creation of a special salary pool to remediate salary inequalities, especially given the extra student and familial caregiving that fell disproportionately on women faculty, international faculty, and faculty of color during the pandemic.

- A greater effort to ensure that spending on sports facilities is dual use. On-site childcare would provide much-needed relief to many faculty and staff. The redevelopment of Ryan Field provides an opportunity to remediate this omission by creating a [childcare facility in the new stadium](#).

We also ask to begin a conversation between faculty and the President and Board of Trustees chair through the following methods:

- A listening tour by the President and Board of Trustees Chair to meet with faculty to learn about concerns, priorities and potential investments.
- A new faculty survey that includes consulting faculty about areas of existing under-investment and that sufficiently differentiates the wide range of faculty experiences and needs so that the University may create more nuanced ways to empower all of us.
- A resumption of the 2016 Provost's Pay-Equity study that, this time, also investigates the over-time growth rates of faculty pay at Northwestern by gender.
- A move beyond aggregate assessments wherein the salaries of male-dominated disciplines (economics, medicine, business, law) are presumed to imply that Northwestern salaries are competitive. We need a by-discipline study and report of NU salaries compared with peer institutions.

Thank you in advance for your attention to these matters. Please let us know when you are available to meet with our Steering Committee to discuss these ideas further. We also invite you to address the Organization of Women Faculty directly in an event that we can help coordinate.

Sincerely,

Co-Chairs of OWF: Karen J. Alter, Yarrow Axford, Leslie Harris, Lisa M. Del Torto

Steering Committee of OWF: Megan Bang, Katharine Breen, Stephanie Edgerly, Laurel Harbridge-Yong, Angela Y. Lee, Janice Mejia, Ann Shola Orloff, Ursula Porod, Deborah Tuerkheimer, Doreen Weisenhaus
And 191 additional women faculty