

"I Know My Problems Aren't as Serious": Faculty Stress and Inequity in Higher Education pre-and during Covid-19

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Faculty Overload:

- Faculty experience “triathlete stress” and burnout (Flaherty 2018, 2020). Expectations include:
 - Active research programs
 - Robust teaching portfolios
 - Institutional and disciplinary service
- The Covid-19 pandemic has increased faculty stress.
 - Stay at home order, remote instruction, caregiving, impact on communities.
- Stress and burnout before and during the pandemic falls inequitably.

Theoretical framework & Background:

- Intersectionality: interlocking categories of oppression by gender, race, class, and other identities shapes experiences (e.g., Walkerson 2017).
- Psychosocial stress and its implications for wellbeing.
- Stress in higher ed is disproportionately experienced by women faculty and faculty of color.
- Higher education institutions reflect/reproduce larger sociocultural and political economic inequities (Graham, Lynn, and McCloud 2020; Patton and Njoku 2019).

Data:

- Two AJCU universities, mission-focused
- **Iñigo University, 2016-present**
 - 77 interviews (56 women, 21 men)
 - 2 focus groups (11 women)
 - 40 faculty CVs
 - 20 faculty promotion statements from successful tenure or promotion files
 - 27 faculty reflections on the impacts of COVID-19 (21 women, 6 men)
- **San Mateo University (comparator), 2018-2019**
 - 6 interviews with women faculty and/or faculty of color

Findings: Iñigo Pre-Pandemic

Inundation with institutional asks + faculty workload

- “I struggled to get through last year... I had high cholesterol, couldn’t sleep at night, stressed out ... I'm here because I don't wanna move again. I love the city and I wanna stay here. I'm building a program that I'm passionate about, doing work that I have the freedom to do, and I do appreciate that. There are some good things here, but I have no time to develop a community. I have no time to develop my scholarship. I have no time to become a better teacher, so I'm just getting by at this point. My father worked in a warehouse his whole life, and he said, ‘Go to college, so you don't have to work in a warehouse.’ I work in a warehouse. That's the way I feel.” *(Associate professor/man of color)*

Findings: Iñigo Pre-Pandemic

Inundation with institutional asks + faculty workload

- “I have this feeling of being under a constant barrage of demands. It is dying a slow death, like in that PACMAN video game, where they chase you around and take bites out of you.... I love my job. I genuinely do. I think everyone who knows me, my students and my friends, will say that I take great joy and delight. It’s a deep heart commitment to me to do what I do... [But] I feel like, in light of the conference cycle and APR cycle, now I’m behind.” *(Associate professor/white woman)*

Findings: Iñigo Pre-Pandemic

Inequitable institutional asks

- “... A desire to be a part of a community. That’s something that I’ve been hungry for from the time that I started here, and ... then finding all of these barriers... and then thinking it’s gonna happen within faculty of color, and meeting with [other] faculty of color, but... we didn’t have the capacity to meet regularly to talk with one another about these types of things without it causing harm in other areas of our life where we’re being spread so thin... It made me even more depressed.” (*Associate professor/woman of color*)

Findings: Iñigo Pre-Pandemic

Inequitable Institutional Asks

- “I feel like I'm very supportive of students, but I also set really clear boundaries. There are some students who feel like they should be able to have access to me whenever they want and I don't—first of all, I'm just too busy. I have my research and other things... I think certain demographics get over-asked... I think there's some of my male colleagues in particular who are able to... stay on the periphery so they're not really looked to for it. They are able to skate, skirt it a little... Women and FOC get over-asked. And are less popular if they say no... There's a lot of people here probably not very happy with me 'cause I say no a lot... I've almost got this vibe like, well then, why do we have a faculty of color? We need somebody who's gonna say yes all the time.” *(Associate professor/woman of color)*

Findings: San Mateo University Pre-Pandemic

Inundation with institutional asks + faculty workload

- “A colleague said to me once, because I told them I was starting to feel very stressed and not happy coming to work, he was like, ‘Why are you chairing three department meetings?!?’ or something like that... With hindsight... and just the workload, I probably shouldn’t’ve been doing it, but whatever noise I made about trying to have them find someone else didn’t work.”
(Associate professor/woman of color)

Findings: San Mateo University Pre-Pandemic

Inequitable institutional asks

- “The one thing is there are real costs for frustration [with the institution]. Over the years, I've been curious about learning that certain people who we know around at some point were really active and involved and did all these things and now are barely existent... We are not good at recognizing when people do things... we're expecting all these things from certain people, and not even—also, they are not acknowledging that you're doing five times as much as someone else.” (Associate professor/white woman)

Findings: Iñigo Covid-19 Reflections

Balancing academic work with disproportionate household/childcare labor

- “All the time I have to work, which is very limited due to having to provide childcare and education for a young child who had school and summer camps cancelled, is put towards teaching. Then service according only to approaching urgency due to deadlines. Research is not happening at all. This is not how my time was allocated prior to COVID. I had much more time for research... And I spent more time on service... My family is suffering and I am also suffering. This is not sustainable and I don’t know how long it will be possible to continue. I have considered leaving higher ed but I... cannot.”
(Associate professor/white woman)

Findings: Iñigo Covid-19 Reflections

Balancing academic work with disproportionate household/childcare labor

- “Although I have been making some progress in all of these areas [scholarship, teaching, and service], it is much slower than I would like and finding time to work productively is a struggle. My husband and I are both working from home and I am home schooling [two children] ... As a result, I am operating with about 10-15% of my normal productive time. So, to answer the question, I am struggling to get anything done professionally.”
(Professor/white woman)

Findings: Iñigo Covid-19 Reflections

Personal life collapses into professional life

- “I feel like I am literally working or dreaming work around the clock. I feel like I am in a permanent soundless Zoom bubble... I’m facing the blur we all face with the collapse of private/professional space. It’s one that happens already Pre-COVID with academics, but it’s definitely worse now... Colleagues have all frequently and repeatedly raised the challenges of faculty dealing with childcare issues and I ... see how challenging it is. However there has been no verbal acknowledgement from leaders or colleagues that SOME of us don’t have children, and still face challenges in navigating work/life balances; still have rights to have a weekend; still have families/friends or relationships that are of equal value ... Some of us live alone. It feels incredibly heteronormative.” *(Professor/white woman)*

Discussion:

- Faculty experience sustained stress and lack of well-being pre-Covid.
 - Greater stress for women and faculty of color as a result of inequitable asks and bias.
- The pandemic exacerbates faculty's experienced stress.
 - Research shows increased caregiving burden disproportionately felt by women.
 - Research shows there have been fewer article submissions and less conventional scholarship done by women.
 - Research shows communities of color facing multiple challenges.
 - How will institutions respond?
- Institutions are at risk currently re: enrollment, budget shortfalls, difficulty adapting to the demands of the 21st century.
 - Perception (often shared by faculty) that the problems experienced tenured/tenure track faculty are "not as serious" in a climate of scarcity, amidst a pandemic.

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