

FORUM

Pandemic Panic on the Tenure Track: Why Early Career Scholars Need Transformative Support After COVID-19

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doi:10.1093/ccc/tcab013

A quick look at Twitter is enough to fray my nerves these days. Peppered between joyful announcements of promotions, book contracts, and published articles are daily reminders of the pandemic's unequal impacts. At one extreme, there is the productive-in-the-pandemic bunch. Somehow, these scholars have been able to keep up the pace with their research—sure, they are probably tired and frustrated like the rest of us, but they are still conducting analyses, writing consistently, and submitting and publishing their work where it counts. Then, there are my people—the staying-afloat-during-the-pandemic bunch. Most of us quietly lurk and sometimes like, share here and there, and maybe occasionally mock the productive bunch just a little, mostly because we are envious. Pandemic-induced anxiety in academia is at an all-time high and there are reasons for some of us to panic. Overall, college enrollments in fall 2020 were down 2.2% (Causey et al., 2020), institutions announced massive furloughs (Whitford, 2020), and some colleges facing pandemic-era budget shortfalls closed permanently (Aspegren, 2021). As institutions respond to revenue losses, much of the burden has shifted to faculty who must adapt materials to new teaching modalities, cope with increased course capacities, and deal with restrictions on research funding and pauses on matching retirement contributions. The pressures of pandemic-era austerity measures come in addition to increased responsibilities at home caring for children, partners, and parents. In one faculty survey, 40% of respondents reported considering leaving their roles due to the impact of COVID-19, with early career academics being the most likely to consider leaving academia, at 48% (Flaherty, 2020). Why might this be? In this article I share some of my experiences as a woman, mother, first-generation academic, and early career scholar who has been a tenure-track assistant professor for two years. I provide a glimpse at the challenges specific to pandemic-era life for early career scholars on the tenure track like me, and consider some of the long-term

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implications of COVID-19 for the most vulnerable—particularly women, caregivers, and people of color.

When I earned my doctorate in 2018, I was one of the lucky few to secure a tenure-track job. Before COVID-19 the academic job market was an absolute mess and the pandemic will exacerbate the challenges of navigating a system that already makes it difficult to succeed. When classes shifted online in March 2020, it was incredibly labor intensive. Faculty were tasked with transferring materials online, altering assignments, and reconsidering evaluation criteria. The summer brought relief for some, but it quickly became clear that things would not return to normal in the fall. Like many academics, the summer is when I am able to make the most headway in my research and writing. In 2020, I planned to attend a research symposium in London, had booked a research trip to the UK, and was slated to present at a major conference in Australia—all of those trips were cancelled. Like many who conduct ethnographic work, I saw my research agenda crumble. I was due to return to London when two Latin American markets—central sites in my research—were set to close after years of community activism to keep them safe from demolition by commercial developers. The markets closed and many of my participants, facing unemployment and post-Brexit residency policies, left the UK. I lost touch with some participants as my fieldsite was literally bulldozed and I felt completely hopeless by the start of fall 2020, not having written a single word about what happened. Because the conference was moved online, I lost networking opportunities crucial for tenure-track faculty like me hoping to connect with collaborators, find venues to publish our work, and identify external reviewers. Life at home provided new challenges. My five year old began kindergarten remotely which required a great deal of my time and attention. Because my partner has a more traditional work schedule and we could no longer rely on family outside of our home to help, there was little reprieve. As I write this in early March 2021 I, like so many others, have been burning the candle at both ends for the better part of a year. The stories I hear from friends on the tenure track is much the same. Pandemic conditions have increased the burden on our teaching and care work responsibilities and, like most of our colleagues, we are exhausted. However, we face the additional pressures of doing what is necessary to achieve tenure. The impacts of the pandemic need to be accounted for in transformative ways if institutions are serious about retaining talented faculty in the long-term.

Many institutions have implemented short-term solutions to deal with increased teaching expectations and lost research time. A common fix is a tenure clock extension of one year. However, while these measures are well intentioned, as [Khamis-Dakwar and Hiller \(2020\)](#) argue, they likely exacerbate existing gender and racial inequalities. They point to the way pandemic conditions disproportionately disadvantage mothers and caregivers whose time and attention is stretched thin in the midst of lockdowns, school closures, and lack of access to support networks. While extending the clock helps address research gaps to some extent, it also prolongs promotion and pay increases and delays larger projects possible during sabbaticals.

Women and people of color, especially caregivers, will be more likely to accept these extensions as they are far more likely to have care work responsibilities either with their children, and/or parents and extended family. For example, as the daughter of immigrant parents who grew up in a working class, Portuguese-speaking home, I am often called on by family members to help navigate systems, secure appointments, and explain correspondence or processes. Unlike many of our peers, friends from similar backgrounds often bear more caregiving and support responsibility for parents, siblings, and even aunts, uncles, and cousins—many of whom work low wage, high contact jobs, such as those in retail and health care that put them at higher risk for contracting COVID-19. The consistent state of worry, constant checking in, and burden of securing ever-changing public health information or vaccine appointments all disproportionately impact women, caregivers, and people of color. I have heard some discussion about other measures that could help level the playing field during promotional reviews in the next few years, such as giving less weight to student evaluations and placing more emphasis on peer evaluations. I consider myself a good teacher, but if my promotion relies partly on how well I taught public speaking online in the middle of a pandemic with my kindergartner counting to 100 with her online class in the next room, I am not getting tenure. Overburdened friends, some of whom are moms and others whose families rely on them more than most, echo similar worries. In addition to the serious concern of the long-term implications of losing valuable research and writing time, there are worries about the undeniable impact of unprocessed grief and mourning, supporting children as they struggle to readjust and catch up when they return to school, and recovering from economic losses faced by many families.

It is clear that institutions must reevaluate criteria for assessing tenure-track faculty post-COVID-19 beyond short-term solutions like tenure clock extensions that, while well intentioned, do not fully address the impacts of the pandemic on early career faculty, particularly women, caregivers, and people of color. Placing further emphasis on teaching evaluations is also limiting when considering the immense challenges of pandemic era-teaching. Institutions will lose valuable faculty either by exodus or by ignoring the changes that are necessary in post-pandemic evaluation criteria. The reassessment of metrics that emphasize research productivity and serious consideration of the value of increased teaching, service, and care work are minimum requirements if institutions hope to avoid their own panics down the road.

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