

Reflection

Tenure track and COVID-19: Who bears the burden?

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Abstract

COVID-19 has impacted all of us, however, its impact has been problematic for tenure-track faculty members, especially those who are untenured. Through this reflection piece, we will highlight some of the main challenges of starting a job during the pandemic by female-identifying authors from a diverse range of higher education institutions in the U.S. In deconstructing our challenges, we will focus on the role of universities in supporting faculty navigate their tenure expectations. We will present this piece as a U.S. based reflection with implications for educational institutions globally.

Keywords: *social work, academia, tenure-track, higher education, COVID-19*

Early March 2020 brought about challenges and changes for everyone. On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020; Rochester Regional Health, 2020). A group that was impacted by the pandemic were tenure-track faculty members, especially those who may be in caregiving roles and/or mothers (Deryugina, Shurchkov and Stearns, 2021; Oleschuk, 2020). Despite proactive steps to maintain momentum and productivity (Cronley and Ravi, 2021; Rai and Ravi, 2020), COVID-19 has substantially impacted the lives of junior faculty.

When academics begin their careers, often they are hired in a tenure-track line. Tenure-track professors are employed in a probationary capacity for up to seven years, within which they have to prove themselves; only thereafter will they be granted tenure. The primary purpose of the tenure-track is to advance academic freedom by offering permanency in employment (Drozdowski, 2021). A tenure-track position is also tied to a significant increase in salary and potential reallocation of time (American Association of University Professors, n.d.; Zackal, 2015). Depending on the stature of the school, R-1 (very high research activity), R-2 (high

research activity), or R-3 (moderate research activity), they can have distinctive expectations for tenure-earning faculty, ranging from the number of publications, service requirements, and teaching responsibilities among others (Weuste and Villa, 2015).

1. COVID-19 and tenure track

The authors' positionalities are important to state upfront as they shape their experiences as tenure-earning faculty at institutions of higher education. All authors are female-identifying, with AR being an immigrant woman of color with caregiving responsibilities for family members abroad and is currently a tenure-track faculty member at an R-2 institution. KR is a tenure track assistant professor at an R-1 institution and the mother of a six-year-old. HY is a mother of two living with a chronic illness on the tenure track at an R-2 institution. PB is a single, differently-abled immigrant woman of color and is on the tenure track at an R-1 institution.

Women and Black, Indigenous, Multiracial, and People of Color (BIMPOC) have traditionally faced disparities in academia, but COVID-19 further enhanced the challenges

faced by this group (Deryugina et al., 2021; Malisch et al., 2020). In some cases, the pivot to working from home has led to extended and uninterrupted time to work. While, this has been helpful for some (Medden, 2021), for women or those with caregiving responsibilities this shift has resulted in heightened distress due to the pandemic and expectations of being on the tenure clock (Shillington et al., 2020). For instance, KR and HY felt anxious that they would not meet the tenure guidelines due to sharing time between supervising virtual learning for their children and fulfilling academic demands. HY pushed the tenure clock further by delaying in-person research with women of color living with HIV due to their vulnerability to COVID-19.

Starting and continuing a tenure-earning position amidst a pandemic came with its own set of challenges, such as limited opportunities for research and collaboration and an increased sense of isolation, especially among unpartnered individuals. Scholars and practitioners have often talked about prioritizing self-care during this pandemic (Jones and Whittle, 2021). For untenured faculty, with limited support from institutions of higher education, this has become an alien concept and a luxury.

With several institutions fluctuating between online, hybrid, and in-person classes, the teaching preparation for junior faculty has sky-rocketed. Further, student evaluations (Medden, 2021) could have been negatively impacted by the anxiety students may be experiencing due to the pandemic and the new mode of instruction. Course preparation and recording online lectures can take anywhere between 5-8 hours a week per course. The preparation time is compounded for faculty teaching more than one course. *Who bears the burden of these expectations?*

Starting the 2021-2022 academic year feels different than last year. Last year, more grace was given regarding the impacts of COVID-19. During the academic year 2021-22 and with the availability of the vaccine and schools fully reopened, there appears to be less flexibility for the implications of COVID-19. Some children continue to be in and out of school, and authors (KR, HY) have had to adjust their schedules to continue digital learning often without warning. For example, KR has lost 80 work hours due to COVID-related school closures between the end of August and early October 2021. The pandemic impacted one of the author's (HY) children who have suffered the compounding stress of moving for their parent's new job while having little to no ability to say goodbye to friends and family or return for visits to their hometown. The stress of being unable to visit aging family abroad has consumed immigrant scholars like many others, due to travel and safety bans. It is difficult to find pockets of uninterrupted time and the mental space to focus on academic

writing. Yet, tenure track faculty are often under pressure to achieve tenure.

Additionally, classes are expected to be taught at full capacity, following COVID-related restrictions, as mask mandates have been removed or reduced, and some academic conferences only offered on-demand access rather than switching to a virtual format despite the raging Delta and omicron variant (Anthes, 2021; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). *Where do junior untenured faculty fit into this equation?* Presenting at these seminal social work conferences is another important aspect of the tenure expectations (Kelsky, 2020). Therefore, if tenure track faculty do not attend conferences physically to present their work, those presentations may not count towards tenure, depending on the university rules.

Several of the authors of this article, have their research grounded in community-based participatory (CBPR) approaches (Israel et al., 2013). *How exactly does one engage in CBPR in the absence of in-person engagement opportunities and data collection privileges?* While interested in collaboration, community organizations often do not have the capacity to engage in new projects. PB's funded project was delayed by six months due to competing community demands. This reduction in organizational capacity extends the timeline of community-engaged research. Working with organizations requires patience and mutual respect, given the competing and intersecting demands of the pandemic. However, not having an active research agenda or connections can very quickly impact the ability to publish, when publications, a major aspect of tenure, count as academic currency (Rai and Ravi, 2020).

2. Implications for Higher Education

The experiences stated above add to the discussion about the role of institutions of higher education. It is worth noting the support offered by some institutions, such as providing flexible teaching options and being invited to ongoing research projects as experienced by the authors of this reflection. Nevertheless, while many institutions have proposed to offer a year-long tenure-clock extension and encouraged faculty to submit COVID-19 impact statements (Medden, 2021; Shillington et al., 2020), less conversation has emerged around rethinking tenure track expectations. These extensions, while helpful, delay the opportunity for a salary increase, job security, and protected academic freedom. Moreover, 1-year extensions with limited regard for ongoing challenges experienced by mothers and those with caregiving responsibilities seem problematic.

Because pre-tenure faculty are new to academia, they are less likely to obtain large federally funded grants (Shillington et al., 2020). In this situation, junior faculty find themselves bearing the burden of conducting online research without participants having access to the internet, computers, tablets, etc. (Rai, Grossman and Perkins, 2020; Shillington et al., 2020). Institutionalizing rapid grants to support the work of junior faculty without them having to think about spending all of their startup funds on a single project could perhaps be an equitable solution in this instance. Alternatively, extending and allowing a more flexible time frame to spend startup funds could benefit junior faculty. Moreover, accepting other forms of evidence of the impact of research, such as the number of social media shares among scholars and community agencies, may be another way to think creatively about making tenure guidelines more equitable.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the review times for manuscripts, adversely impacting junior faculty (Ramos, 2021). Perhaps, dissemination through grey literature (e.g., blogs, agency reports, podcasts) and community presentations could be recognized in the context of COVID-19. Considering how CBPR has been substantially affected, evidence of research progress should be considered. Even though there has been some discussion around not taking student evaluations into account during COVID-19, it may be beneficial to rethink its weightage in the tenure review process.

3. Conclusion

The second year of the COVID-19 pandemic has cemented a new reality that has required a shift in many policies and procedures. The experience of starting a new job, quarantining, and moving to a new city is stressful and isolating. Given the complexity of these challenges, it is vital for institutions of higher education globally to reconsider and reevaluate the criteria used for assessing tenure-track expectations. Immediate solutions such as providing tenure track extensions are positive steps. However, there is still work that needs to be done. More flexibility is required to promote equity in the tenure review process that considers the impact of COVID-19 on teaching evaluations, research, and dissemination.

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