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Work-Life Imbalance in the Time of COVID-19

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Synopsis

Four women mathematicians at various stages of their careers at public liberal arts institutions share their struggles and challenges in their professional and personal lives during the pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic, inequity, women in mathematics, teaching.

Between February and October in 2020, nearly 2.2 million women left the workforce, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its gendered, unequal impacts [1]. Women of color and women with disabilities have been affected disproportionately [2]. This hard-to-swallow reality, unsurprisingly, widens the gender and racial gap in employment. During the pandemic, we, as four women mathematicians, have witnessed the ultimate dream of work-life balance vanish entirely.

All four of us are in teaching-focused institutions because teaching mathematics is our method of choice to make the world a fairer place. We love teaching and mentoring our students. We are energized by our interactions with them in the classroom. However, the pandemic has stripped much of the joy from teaching. The new modes of instruction we were forced to switch to have hindered our ability to build community in our classrooms and form our usual relationships with students.

In addition, such challenges as having to care for family members, losing loved ones, tending to the changing needs of our students, managing increasing demands for service at our institutions, and adapting continually to new regulations, new technologies, and the changing pandemic situation has had us struggling more than ever. Social and political unrest, and blatant racial injustice, combined with the pandemic, has left little room for respite, for all of us. As women mathematicians, we have been feeling we are fighting full force on so many fronts without adequate support.

What began as a response to an emergency situation in March 2020 has now become a year-long test of our stamina to persevere while everything around us is affected. We have all likely had times in our careers where our personal lives, such as caring for children or elderly parents or divorce, impacted our abilities to do our jobs as well as we would have liked. Whatever struggles we have had balancing our lives are heightened during the pandemic, however. Through our careers, various students have struggled with mental health issues or serious family crises and we felt like we could support those students as those situations arose. But this has been different. Now we all — faculty, staff, students, our families, and friends — are experiencing isolation, fear for loved ones, loss of loved ones, at the same time. The difficulties keep piling on, making it an untenable situation.

Spring Break 2020 was spent frantically planning and building our courses, attending cross-disciplinary technology workshops that often didn't address the challenges or the specific needs of math and science teaching, trying new software and technology and then immediately putting it to use. As mathematicians, so much of what we do in class or in office hours with students requires being able to draw diagrams and write down our mathematics. Funding was hard to come by to provide tools like tablets for faculty. Students often lacked more basic necessities such as computers and internet access.

This limited what could be done with students during online classes. Our inboxes and social media pages filled with tips for online teaching and lists of do's and don'ts for an equitable online learning experience. It was overwhelming, but we put our students first and did everything we could to design the best possible courses. We knew that what our students needed most was compassion. We stripped our courses of all the content that wasn't essential while fearing that we weren't teaching them enough to prepare them for the next course in the sequence.

Summer brought more course redesigning. Whether teaching online or in socially-distanced classrooms, we had to completely rethink the way we taught. We removed active learning from our courses and then tried to find ways to put it back subject to myriads of constraints. We redesigned our grading systems to try to be more flexible, knowing students would need flexibility. Everything we did increased our workload. We have been completely overwhelmed with doing what feels like the bare minimum to teach our courses in these impossible times. We spent many long hours preparing for the semester, but we could not prepare for the reality of teaching while our students and their families got sick, while our colleagues and friends were infected, while we feared for our safety and that of our communities.

Furthermore, our colleges and universities are experiencing the financial impacts of decreased enrollments and loss of revenue from students staying at home rather than in the dorms. Many high school graduating seniors chose a gap year or a year living at home and taking classes locally at a community college. Those in administrative positions such as Department Chair have had an increase in their usual duties, including many extra meetings, assisting faculty with pandemic teaching issues, changing faculty evaluation procedures, advocating for faculty, especially those in non-tenure track positions (who are majority women), helping with recruiting and retention efforts, and detailing strengths of our programs in response to possible institutional restructuring. We are accustomed to being asked to make do and do more with less, but the pandemic situation has reached a level that has pushed the limits of our resources.

The academic system is not set up to handle its total population dealing with a pandemic crisis and the impacts of that on both the physical and mental health of faculty, staff and students. Our semesters are intense 14-15

week periods of time that lack the flexibility for taking time off for health problems for both faculty and students. As the pandemic continues, more students are struggling with online learning, lack of typical college social interaction, and the loss and grief of loved ones. They are fighting to keep themselves organized and on pace with asynchronous parts of our courses. As faculty who care deeply about our students, the amount of time we have spent listening to and addressing student needs has greatly increased. Our administrations have asked us to try to keep students engaged and stay on top of the ones that start to drift away from participating in our courses. So we have become flexible with deadlines, we communicate more about where to find things and what is due and when, we have conversations during our synchronous times to check in on how they are doing, and we talk about feelings more in our mathematics classes than ever before.

After a year of this, students' ability to function at this level has deteriorated. But so has ours. We are used to working hard. We are used to always having work to do despite it being the weekend or evenings. An academic's job is never done. But we are also used to being well prepared to do our job and being able to control aspects of our courses. In these past months, however, that preparation and control have continually seemed out of our grasp.

We kept thinking this would be just a temporary crisis situation. That we could do anything needed for some short amount of time. But now we have passed the one year mark. March 2021 came and marked a year that went by quickly and slowly, both at the same time. A year since we have seen our loved ones. A year since we have been able to hang out with friends who we rely on to provide us with relaxation and breaks in our work. Our minds struggle to remember what day of the week it is. Much like the "baby brain" some of us felt after having children, we have what we now call "pandemic brain" [4]. As mathematicians we are used to being very detail-oriented and well-organized. However, we now find ourselves forgetting a meeting that occurs every week or having to set alarms to remind us to teach.

Women faculty with young children lost the childcare and in-person schooling that made working and parenting possible. And we know, the work of parenting falls disproportionately on women [3]. Our mathematical research and teaching require extended lengths of uninterrupted, focused time.

But such periods of calm focus seem to be no longer possible. We are living day to day, rushing from one fire to another, with our buckets running low.

We have all mourned the milestones that we would have celebrated with our children, such as recitals, sporting events, high school graduations, and heading to college. Those of us with college-age children feared for their exposure returning to campus. However, there were rare silver linings. In our children, we were able to see a reflection of our own students' experiences with learning during the pandemic. Recognizing our own children's challenges helped make us more compassionate to the needs of our students.

There is guilt for feeling overwhelmed when we have been privileged enough to have jobs throughout this pandemic, and for some of us, the ability to teach from the safety of our homes, unlike so many frontline essential workers. We have seen programs dissolved, nonpermanent faculty losing positions, low morale in departments, and faculty chairs have shouldered the added weight of feeling responsible for their faculty and staff as well as their students. So of course we understand that in some ways we have not suffered as much as others. But the need to keep pushing on and pushing through with no substantial break for this long with no foreseeable end to the pandemic has taken its toll.

However, we have had each other through this time and we are grateful. Meeting regularly as a group through an NSF-ADVANCE-sponsored Affinity Group¹ has given us a sense of community, one that the pandemic had taken away. As difficult as this time has been, a bright spot has been finding companionship and scholarly collaboration with this group of fellow women mathematicians through our Affinity group. We look forward to supporting each other in the future, as well.

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¹ ADVANCE Partnership: Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges Partnering and Liasing Across the Nation, NSF, Award Number: 1935916.

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Author bios:

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