



**THE OHIO STATE
UNIVERSITY**

THE WOMEN'S PLACE

Summary Report of Faculty & Staff COVID-19 Remote Work Experiences

Andreá N. Williams
Interim Director
The Women's Place

Rachel Bowen
Assistant Director
and Faculty Fellow
The Women's Place

July 2020

Overview

The Women's Place conducted a survey to assess the COVID-19 remote work experiences of faculty, staff, and graduate students in May 2020. The anonymous survey was designed in consultation with the [President and Provost's Council on Women](#) (PPCW) and Institutional Research and Planning to include questions about factors impacting employees' work, including caregiving responsibilities. It was available to respondents of any gender on all Ohio State campuses; participation was voluntary.

Respondents were recruited through direct and indirect contact. The survey was shared directly with The Women's Place mailing list and announced through the university newsletters *onCampus Today* and *OSU HealthBeat*. The Women's Place also requested that university leaders including chairs, deans, directors, and diversity advocates distribute it to their audiences.

The survey elicited responses from 642 faculty, 1,696 staff, and 255 graduate students. Each of the three groups received a version of the survey tailored to its population, with key questions repeated on all three. The survey collected general demographic information about respondents' gender, college/unit of employment or student enrollment, caregiving status, age, and whether or not they identified as persons of color.

Women were the primary respondents for the study, with women representing 69% of faculty, 85% of staff, and 71% of graduate students who offered feedback. This report distills key findings related to faculty and staff; graduate student responses will be addressed through a separate report.

Highlighted Results

- › Staff and faculty alike attested to the challenges of working from home while providing care for children, elders, or other individuals with special needs. Among staff, **20%** said that caregiving responsibilities frequently or very frequently impacted their work.
- › Staff women estimated that they perform **66%** of household caregiving on average. By contrast, male staff estimate that they perform **45%**. Numbers among faculty respondents were similar.
- › Faculty women of color estimated that they perform **69%** of household caregiving on average, a higher rate compared to other women performing **62%** of caregiving.
- › Fifty-eight percent of faculty felt that their workload increased during the telework period, spending an average of **43%** of their time on teaching and student support. By comparison, they focused on research only **17%** of the time.
- › **Seventy-one percent** of faculty replied that they had less time for research and creative expression during the pandemic.
- › Faculty were twice as likely as staff to already have been in the habit of working from home before COVID-19 closures, and **79%** of faculty would like the option to continue working remotely.
- › Many staff were working remotely for the first time (**42%**), but as many as **87%** would like the option to continue to work from home when the university returns to full operationality.
- › **Fifty-four percent** of staff respondents expressed concerns about job security.

- › Strikingly, by mid-May 2020, about 9-10 weeks into the stay-at-home period, most respondents said that they had not been impacted by personal illness or loss and grief. Yet they remained concerned about their health and the well-being of loved ones.

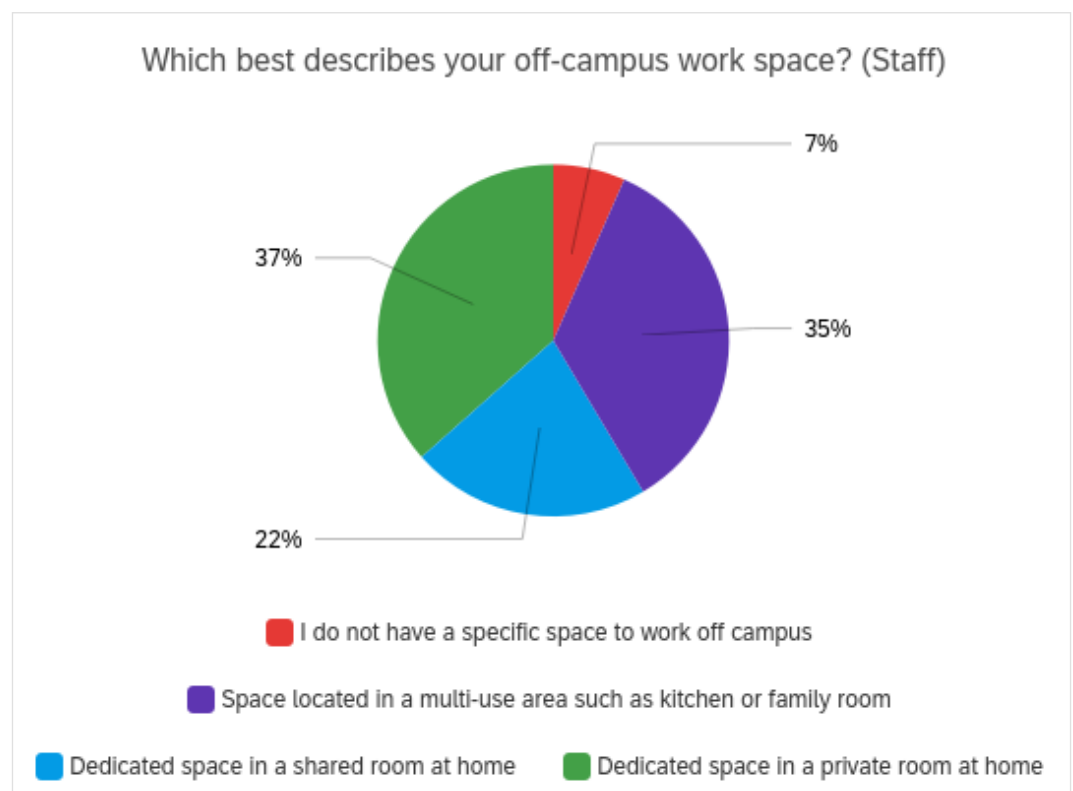
The remainder of the report is divided into four parts. The first part summarizes participants' descriptions of their telework environments, including the physical spaces, living conditions, and digital contexts in which they performed their work away from campus. Section two describes how COVID-19 and the telework period is impacting employees' time, focus, and productivity. Section three examines people's concerns about their work performance, evaluation, and job security during the campus disruptions and unpredictability of the ongoing pandemic. The fourth section reflects employees' overall telework experiences, based largely on respondents' discursive feedback. This fourth section aims to enable The Women's Place and other campus units to identify best practices for remote work and take steps in addressing employee concerns, especially if many people will continue to work remotely full-time or part-time in autumn 2020.

PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL TELEWORK ENVIRONMENTS

During the remote work period, most Ohio State staff, faculty and students have performed their ordinary work in a range of physical environments while, for some, being away from campus halted important aspects of their work. People who expressed satisfaction with working from home were more likely to have access to appropriate workspace, stable internet, relative quietude, and technological support from the university.

The majority of employees lived in shared households rather than alone during the period, which often caused demands on space and internet speed for multiple devices. Forty-three percent of faculty maintain a dedicated private space at home for completing their work; at the opposite extreme, a professor who lacked adequate home space explained,

"I don't have a private work space, and I don't have privacy in general. If I need to make a phone call, I have to go to my car. My bedroom is a dead cell zone, and the only privacy I can have is in my car." Thirty-seven percent of staff had a dedicated private room in which to work, with nearly as many (35%) working from multi-use areas such as a kitchen or family room. These details are worth noting because people working from shared spaces may

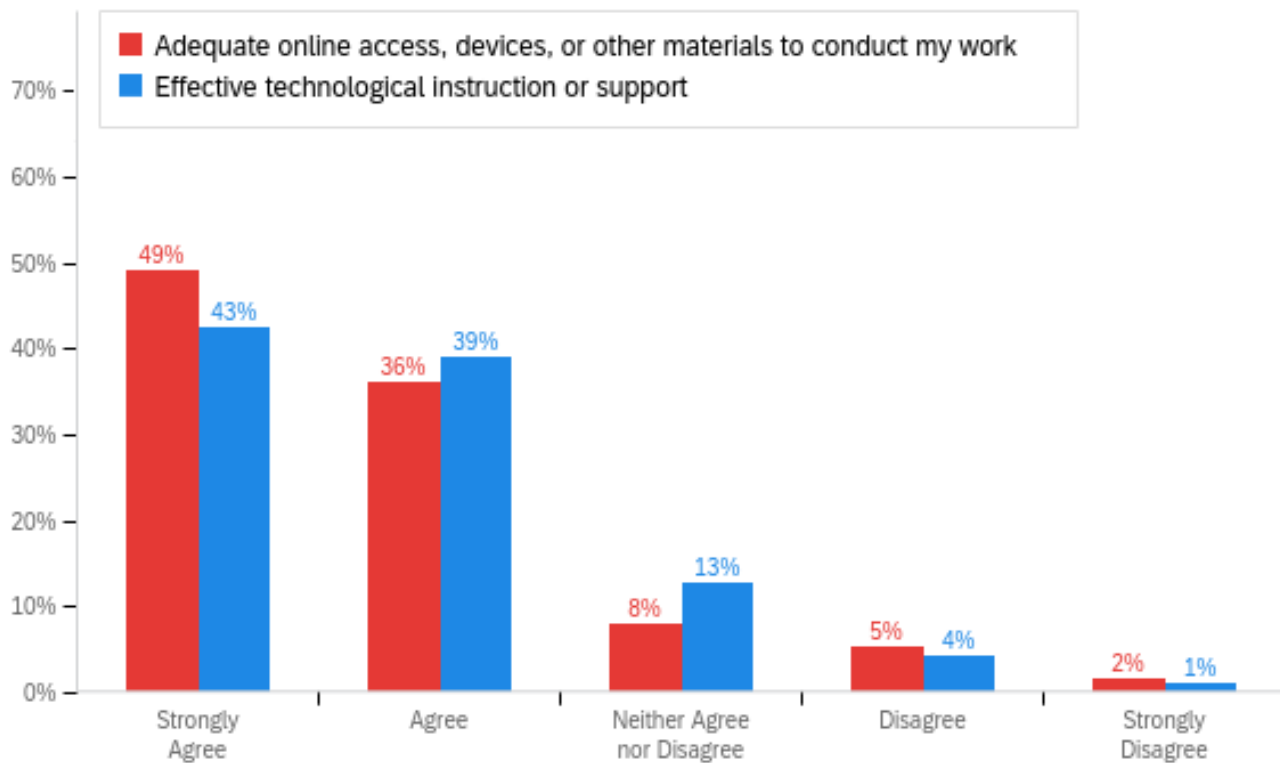


be prone to encounter more or longer disruptions from others within their households, though fewer from remote colleagues. Twenty-one percent of staff said that their living environment occasionally impacted their work. For staff who lived alone, 32% said that discomfort with limited social interaction frequently or very frequently impacted their work. For this group of solo dwellers, concern about limited interaction was ranked above worries over illness, loss, and finances as possibly interfering with work.

Overall, people appreciated the experience of working remotely, despite COVID-19 circumstances that caused this transition and adjustments needed to arrange new working conditions. In particular, staff members who felt minoritized within their offices on campus mentioned that working from home removed them physically from some of the stigma or isolation of their usual work environment. As one staff member replied, *“I have not been forced to engage with racist, sexist, and ageist people in my College as frequently as I had when on campus. It has been refreshing not to have to explain diversity, equity, and inclusion to people all the time.”*

Staff and faculty agreed or strongly agreed that they received several benefits or supports from Ohio State that helped them to work at home successfully, including adequate devices or online access, technological instruction, or technological support. In addition, the majority of employees across categories agreed that their department chair or unit head provided clear work expectations or work-life flexibility for performing their work.

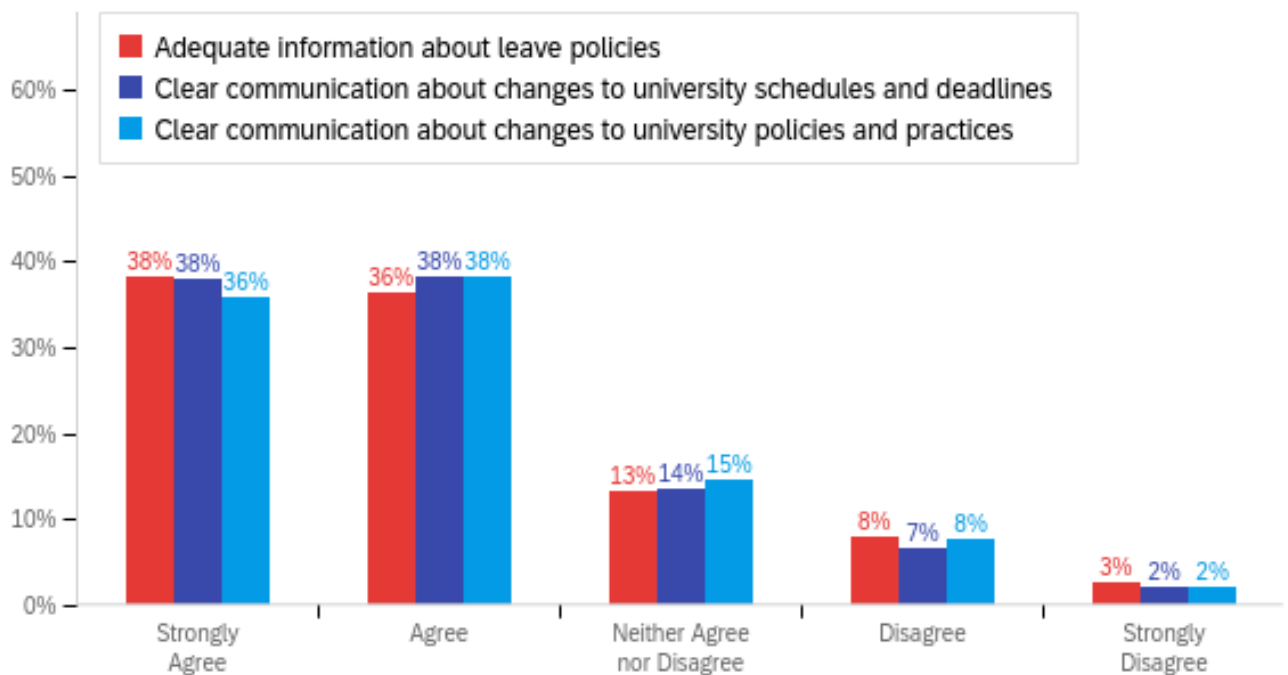
Forms of Support Received from Ohio State (Staff)



Meanwhile, 11% of staff felt they lacked clear communication about leave policies and other changes to university policies and practices during the transitional period. Others felt that even with the disaster leave and CARES act, their needs for leave time may be inadequately covered.

- › *“I didn’t consider taking any leave time because my coworkers in the same situation didn’t and I did not want to cause others to look at me unfavorably, but looking back it would have probably been a positive thing to take a couple weeks of leave to focus on my kids and get into a new home routine.” (Staff)*
- › *“My daughter is a single parent nurse [...] and my grandson is with me fulltime. I don’t like that the FMLA-Covid leave is only for a SON or DAUGHTER, but I know that is a federal rule.” (Staff)*
- › *“I wish the university had done a better job communicating their expectations for various units. The communication about disaster leave has also been lacking and confusing.” (Staff)*

Forms of Support from Ohio State (Staff)



TIME, FOCUS AND PRODUCTIVITY

During the work-at-home period, many people expressed appreciation for improvements in their daily life, including not needing to commute, being able to prepare and eat a healthy lunch, and having flexibility to take breaks when needed. These observations overlap with employees’ high interest in having the option to continue working from home.

- › *“[N]ot having to deal with the stress of commuting to and from work, having the flexibility during my work day to have a break away from work. I have been able to exercise more which has helped my mental health tremendously.” (Staff)*
- › *“The flexibility to take a longer lunch break and work later into the evening has been a positive experience.” (Faculty)*
- › *“The pace of the day remains busy, but in a way that allows for more flexibility. By staying at home, I can maximize my productivity by getting up a few hours before my children and, instead of getting all of us*

ready for a day away from home, I can focus in and get hours of meaningful work time that I did not have when I was commuting into work. I am also able to exercise more regularly and take mindfulness breaks throughout the day.” (Faculty)

However, the ability to shift one’s hours varied by unit, with many employees continuing, by habit or requirement, to work normal business hours. Others found that flexibility made it difficult to maintain work-life balance. Having little or no separation between work and home meant that both could intrude on the other at any time.

- › *“Balancing work and life. I sometimes work longer hours because the work is at my dining room table. Also, though we’ve been told to take care of ourselves and to take time to make sure we are okay, the workload hasn’t decreased; it’s increased. Therefore, it’s difficult to feel like I can truly take care without penalty. And with the budget cuts, there’s more worry about productivity.” (Staff)*
- › *“Not in my direct report, but I do worry that this window into our personal lives will negatively affect perceptions. I often have little zoom bombers behind me because of where I’ve had to set up my office. Or do we need to dress up for zoom meetings? Somedays it’s all I can do to put a sweatshirt on, start my kids’ schooling and log on to a meeting in the morning! I also worry about work-life balance. There’s a blurring of time on/time off when your office is in your dining room.” (Staff)*

Caregivers for preschool children were more likely than any other group to express concern about how their performance will be evaluated. Among faculty respondents, caregiving for preschool and primary school children was a significant factor that increased concern about performance evaluation related to research. For parents of preschool children, managing work and caregiving during COVID-19 exacerbated the longstanding challenges that working parents—and particularly working mothers—face with limited childcare options, even under normal circumstances:

- › *“It is impossible to work and work well while trying to care for a small child. I am not different than any other mother of small children in this way, but there has been nothing explicit about support or help with care. I am primary for my child. I still work 8 hours a day and am now also parenting, teaching, and developing my child for 12 hours a day, which means my work slides in around care for my child in pockets of 15 mins to 1 hour (sometimes I get a solid 2 hours), and continues long into the night sometimes. My supervisor has not made any statement about this choppy work schedule, but neither have I gotten any support from the University, strategies, official statements of parental expectations, etc. And I’m burning out fast.” (Staff)*
- › *“Trying to do two jobs at once -- managing my work and taking care of two small children, who require much of my time and attention. I’ve never been more exhausted in my life. Lack of clear expectations from my supervisor, and a fear of being honest about the challenges I’m experiencing at home.” (Staff)*

Some people lauded their individual supervisors for being flexible and understanding. Others felt that their supervisors’ attitudes and behaviors made the situation harder:

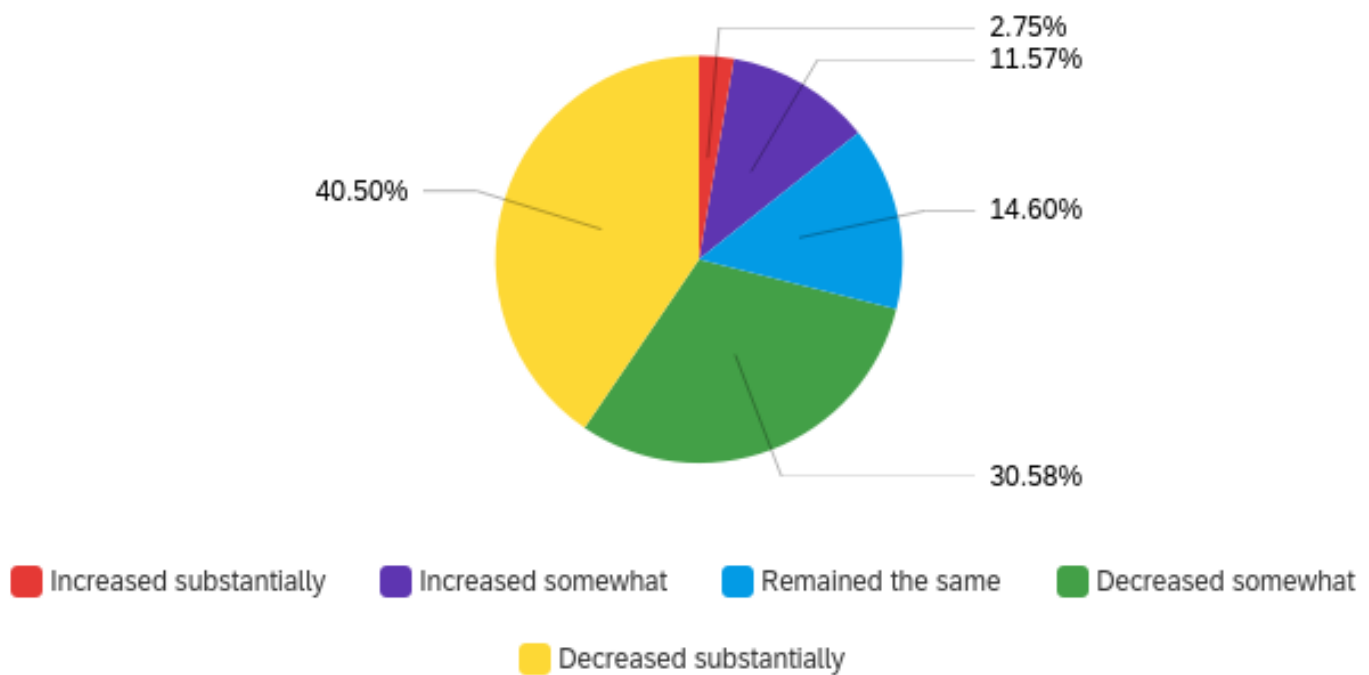
- › *“Senior Leadership in our department don’t have children which seems to lessen their understanding of what is able to be done during the workday. This has led to having to work after my children are in bed to meet deadlines. Also, there are no boundaries right now so supervisors are calling during times they typically wouldn’t when we are in normal working conditions. I fear that if I can’t get to the phone because I am taking care of my young children then it will reflect poorly on my ability to do my work.” (Staff)*
- › *“Lack of understanding on the part of my supervisor of good work life balance. Lack of understanding about what it is like to have kids out of school and have two working adults in the household with no dedi-*

cated work spaces. Lack of understanding of the volume of zoom meetings for a family of four collectively for both work and school.” (Staff)

Half of staff respondents indicated that they were a caregiver for a minor child, elder, or someone with special needs, with 16% caring for pre-schoolers. Meanwhile, though not numerically reflected in the survey as a special population, parents of college students indicated that concerns about their children’s disrupted school years impacted their work, especially for parents whose children moved home from out-of-state colleges or universities.

Faculty were more likely than staff to report that their workload had increased after the university initiated widespread telework. Fifty-eight percent of faculty reported that their workload had increased somewhat or substantially, with only 10% saying that their workload had decreased. Likewise, faculty overwhelmingly reported that their time for research or creative expression had decreased.

Faculty Time for Research/Creative Expression during Stay-at-Home Period



Having less research time was frequently tied to the experience of caregiving while working, as in the following examples:

- › *“I have heard from lots of colleagues (typically tenured and not caring for children) about how much more research they are accomplishing now or how much time they have to write grants. My research depends on a [...] lab, so no research is being conducted and ongoing studies were shut down. It is also extremely difficult to write, particularly grants, while caring for young children or having constant background noise.” (Faculty)*
- › *“Balancing home schooling 3 elementary school age children while trying to work. The rapid transition to online teaching doubled my usual teaching work time/load during this time. My research work has been stagnant for the past 3 months.” (Faculty)*

Yet even employees who were not caregivers attested to additional household and professional demands of the stay-at-home period. Sixty-two percent of faculty with no minor children or caregiving responsibilities note that their research time declined between March and May 2020. One faculty member felt a sense of unfairness *“that those of us who do not have children should have to take on more responsibilities (e.g., service) as if not having kids means we have the time, capacity, and/or obligation to work more hours.”* In general, regardless of caregiving status, one-third of faculty felt that the pace of their work suffered during COVID-19.

CONCERNS ABOUT WORK EVALUATION AND JOB SECURITY

COVID-19 has spurred national economic downturns, slowing or suspending business in many sectors. Employees at Ohio State responded to these economic trends with particular concerns about the fate of higher education, Ohio State’s budget, and the possibility of job loss at the university.

Staff in general expressed concerns about their job security, with 54% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “I am concerned about my job security.” Respondents expressed these concerns to similar degrees across colleges and divisions. Staff on regional campuses and the Columbus campus expressed similar levels of concern about job security (56% of regional campus respondents and 54% of Columbus campus respondents).¹ Yet staff respondents who identify as people of color were nearly twice as likely to strongly agree that they are concerned about their job security than respondents who do not identify as people of color. By contrast, there was no statistically significant relationship between staff respondents who identified as male and those who identified as female, nor between different age ranges.²

Staff who expressed less concern about their job security were also more likely to express that they had access to mentoring, were able to complete their work at the same pace and quality as usual, and found communications from university leadership to be clear. Similar patterns can be seen among faculty. Those who reported having access to mentoring, a sense of connection to their team, and continued ability to collaborate were less likely to report having concerns about their job security. It is not clear whether this overlaps with the negative correlation between completing work at the same pace and quality and fear of job security.

A smaller percentage of faculty (42%) than staff expressed concern about their job security. Faculty in the 35-44 age group more commonly expressed this concern, and it is likely that this age group is dominated by non-tenured faculty. Male-identified faculty were somewhat less likely to express concern about their job security than female-identified faculty.

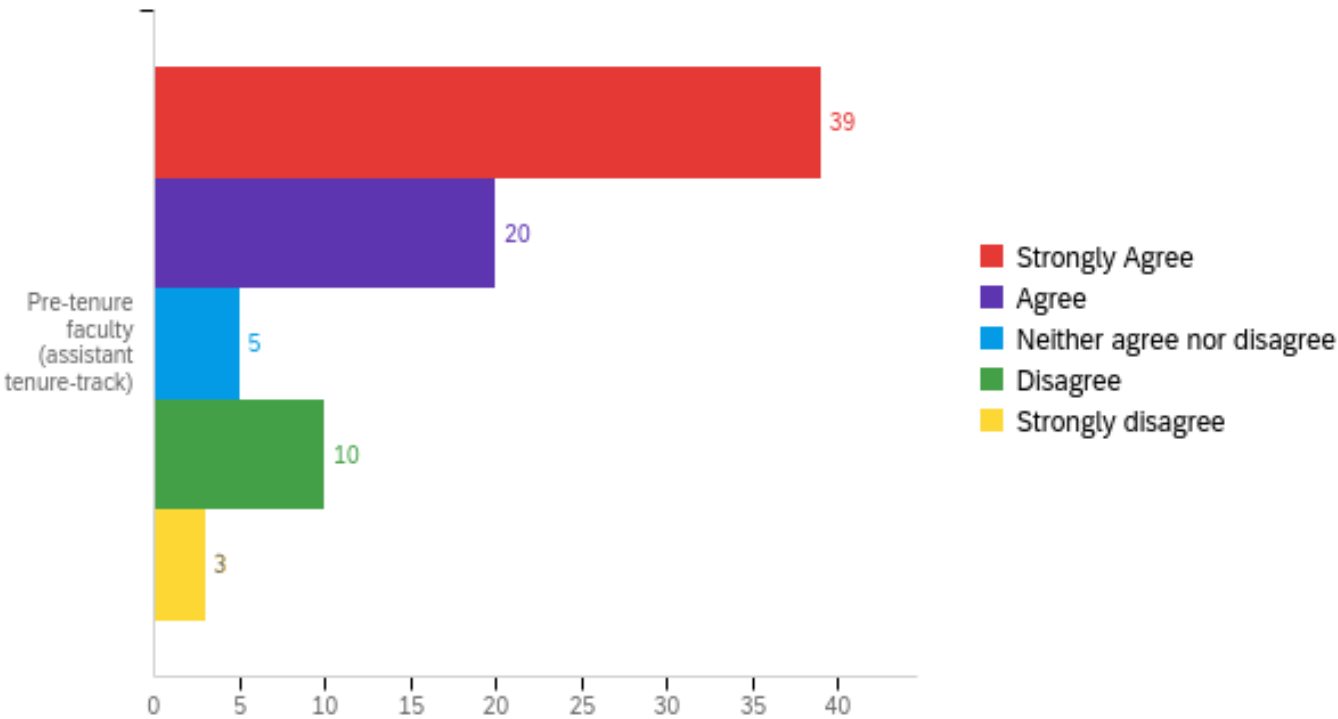
Above all, non-tenured faculty (including early career tenure-track and non-tenure track) were far more likely to be concerned about their job security, with 61% either agreeing or strongly agreeing, compared with only 22% of tenured faculty. That 1 out of every 5 tenured faculty respondents expressed concern about their job security speaks to the high level of anxiety in this moment. These concerns seemed to be shared across campuses, colleges, and divisions.

¹While attitudes about job security appear to differ among the regional campuses, the sample size is too small to draw statistically significant inferences from the data.

²Responses from trans and nonbinary staff members were recorded in the survey and considered in textual responses, but are too few in number to analyze statistically in this query.

Assistant tenure-track professors indicated considerable concerns about how their research progress during 2020 would be evaluated. Notably, even after the university announced the option for pre-tenure faculty to delay their mandatory tenure review by one year, more than half of assistant professors still conveyed that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the following statement: “Because of campus disruptions, I am concerned about how my research or creative expression during Spring 2020 will be evaluated for annual reviews, tenure, promotion, or contract renewal.”

Faculty Concerns about Evaluation of Research/Creative Expression Productivity during COVID-19 (Pre-tenure Faculty)



OVERALL TELEWORK EXPERIENCES AND BEST PRACTICES

Concerns about health and safety motivated some people’s appreciation for working away from campus, but faculty and staff also highlighted the positive benefits of remote work. In particular, respondents expressed three benefits of work at home:

- › no commute or lessened commute time
- › fewer distractions and more concentrated work time for employees not engaged in caregiving
- › greater autonomy to devise a work schedule that is focused on fulfilling objectives or projects rather than adhering to particular work hours

Staff who felt most successful during the remote work period indicate that their managers, supervisors, chairs or deans instituted practices such as regular meetings and check-ins. Yet respondents also cautioned that such practices should be based on reciprocal trust rather than as a basis of surveillance:

- › *“When we first started working from home I felt there was a lot of mistrust by management that we would stay home and actually work. My boss told us that we had to have random daily check-ins to make sure we weren't at the movies. In the beginning, the check-ins seem a bit excessive. Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Slack, you name it, our team is on it. It was really overwhelming with the amount of communication coming from various platforms, but thankfully that has died down a bit.”* (Staff)
- › *“I spend time documenting the work I'm doing every day because my unit has mandated this because they don't trust their employees, which is very frustrating because I can't keep up with my work load and I'm wasting time on this documentation.”* (Staff)

Beyond conducting business-related meetings, some units or teams instituted informal coffee hours, lunch breaks, game nights, or other social occasions to maintain cohesion and camaraderie. Seventy-one percent of staff and over half of faculty felt connected to their work team or colleagues during this period. Yet based on this feedback, a still considerable portion of faculty and staff may benefit from unit efforts to utilize both technology and other means to maintain connection. Unit leaders can strategize towards ensuring that, if mentoring efforts were in place before COVID-19, those continue in virtual form or that staff and faculty benefit from new opportunities for professional development while teleworking.

Employees who raised communication as a concern generally addressed three themes: 1) it takes longer to communicate in writing (as in email) than verbally, whether in person or through technology; 2) that technology exacerbates already existing communication patterns, and 3) that the university did not or could not offer more clear communication about budgets, furloughs, work expectations, and return to work. To the first point, some respondents recommended that non-video Skype calls, rather than video calls or emails, play a more regular role in interoffice communication. To the second point, staff raised concerns about how communication patterns could cohere or weaken a team's performance.

- › *“Working from home tends to put a spotlight on any lack of communication that exists, regardless of whether we're all together in an office or not. If you're a poor communicator, you're a poor communicator at work or when working from home.”* (Staff)
- › *“Lack of communication and collaboration from teammates, even though the resources and opportunity was available (Jabber, Zoom). Needed to be an expectation set up in the beginning.”* (Staff)
- › *“Communication has been an issue in the past and the fast paced nature in which decisions are being made has created many communication gaps. As a result, I spend many hours daily reading emails from multiple sources and trying to piece together a coherent picture.”* (Staff)

Staff also requested that unit leaders translate communication from the university level into more relevant, local directives or implications.

- › *“I feel like communication from our departmental leaders has fallen short of what Dr. Drake and Dr. Shivers are providing to the university community.”* (Staff)

- > *“Disjointed communication has only increased, especially in regards to policies and procedures regarding COVID (there are conflicting, differing opinions between how to enforce policies at the university level vs the college level vs the departmental level).” (Staff)*
- > *“It seems that all we receive are the general communications from the University without many updates from my College/Unit as to how the general communication will apply to us.” (Staff)*
- > *“Additionally, communications from the university don't always reach me directly and I have to get them from someone else - no clear chain of information.” (Staff)*

In addition, as Ohio State continues to offer telework options, supervisors can connect faculty and staff who do not have adequate technological support to the needed resources, including by allowing them to bring additional equipment home from their on-campus offices or connecting them with IT support.

Overwhelmingly, faculty and staff respondents attested to the disproportionately gendered impact that COVID-19 is having on women, women of color, and women’s professional advancement. People who are primary caregivers—in this survey, as nationally, mostly women—attested to the severe effects of multitasking on the pace, quality or feasibility of their work. As one faculty respondent succinctly concludes, *“Access to safe and affordable child care was a problem prior to the epidemic and the epidemic has created even more challenges for working parents with young children. The impact of this on my faculty colleagues, in particular women, will be felt over the next couple of years as their productivity and/or mental health will be impacted.”* These effects also extend to staff, who typically enjoy less job security and work flexibility than do faculty, raising concerns about how staff will be evaluated during annual performance reviews.

Among faculty, pre-tenure faculty expressed considerable concern about their job security and how their research performance will be assessed. Notably, while summers often allow faculty more concentrated time to focus on their research, limited access to labs, archives, and travel likely will limit such productivity for the remainder of 2020. While the university has attempted to mitigate the research impact by extending the tenure clock by one year, national research indicates that, when universally applied across gender, tenure clock extension policies both help men to advance more quickly and contribute to long-term gender salary inequity and salary compression for scholars whose advancement to tenure takes longer. In addition, the tenure clock extension does not pertain to associate professors, whose timely progress towards non-mandatory reviews for full professor promotion may be delayed. Supports for associate professors seeking promotion are important for closing gender gaps at the higher faculty ranks; at Ohio State, women constitute only 28% of full professors. University and college leaders will need to explore additional measures that may respond to pandemic interruptions, such as course releases, priority access to labs and funding, and allowing parents to include childcare subsidies in research budget proposals.

Yet even as colleagues and supervisors extend flexibility to caregivers, they must be mindful not to create or reinforce patterns of labor distribution that disadvantage workers without families or who have relationship statuses not formally recognized by the university. Staff and faculty who are not caregivers or who are solo dwellers may benefit from additional support and resources towards maintaining their work-life balance.

The Women’s Place and campus partners will be using this information to inform our programming and to advocate for inclusion, supportive work practices, and gender equity in the process and aftermath of our changing work conditions.