

# Academic Dispatch

August 7, 2020

## What We Learned from Faculty and Staff Surveys

Yes, it's a boring title. But read on! As our students start back to campus this week, rejoining the community of learning and discovery that is UNM, in many cases taking advantage of the access to internet, quiet study space, and other resources that many of our most vulnerable students lack in their home environments, we must reflect on why they can find those resources here. It's because our amazing staff and faculty have worked diligently to prepare for the arrival of these bright, fresh minds, who will be the future of New Mexico. So, while we must cast our eyes on the needs of our students and the potential they represent, it is also appropriate for us to remember that our faculty and staff have challenges too, especially in these difficult times.

Recent reports based on surveys of UNM faculty and staff give a clear picture of how extraordinarily challenging the COVID-19 pandemic has been, especially for those with young children at home or other caregiving responsibilities.

The Office of Assessment and Academic Program Review [conducted a survey](#) of UNM instructors in early summer. A word cloud from the survey shows what these faculty considered to be the greatest challenge in the transition to remote work:



Faculty expressed concern for the difficulty of staying in communication with students as they dispersed to their homes last spring, about students' difficulties in gaining adequate access to internet services, about students' economic hardships, their fear for loved ones, and disruption of life plans. Some instructors also had some pointed criticisms about early problems with communication from leadership at all levels. Many felt they needed more support to transition to remote teaching. They also expressed

concerns about delays and even stoppage of their research programs, and asked how the university would address the unavoidable shift in workload from scholarship to teaching and student support.

UNM has made progress in addressing many of these concerns. Communication on COVID-19 responses has been centralized now through the [Bringing Back the Pack](https://bringbackthepack.unm.edu) website (also called BBTP: <https://bringbackthepack.unm.edu>); IT responded to students' technology needs with a laptop loan program, mobile hotspots, and information about public WiFi locations; the Center for Teaching and Learning provided three tiers of summer training and course design support through the summer and 748 instructors participated in these programs; Student Services reached out to students needing extra support; no-penalty Credit / No Credit grading relieved some stress on students; and an extension of the tenure clock for assistant professors eased the immediate pressures on faculty to achieve scholarly output in the midst of the pandemic.

A smaller survey by ADVANCE at UNM, conducted mid-summer, points to the work ahead to address work-life balance issues for faculty, and many of these concerns will arise for staff also. The [August 4, 2020 report](#), highlights the particular challenges faced by women faculty, and for faculty with pre-school and school-age children, as well as those in CDC-defined vulnerable categories or who live with others who are in those categories. The study incorporates findings from a pre-pandemic survey from 2018 that pointed to the more adverse work-life experiences of women faculty as well as faculty from under-represented minority groups. The new survey suggests some of these discrepancies have been amplified further by the pandemic. The report calls for flexibility in teaching assignments, recognition of the need to modify research expectations under our current conditions, minimizing service burdens, and recognition of the particular burdens on faculty with young families. Respondents were eloquent in describing constant interruptions, cramped and noisy working environments, overburdened bandwidth (digital and personal), gnawing personal and professional worries, and loss of time to pursue rewarding scholarship.

What seemed initially like a brief interruption now appears likely to continue into the coming academic year. While the intense efforts of our faculty and staff this summer have prepared us better for a mix of remote and in-person teaching in the fall, the question of how to address the highly variable impact of the pandemic on different faculty members' scholarship remains.

A third survey, just completed last Friday, addressed the experiences and concerns of faculty and staff with school-age children. In alignment with the surveys mentioned above, initial analysis of this latest survey shows the top three requests as work schedule flexibility, remote working options, and childcare.

I can't claim to have answers yet for these challenges, but I can say that Academic Affairs plans to work closely with faculty and staff in shaping an institutional response that reflects our lived experiences as employees within the Lobo community, as well as the needs of our students. Flexibility will be a central

need for any approach that we take. Most importantly, I want to acknowledge the very real challenges UNM faculty and staff have faced, and the tremendous spirit and dedication with which they have risen to these challenges. I know that our students appreciate the dedication with which you all create the learning environment that will shape their futures as individuals and as members of the community of New Mexico.

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