



Pandemic fairness and academia

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This pandemic, like all natural disasters, is not fair. No one deserves to die from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) or to become very sick from it, with a future of uncertain long-term consequences. In 1962, President Kennedy said ‘life is unfair’ in the context of reservists called up for additional duty;¹ more recently, and less eloquently, we might say ‘shit happens’.

And so it is, and so it does, and all reflective people know it. The virus SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19, its associated disease, have provided further evidence for this truism. People have been infected through no fault of their own, some of the infected have become desperately ill through no fault of their own, and nearly 100,000 in the USA and nearly 350,000 around the world have died from it. Unfairly, through no fault of their own.

This pandemic has been unfair in other ways. Those most susceptible to infection and illness have been the elderly and those with other medical conditions, whose burdens were unfairly increased by the virus. So have been minorities, especially African-Americans and Native Americans. What did they do to make this affliction just? Health care workers—doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, orderlies, janitors, all heroes—have also been hard hit, and not just because many of them were sent in to work in garbage bags and bandanas instead of effective personal protective equipment.

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1 ‘There is always inequity in life’, he said. ‘Some men are killed in a war and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country, and some men are stationed in the Antarctic and some are stationed in San Francisco. It’s very hard in military or in personal life to assure complete equality. Life is unfair.’ President’s News Conference of Mar. 21, 1962 (107); Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy (1962). <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/john-f-kennedy-quotations>.

Meat-packers, mainly immigrants working dirty and difficult jobs that most Americans would never consider, are being infected at unbelievable rates. Other people in 'essential positions' are still risking their lives, whether in delivery services, groceries, or the police or fire departments. So are prisoners, who were never sentenced to possibly fatal plagues, as well as prison and jail staff, who were never sentenced to anything. Workers laid off by the virus and struggling to pay the rent, the mortgage, or for their groceries did not deserve this.

The pandemic is not fair. And it does not care. Our societies should learn some lessons and make some changes, perhaps big changes. But what changes need to be made in society, and how, is too big a question for me to talk about in this editorial.

But I can talk about changes needed to help one group that is also being unfairly hammered by this virus, one that I know well: academics with family responsibilities. Yes, these are problems of a relatively elite, secure, and well-paid group and less serious than those of many are losing homes, friends, and families due to the pandemic, but, for us academics, they are our problems. We can and should do something to mitigate them.

Many academics, and would-be academics, are facing not only the standard disruptions of Zoom teaching, uncertain future budgets, cancelled meetings, and interrupted research. They are facing, every day, for 24 hours, their own children, or parents, or partners, or others needing much more of their time than in the past. The problem of children is probably the most common among academics. In line with the common gender roles in our society, women are more heavily affected than men, but many men are also trying, often desperately, each day to help educate, entertain, and, yes, survive their children, including many children too young to understand what's happening but not too young to be scared.

Yet the professional teaching duties of these colleagues do not stop, their committee work does not stop, and the research expectations on them do not stop. And the stress does not stop. Something has to give, but what? Research progress, manuscripts, papers published, those can take back seats that family, classes, and administrative work cannot. They can slow, and even stop. Already, after more than 2 months of the school and daycare shutdowns, there is evidence that, on average, female academics are submitting fewer papers.² Can any of us honestly not nod in understanding?

My wife and I have two children. They are 28 and 31 years old, well launched, and living 350 miles away. My mother is a healthy 91-year-old, living with my sister and my brother-in-law. We talk with them all, by phone or video, more often than before the pandemic, but they do not drastically affect our lives. But I know from many colleagues, former fellows, and current fellows that their lives have been massively changed by new family responsibilities coming from the pandemic. They count a good day as one where they are only a bit farther behind than when they started. And, for many of them, doing new research or writing is impossible, or close to it.

So, here's my proposal. Academia should cut them some slack. Law schools and college or university departments certainly have their needs. Classes must be taught,

2 Colleen Flaherty, *No Room of One's Own*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Apr. 21, 2020). <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity>

programs have to be administered, and (in most cases) research and publishing needs to happen. But the last category does not have to happen now.

School administrations should determine, carefully and discreetly, which faculty are struggling with increased personal obligations as a result of the pandemic. When considering existing faculty for promotion, tenure, salary increases, research funding, summer support, or chairs or other honors, schools should treat faculty with substantially increased personal responsibilities as a result of this pandemic similar to, for at least research and publishing purposes, those on medical or classic family leave. Tenure and promotion clocks should be paused for them; for other review purposes, much less research and publication should be expected from them during the affected period. And this should be announced, publicly and soon, removing, or at least lightening, one burden from already overloaded lives.

The situation for aspiring academics is a little different. As one friend told me ‘TBH, it’s hard to say “I know you don’t have a job market paper for COVID reasons but I won’t hold that against you”’. Fair enough. But we could say ‘for those whose lives were particularly affected by the pandemic, we won’t necessarily expect as many other publications or quite as polished a job talk paper’. And this too should be announced soon—people who had planned to go on the job market this fall are already worried enough about how much of a job market, if any, there will be. Those whose research and writing has ground to a halt because of new duties from the pandemic can at least be slightly reassured.

This late winter and early spring, schools spent much time and effort worrying about the effects of the pandemic on our students. Schools thought not just about the added burdens and stresses on students but about how those problems might fall harder on some students, especially those with fewer resources or in more difficult situations. Many schools decided to grade their students on a mandatory pass/fail basis for spring 2020 in recognition of the unexpected, unfair, and unevenly distributed stresses the pandemic brought them. We should take equally seriously the difficult and disparate situations of some of our colleagues and of those who would be our colleagues.

It can be argued that the pandemic has highlighted systemic problems with financial and other disparities between some, usually younger, faculty and others, disparities that include but go beyond often different family obligations to housing costs, student debt, and other challenges more acute today than in the past. These issues hit close to home and deserve careful thought and consideration, but they go beyond the less complicated proposal I have tried to make in this editorial.

Yes, life, including the pandemic, is unfair. We cannot prevent that. But, sometimes, to some extent, we can mitigate that unhappy reality. Life may be unfair, but we do not have to be. That is true at the largest scale, but it is even more true at smaller scales, where we have a realistic opportunity to make a difference. That’s a chance we as faculty and administrators can and should seize.