

29 May 2020

Attention: USFA Executive; USFA Joint Committee for Management of the Agreement; USFA Committee on Women's Issues

As the Colleges and Departments settle into a “new normal” of remote operations, and gear up for the additional work of redesigning courses for remote delivery, we are deeply concerned by the failure of the University administration to acknowledge the circumstances of faculty who rely on schools, daycares, and other community and care programs in order to be free to do their work.

Many children's camps are not running this July and August, and others have restricted enrollments. At this time the province has provided few details as to how schools, school-based care programs, and larger daycares will resume. There is currently no plan to compensate for childcare spaces lost to reduced capacities in existing programs. While it appears that schools will reopen in September, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to accommodate all students while maintaining distance and hygiene requirements. Therefore it is almost certain that school-age children will be attending half days or alternate days throughout the Fall, and will be expected to do a significant amount of their learning from home, with parental support. While the province's plan involves re-opening daycares, it is unclear how distancing will be possible with babies, toddlers, and pre-school aged children. As with schools, daycare centres that do open are unlikely to operate at full capacity. Furthermore, given the current uncertainty about how young children may be impacted by and spread the virus, families with vulnerable members may be unable to risk having children schooled or cared for outside the home. If there is a spike in COVID-19 cases, schools and daycares may be under these constraints well into 2021—or they may be again closed altogether on a few days' notice. The University must respond to the current circumstances of faculty parents and caregivers and to the likely scenario for the Fall. It must also be prepared for the eventuality of complete closure of schools and daycares.

Working from home while attending to and schooling children leaves faculty struggling to fulfill even their most immediate duties. Some faculty have found their Department Heads and Deans sympathetic and accommodating, but personal understandings are not a comprehensive, equitable, or long-term solution. The disrupted, heavily compromised working conditions faculty parents have managed so far, with improvised and temporary care arrangements if any, are simply not sustainable. In short, faculty *cannot be expected to resume their duties in full, and at the expected levels of efficiency and productivity, while also being responsible for half- to full-time childcare at home.* Many faculty with dependent adult children or elderly parents are similarly impacted by reductions to or loss of care services, and are likewise struggling to balance work and caregiving duties.

The differential impacts of the pandemic on university faculty with dependents, and on women faculty in particular, have been widely documented and discussed in the academic press.^[1] Many of us have been enduring extremely high levels of stress from trying to meet performance expectations in these conditions.^[2] Many of us have already suffered setbacks that will impact our careers. Those of us with preschool-aged children, whose children have special needs or health problems, who are single parents, and who are also handling other family caregiving duties—such as caring for elderly parents, with reduced supports—are even more heavily impacted.

We are asking USFA to initiate an open, frank, University-wide conversation about this problem. The federal government has been providing partial paid leave to employees caring for children since pandemic closures began. Both the federal and the provincial government have at least recognized that any “reopen” plan relies on workers who are parents, and that parents rely on schools and childcare in order to work. We ask that the University likewise recognize the circumstances of faculty parents and other caregivers, and work with USFA to find realistic and equitable solutions.

The problems of family caregiving and of educating children in pandemic conditions cannot be shunted aside as extraneous to the University business. The University cannot leave individual faculty members to shift for themselves, shouldering alone the burdens of stress, guilt, and compromised performance, and absorbing the damage to their physical and mental health as well as to their careers.

We suggest that USFA begin by surveying the membership to clarify the scope and nature of our caregiving responsibilities and needs. We ask that USFA then bring the information to the University to begin a discussion about how to support faculty so that they can balance the demands of academic work, parenting, and caregiving in these indefinitely altered conditions.

Signed,

- [1] “Lost ground: Female academics face an uphill battle in a post-pandemic world” <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/hyp.13803>
“Women are getting less research done than men during this coronavirus pandemic” https://theconversation.com/women-are-getting-less-research-done-than-men-during-this-coronavirus-pandemic-138073?utm_medium=ampemail&utm_source=email
“The pandemic and the female academic” <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01135-9>
“Women’s research plummets during lockdown” https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/12/womens-research-plummets-during-lockdown-but-articles-from-men-increase?CMP=share_btn_fb&fbclid=IwAR0cSejLOvpZLt9v_RDqX6MOOQ7fXGYbfOd4q5nn-UcyPttmXplajls44
- [2] “Two parents. Two Kids. Two Jobs. No Child Care” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/opinion/coronavirus-parenting-burnout.html>
“The parents are not okay in the age of Covid-19” <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-the-parents-are-not-okay-in-the-age-of-covid-19/>
“The parents are not all right” <https://gen.medium.com/parents-are-not-ok-66ab2a3e42d9>