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# The Present and Future of Academia for Faculty—Teaching Amid a Global Pandemic

Logan Gilbert, Investigative Editor

At the start of the pandemic, Seattle University faculty were asked to completely overhaul their class lesson plans as the effects of COVID-19 progressed, forcing universities across the nation to transition entirely online. With this, a variety of challenges have arisen, from technology issues to struggles with childcare while working.

Of the many issues professors currently face, one of the main concerns for many is childcare. With K-12 schools and daycares mostly closed, workers across the country are having to balance their jobs while simultaneously educating and entertaining their children. Professor of Communications and President of the Faculty Staff Senate, Chris Paul, is taking care of his two daughters during the pandemic and says the most stressful part is having to organize childcare with his partner.

“The primary challenge for me has been balancing childcare with my job,” Paul said. “We don’t have daycare, so not only am I teaching, but I’m coordinating with my partner and having to educate and raise our kids. It turns into being a lot more work than it was before.”

Other issues, like problems with technology and learning how to adapt to changing circumstances, have created opportunities for Seattle U. Courses run by the Center for Digital Learning and Innovation (CDLI) aim to give professors the tools they need to run online courses. David Powers, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, spoke to how challenging the shift from in-person to online classes was for faculty.

“The faculty really want to do well and teach classes the best they can,” Powers said. “The shift in winter quarter was so dramatic, and not everything has gone smoothly, but the faculty have adjusted the best they can.”

Originally, there was supposed to be a months-long course for professors on running online classes, but with the quick change to an entirely remote curriculum, many teachers had to learn through short module-type classes in order to prepare for spring quarter.

To remedy issues for the upcoming fall quarter, the CDLI has instituted classes over the summer where professors can continue to learn how to teach over the internet. The classes are not mandatory, but professors can earn a stipend for doing the extra work while not under contract. This is an important part of getting the university up to speed with its use of technology, University President Fr. Stephen V. Sundborg S.J., said.

“Our faculty was in different places in regards to being able to [provide online education], but I think what we have heard is all faculty has significantly increased their capacity to do that,” Sundborg said. “I think there will be an ongoing impact for faculty about how they will be able to incorporate technology in their courses in the long term.”



Jake Nelson

The shift has come with an increased workload for professors as they attempt to transition to an entirely online learning environment. According to Victor Evans, a professor of Communications, the work required to transition a course online and the extra grading that comes with not being able to evaluate material in class has professors working harder than ever.

“There’s no doubt that we are doing more work than before. Changing the classes from in person to online was a ton of work, and now we are having to teach it. I think that because we are putting more work into it, we should be compensated for it, but I don’t think that would ever happen,” Evans said. “I want to give students the same level of education, but I’m having to do so much more work to get there.”

Instead of paying teachers more for their increased job duties, the school is attempting to save money by asking faculty members to take voluntary pay cuts to make up for the more than \$7 million lost this quarter as a result of the pandemic. According to Paul, the way that the university asked for the pay cuts was inappropriate, and he felt the school did not provide sufficient explanation for where exactly the money was going—putting already vulnerable faculty and staff in a difficult position.

“I think the task was woefully inadequate, there was terrible messaging around it and it basically amounted to guilt tripping low-paid faculty,” Paul said. “I don’t have an issue with the cuts themselves, but the messaging around it was bad. This affects the most marginalized in our community, because it puts them in a position where they feel they have to contribute and that is inappropriate.”

The university is taking steps to help faculty members through this time, specifically through an extension on the faculty tenure clock and optional suspension of evaluations for tenure. This means that faculty can apply to have their tenure hearings pushed back from the normal six year timeline, and they can choose to abstain from course evaluations for their classes.

Provost Shane Martin explained that this was done to make sure the university was being fair to faculty. The number of evaluations on file was also reduced from three to two, but faculty must decide how they want to proceed by July 1.

“What we wanted to do was provide as much flexibility as possible that would help students and faculty,” Martin said. “For those whose work was put on hold or disrupted, we felt it wouldn’t be fair to have these evaluations and to have them submit everything to the tenure committee...these were put in place to give faculty more agency in a time when we don’t really know what is going to happen.”

Evans, who is coming up for his third-year hearing, is thankful because it allows him more time to make up for the disruption of the pandemic.

“I am very appreciative of the provost for this,” Evans said. “It’s one thing to have these stresses of being under evaluation for tenure during a normal school year, but to try to get everything together while teaching a class by the seat of your pants, it’s so much harder.”

These decisions mainly affect tenure track professors, and for part-time faculty members, questions about what courses the school will have money for weigh on their heads. Part-time faculty are not contracted to work at the school the same way that tenure track professors are, instead getting paid per class. For them, the budget cuts, financial strain of the university and the question of how many students are coming to campus remains a looming cloud.

Robert Trumbull, Professor of Philosophy, is a part-time faculty member and is worried what affects the pandemic will have on him, especially in light of healthcare.

“If you’re a senior faculty, the school has made an investment in you, and if you’re part-time faculty, they haven’t made as much of a commitment,” Trumbull said. “If enrollments go down, simply put, classes will be cut and tenured faculty might have their workload changed, but for part-time faculty, it will have a real impact. I get health benefits through the school, but if my course load drops, then I could lose my health insurance.”

The end of the quarter has also brought up many questions about what the fall will look like for teachers and how much time they will be given for course preparation. An announcement was made this week by Sundborg that fall quarter will begin two weeks early, on Sep. 9. This was done in order to limit exposure through travel, according to the president’s email.

“In the situation of COVID-19, with people traveling to and from school, it actually makes it more dangerous,” Sundborg said. “Another reason is that the ordinary flu season is the more likely time of a second wave of the virus, the flu makes it more dangerous. So we are joined by other universities to start early to prevent those factors.”

This decision impacts faculty, as they need to think about finishing lesson plans from earlier in the year. The current plan of in-person fall classes, at least partially, increases health risks. Trumbull spoke to his worries of opening the school in the fall without the pandemic being completely under control.

“I just don’t see how even a hybrid teaching model is possible,” Trumbull said. “I realize that it’s important to get the school open, but I don’t see how it’s possible with everyone’s health and safety. I’m skeptical because if even one person gets sick and dies, that’s on the school for opening, and you can’t take that back.”

This has been a challenging time for all faculty as they adjust to a new instruction mode, and Martin, among others, expressed his gratitude for the hard work that faculty has done this quarter.

“The faculty have been tremendous—they are going above and beyond the call of duty for students,” Martin said. “There’s always the story of something not working, but overwhelmingly it is positive because of our faculty, who really make this all work.”