

Women, parents and early-career faculty in ecology most impacted by COVID-19

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In April 2020, Lise Aubry learned that the daycare her children attended in Fort Collins would be closed for several weeks. Aubry, an assistant professor in the Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Biology Department at Colorado State University, and her husband, Professor Dave Koons, began to juggle childcare at home for their two kids—ages 4 months and

4 years old—and work responsibilities.

Aubry said she was happy after a successful day early on of balancing these duties, having completed at least six hours of work.

"Reflecting on the day, I felt pretty good," said Aubry, also an instructor for the Graduate Degree Program in Ecology at CSU. "But I realized there might be other people—single parents, young faculty starting out—in the university setting who were really struggling."

Aubry decided to conduct a survey of similar faculty across the United States to gauge how they've been impacted by COVID-19. She teamed up with Professor Zhao Ma from Purdue University and Theresa Laverty, postdoctoral fellow at CSU, as both have experience with designing surveys.

The results, "Impacts of COVID-19 on ecology and evolutionary biology faculty in the United States," were recently published in *Ecological Applications*, a journal from the Ecological Society of America.

Among the findings, the team said that the majority of more than 600 faculty who responded to the survey were negatively impacted on personal and professional levels, and struggling to find a healthy work-life balance.

Aubry said female faculty, early-career researchers and those in caretaking roles were most impacted by the pandemic. In addition, people who did not have access to a private room to use as a home office were significantly more dissatisfied with their work-life balance.

Researchers hope that administrators will use these data when discussing faculty promotions or tenure applications, and that the study will also increase recognition for the problems being faced by faculty during the

pandemic.

Aubry said she also views the survey as a "manifesto, a record of what we're experiencing" that will be important as we recover from the "massive blow that COVID-19 has been to many people's careers and personal lives."

Research provides more evidence on pandemic's impact

To conduct the survey, the research team used a list from the National Research Council to target 94 ecology and evolutionary biology doctoral programs in the United States.

More than 600 faculty responded, providing a response rate of more than 23%.

Ma, a University Faculty Scholar in the Department of Forestry and Natural Resources at Purdue University, said what the team discovered adds to existing evidence and increases the recognition of the impacts of COVID-19 in an academic setting.

"Female and junior faculty members, people who have more responsibilities for either children or elderly relatives, are impacted more and are more stressed," she said.

"We talk about the 'leaky pipeline,' and why women gradually disappear in STEM fields," said Ma. "By the time you get to being a full professor, you wonder, 'Where did the women go'? The pandemic will most likely exacerbate what we've seen."

"This will affect faculty for years to come, and the long-term effect is

concerning," she said. "This needs to be addressed by university leadership, so that faculty can continue to be successful."

Researchers said they are also seeing serious impacts on graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. Ma said that she is spending more time mentoring students and postdocs than she did prior to the pandemic, which takes away from research activities.

"They are so worried and stressed," she said. "In that particular time of their career, it's already stressful. They don't know what may happen after the pandemic, if their funding will continue, if they will have a job or what the job market will look like. Our survey really documents the need to look at the long-term impact."

Anxiety for younger researchers

Laverty, as a member of the research team, is one of those early-career researchers. Her postdoc position in the Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Biology department ends in May 2021, and that's already creating anxiety for her.

"It's definitely stressful being on the job market," she said. "I don't have the same home life that Lise and Zhao both have, with children at home. But the effects from the pandemic will impact early-career researchers over the next several years."

Laverty said the team found that while options like putting a pause on the tenure clock might be helpful for some faculty, promotions should be handled on a case-by-case basis.

"Rather than issue blanket statements or policies, we suggest that universities acknowledge the difficulties faced by faculty, especially women," she said. "Administrators need to recognize that what is

happening will affect tenure and promotion applications."

'Suck it up, cupcake'

As part of the survey, Aubry and the team included an open comment box, which was completed by one-third of the people who responded. Some faculty responded with a line, while others typed out pages.

Aubry said the comments were insightful—ranging from thoughts on home schooling older children, balancing work and life as a single parent, and the need for increased mentoring of students—and are grouped by themes in the research paper.

"A big proportion of the respondents were full professors, and what I appreciated from them was a recognition that they were doing okay, working from home, but they showed concern for their students and younger colleagues," she said. "It showed that our larger community of ecologists and evolutionary biologists is not just resilient, but also empathetic, and we need empathy now more than ever."

On the flip side, the scientists also received a few negative remarks, including one [faculty](#) member whose advice was: Suck it up, cupcake, we're all in this together, so what's the big deal?

Aubry said this person "couldn't be more wrong. Not everybody is impacted the same way by the pandemic."

More information: Lise M. Aubry et al, Impacts of COVID-19 on ecology and evolutionary biology faculty in the United States, *Ecological Applications* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/eap.2265](https://doi.org/10.1002/eap.2265)

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