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## COVID's Lasting Impacts on Faculty Inclusion

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# COVID's Lasting Impacts on Faculty Inclusion

Think the pandemic is well behind us? Survey data shows feelings of inclusion have continued dropping as a result of it, write Laurel Smith-Doerr, Joya Misra, Shuyin Liu and Dessie Clark.

By [Laurel Smith-Doerr](#), [Joya Misra](#), [Shuyin Liu](#) and [Dessie Clark](#)



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**R**emember the COVID-19 pandemic? It seems like a silly question, but as social scientists who study organizations, we know that organizational routines, including in higher education, are set up to forget crises and return to business as usual. In higher education, forgetting the pandemic means we are more likely to fail to address its ongoing detrimental effects on faculty, staff and student well-being.

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There have been quite a few studies about the immediate effects of COVID-19 on faculty productivity. Yet the continuing impact of the pandemic on faculty inclusion is also important and plays a key role in understanding the retention of diverse faculty. And faculty life, as measured by feeling included, has continued to get worse since COVID-19. Faculty members didn't simply bounce back after the pandemic, after universities, including ours, returned to in-person work and mask requirements were dropped.

As part of an [NSF-funded ADVANCE grant](#), we collected survey data in 2018 and 2022, which shows a drastic drop in faculty members' feelings of inclusion, even after the acute COVID-19 pandemic period from 2020 to 2021. We were surprised by the extent and continuing effects of the pandemic on faculty inclusion.

Compared to 2018, it is clear that inclusion has taken a hit since the pandemic. We found a significant decline in the inclusion measures, particularly in faculty feeling connected with colleagues and feeling consulted and engaged by their department chair.

For example, in 2022, the odds of faculty feeling connected to their department or satisfied with social interactions decreased by 40 percent compared to 2018, and the odds of feeling satisfied with professional interactions decreased by 50 percent. The odds were also significantly lower in 2022 than in 2018 for faculty members to report often communicating their concerns to their department chair or feeling that their chair and colleagues value their opinions. And perhaps most troublingly, the odds of faculty saying their chair consults their opinion were reduced substantially by 75 percent. We find it especially worrisome that these declines in feeling included are in reference not to a perfect world but to 2018, when even then not all faculty felt included.

We expected to see large gender, race, rank and caregiver differences in faculty inclusion based on other kinds of disparate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on faculty—such as on productivity—that we have previously seen in [our research](#). But in models controlling for gender, race, sexuality, nationality, rank, caregiving status and discipline, we saw that faculty inclusion [dropped across the board, for everyone](#).

There is cause for concern in these findings. Feelings of inclusion among our core workers—faculty members—are a measure of organizational health. How can faculty address the dire challenges to higher education we are facing now if they do not feel integrated and engaged with their colleagues?

Our colleges and universities need to attend to the continuing effects of the pandemic disruptions to inclusive communities on our campus. Things won't fix themselves on their own with the passage of time. Unfortunately, it appears that we are just more likely to dismiss or forget pandemic impacts as time passes.

We still see disruptions to important community-building opportunities on campuses now. Many meetings of faculty continue to be held remotely or hybrid without attention to how online modes need to supply the latent functions of informal interaction that occur before and after in-person meetings—such as allowing conflicts to be resolved after a heated exchange and other relationship-building and repair moments.

While events have always seen fewer attendees than registrants, currently fewer than half of the people who register show up at in-person events, crucial moments for intellectual interchange. Feelings of inclusion cannot recover in such situations.

What can be done to revive faculty inclusion? Based on our research, our [UMass ADVANCE tool for inclusive departments](#) suggests key places to start, such as regular faculty meetings and research talks for work in progress, [mentoring plans](#) for all faculty members, meaningful committee service assignments that go beyond bureaucratic box-checking to engage with intellectual content, regular chair meetings in which both check-ins on career progress and informal sharing occurs, and departmental awards and regular communications recognizing contributions of all faculty members.

These faculty inclusion measures may seem obvious, but many departments that skip doing this community-building work end up with marginalizing climates that all faculty members—women of color, men of color, white women and white men—experience as excluding and unsatisfying. In a follow-up piece, we will also focus on how caregiving and health burdens have also played a major role in faculty members not feeling included and what higher education institutions can do to help to alleviate them.

The good news is that departments that put in the effort can create inclusive climates that all faculty experience as satisfying and supportive, and that are places where they can do their best work.

*Laurel Smith-Doerr is professor of sociology and principal investigator of the NSF ADVANCE-IT grant at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She is co-lead editor of American Sociological Review, the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association. Joya Misra is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Public Policy and a co-principal investigator of the UMass NSF ADVANCE-IT grant. She is currently president of the American Sociological Association. Shuyin Liu is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and serves as a graduate research assistant on the grant. Dessie Clark is the director of curriculum development and implementation for the University of Wisconsin at Madison Inclusion in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute.*

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