

MOBTS Oceania Roundtable Proposal

Sharing Institutional and Individual Responses to Promote Faculty Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

In this roundtable, we will explore institutional and individual responses to help faculty manage stress and promote well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. In discussion with participants, we will consider the stressors faced in the context of teaching and learning, how our institutions supported (or did not support) employees' mental health, and how individuals personally coped with the ongoing crisis. At the end of the session, participants will have an understanding of common stressors, the different institutional supports offered to faculty (and the perceived effectiveness of these), and the individual-level strategies they can use to promote their own well-being at work.

Keywords: Faculty mental health, faculty well-being, stress

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant global health crises in recent memory (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). It has significantly impacted higher education institutions around the world, with colleges and universities forced to make rapid and disruptive changes to continue operating. Some of these changes include closing campuses, delivering courses entirely online, freezing hiring of new faculty and dismissing existing staff, and adapting admissions processes (Burke, 2020; Vigdor & Diaz, 2020; Whitford, 2020; Woolston, 2020). Such changes have had a significant impact on the mental health of students, with research suggesting many students are experiencing elevated levels of anxiety (Son et al., 2020) and major depression (Wang et al., 2020). Most of the research to date, however, has focused almost entirely on students (e.g., Islam et al., 2020, Kaparounaki et al., 2020), and faculty mental health has received relatively less attention. Given reports of significant work stress in academic settings prior to the pandemic (e.g., Fazackerley, 2019), and the harmful impact of the pandemic on mental health generally (Salari et al., 2020), we suggest this is an important issue for discussion.

The purpose of this roundtable is two-fold: First, we seek to explore institutional responses designed to help faculty manage stress and stay mentally healthy through the pandemic and understand the mental health and well-being experiences of roundtable participants. To introduce the topic, we will initially focus on the experiences of four faculty members at three different institutions (two located in the United States and one in Australia). Then in wider discussions with participants, we will consider the major stressors that emerged in the context of teaching and learning, how institutions supported (or failed to support) employee mental health, and the individual strategies and approaches participants used to manage stress and support their well-being. Second, at the end of the session, participants will have an

understanding of common stressors, the variety of supports offered to faculty (and the perceived effectiveness of these), and, in particular, some individual-level strategies they can use to promote their own well-being in the workplace. We hope that all faculty could benefit from attending this roundtable.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

A crisis can be broadly defined as “a situation faced by an individual, group or organization which they are unable to cope with by the use of normal, routine procedures and in which stress is created by sudden change” (Booth, 1993 cited in Lin Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006 p. 402). As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world, it became apparent that colleges and universities would have to manage unique and unprecedented challenges in order to survive. Student admissions and learning trajectories were affected almost immediately; as of early April, 220 million post-secondary students had experienced significant disruption or were unable to complete their studies (World Bank Group, 2020). Multiple campuses shut down and faculty were required to work from home and teach courses online. This meant that, depending on their circumstances, educators had to manage challenges such as mastering remote learning platforms, coping with “Zoom fatigue”, supporting students, balancing carer responsibilities, financial concerns, and maintaining their own physical and emotional wellness (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020; Oleschuk, 2020).

When a crisis impacts an organization, leaders must find ways to keep employees engaged and support their mental health. In the context of COVID-19, Dirani et al. (2020) suggest that leaders can achieve this through offering supervisory support, psychological empowerment, positive reinforcement and appreciation of work, and communication. Similarly, Malinen, Wong and Näsweil (2020) emphasize the importance of providing job resources such

as flexibility, communication, and a sense of job security. At the same time, employees can utilize coping strategies, self-care, and external resources, such as counselling, to promote their personal well-being and manage stress (see Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2017).

Previous research indicates that academic staff experience high levels of stress in general (Winefield & Jarrett, 2001; Winefield et al., 2003), and specific stressors in university settings include workload pressures, lack of resources and role overload (Gillespie et al., 2001; Gunbayi, 2014; Johnson, Willis & Evans, 2019). Researchers have identified a range of consequences that can arise from significant occupational stress, which include poor physical health, reduced psychological well-being and behavioral outcomes such as problematic substance use (for a review, see Quick & Henderson, 2016). We also know that stress can exacerbate and lead to the development of mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression (see Herbert, 1997). This underscores the importance of providing support to faculty during times of heightened stress, whom we know are already a vulnerable group with an increased likelihood of having or developing a mental illness relative to other working populations (for a review, see Guthrie et al., 2017).

At present, our knowledge of institutional and individual-level responses to COVID-19 in the context of higher education is limited. What we do know, however, is that many faculty members are struggling with chronic stress and high levels of burnout as a result of the pandemic (Flaherty, 2020); this can lead to cynicism, withdrawal, and reduced work performance (Sabagh, Hall, & Saroyan, 2018). Moreover, prior studies have demonstrated that increased faculty work demands and reduced resources, which characterize the faculty experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, lead to stress and disengagement, respectively (Mudrak et al., 2010). We suggest that stress can also affect our relationships with students. On one hand, faculty struggling with issues

such as work overload and social isolation may be able to empathize and connect more deeply with their students' experiences during the pandemic. This could lead to stronger, more meaningful connections with students. If faculty are burnt out, however, they may seek to depersonalize their students, leading to poor quality relationships and student disengagement (Rumschlag, 2017).

Session Description

In this session, we will share our experiences of adapting to and addressing the many and new demands placed on us during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we aim to cover many questions and topics related to teaching and faculty support during the pandemic (Table 1).

Following a welcome and introductions, the four facilitators will briefly summarize how our institutions responded and communicated decisions to faculty during the COVID-19 crisis. Three first-hand examples will be provided. First, we will present an example of an institution that communicated effectively and addressed the uncertainty of the pandemic well. Second, we will consider an example of an institution that offered support to faculty but also maintained a strong focus on its bottom line. Finally, we will discuss an institution that offered limited communication and guidance throughout the pandemic. We will also briefly discuss how these responses affected us as individual faculty members.

Following this, we will open up the discussion in breakout rooms with roundtable participants to share our experiences and consider what institutions can do to foster well-being among faculty and staff. We anticipate that many questions will be addressed in these discussions. These will include:

1. What kind of support has been offered to faculty to date, and has this been effective?
 What could our institutions have done differently?

2. What can faculty do to preserve their own mental health and well-being during these difficult times? What kinds of strategies have we used to date, and have these been effective or ineffective?

We will also consider related questions here. For example, did institutional communication and decision-making help to allay or exacerbate fears and/or affect employees’ perceived stress during the COVID-19 crisis? Do traditional motivational approaches work to keep employees engaged during times of crisis? Also, how did career stage affect our reactions to the crisis and in turn our mental health during the crisis?

Table 1

Proposed Timeline

0-15 minutes	<p>Welcome and introductions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduction to each facilitator ● Objectives of the roundtable ● Brief discussion of three institutional responses
15-40 minutes	<p>Discussions in breakout rooms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What stressors have you encountered as a result of the pandemic? ● How did your institution respond to COVID-19? What kind of resources were you offered to promote your well-being? ● In your opinion, were these resources effective or not? How could your institution have supported you more effectively? ● What strategies and/or resources have you personally used to support your well-being?
40-55 minutes	<p>Group discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group discussion of key themes from breakout rooms
55-60 minutes	<p>Thank you and close</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Session wrap up and possible discussion of next steps

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