

---

4-2022

## Faculty and Staff Experiences in Early Covid

Norma Anderson

Kimberly E. Fox

Follow this and additional works at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev)

---

### Recommended Citation

Anderson, Norma and Fox, Kimberly E. (2022). Faculty and Staff Experiences in Early Covid. *Bridgewater Review*, 40(1), 12-15.

Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol40/iss1/6](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol40/iss1/6)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

---

# Faculty and Staff Experiences in Early Covid

Norma Anderson and Kimberly E. Fox

## Introduction

The first weeks and months of lockdown were enormously stressful for us (Norma and Kim). We felt isolated and adrift. Many work emails signed off with “We got this!” which, while meant to be encouraging, left us feeling inferior; while others might “got this,” we definitely did not.

We wondered, though, if others felt similarly. We questioned how the Covid pandemic was *really* affecting employees at BSU. To find out, we created a convenience sample survey of faculty, librarians, and staff during Massachusetts’s intensive first wave, when most BSU community members were physically remote.

Given the upheaval of the last two years, it may be hard to remember just how frightening it was in those first months of the pandemic. For perspective, Governor Baker closed all non-essential businesses March 24<sup>th</sup> 2020. In April and May 2020, our region experienced a “surge” of cases and deaths; by the end of May, Massachusetts’s Covid death toll was the third highest in the nation. Hopes for a vaccine were nascent. Our survey was distributed when faculty and staff had been (mostly) isolated for a month and a half, and when numbers and uncertainties were soaring.

## The Data

Our survey asked a variety of questions about stressors; worries for personal safety; social issues; health protocols; and work roles. Finally, we allowed for an open-ended response for additional information.

We received 291 responses, 254 of which were analyzable. A total of

113 faculty/librarians and 141 staff responded, response rates of about 14.3% and 19.4% respectively. Out of 141 staff responses, 73 respondents were professional staff and 60 were

classified staff. At least 43 part-time and 62 full-time faculty participated. (The remaining staff and faculty members did not identify a specific status.) Our work slightly under samples faculty but largely represents racial and gender divisions among faculty, librarians, and staff.

In this essay, we focus on generalized anxieties and societal concerns, highlighting how people’s roles, including gender, family, and work, influence

their experiences.<sup>1</sup> We point out how certain inequalities were exacerbated during the coronavirus, but how, overall, respondents were deeply concerned for the welfare of others. While our data is not generalizable, it does give us a sense of how BSU community members were feeling in late spring 2020.

## Challenges and Stressors

One of the clearest indicators that our community members were feeling the mental and physical strain of the coronavirus pandemic was the number of respondents who knew someone with Covid-19. While more than half of the sample (57.1%) indicated that they knew someone who thought they had coronavirus, but wasn’t tested, 69.3% of our respondents said they knew someone who *had tested positive* for coronavirus. Testing was, at the time, very hard to

---

... the information presented here shows that the pandemic had different impacts on us based on work roles, family status, and gender, but that our whole community struggled in the first wave of the coronavirus.

---

access. These numbers show just how real the virus was to our respondents. A staff member wrote:

I know of 3 people who have died from COVID. It has made the pandemic ‘hit home’ and caused my family to take the disease/safety precautions/attention to hygiene/social distancing/NOT venturing from my house for any reason/NOT venturing into public very seriously. Real people

# One of the brightest spots for many faculty and staff was the response of the IT staff who provided support for teaching and working remotely. ... IT staff were universally praised for helping an entire campus move online.

who had lives, jobs, family and friends, futures to look forward to are painfully ill and too many suddenly DEAD.

Some respondents' worries about the virus were connected to their job status at BSU. Staff reported greater unease about losing their jobs than faculty and were more concerned about running out of money (see Figure 1). This is not surprising given the relative stability of tenure for many faculty.

Looking at part-time faculty revealed a starker inequality; part-time faculty were more likely to worry about losing their jobs than tenured or pre-tenured full-time faculty and staff. We see significant differences between those who reported fear of job loss and worries about money, where part-time faculty reported fear of job loss a full two points higher than full-time faculty (1.31 to 3.31) and .64 points higher than staff. Part-time faculty reported concerns about running out of money nearly 1.3 points higher than full-time faculty (1.70 to 0.41; see Figure 1).

One respondent said, "As a long-time part-time faculty member, the messaging by Admin. that many of us will likely lose our positions, without knowing for sure, has been incredibly stressful and demoralizing as I pull out all the stops and work long hours to make my students' online education

worthwhile." Another wrote, "I am positive I will lose my PT teaching job at BSU, which will put me in a financial bind... That is the scariest part of this virus is the financial implications for a lot of folks." That part-time faculty were far more worried about job loss than faculty and staff highlights the privileged standing of faculty who have (or are on track to have) tenure, but also the strength of unionized labor among staff as well.

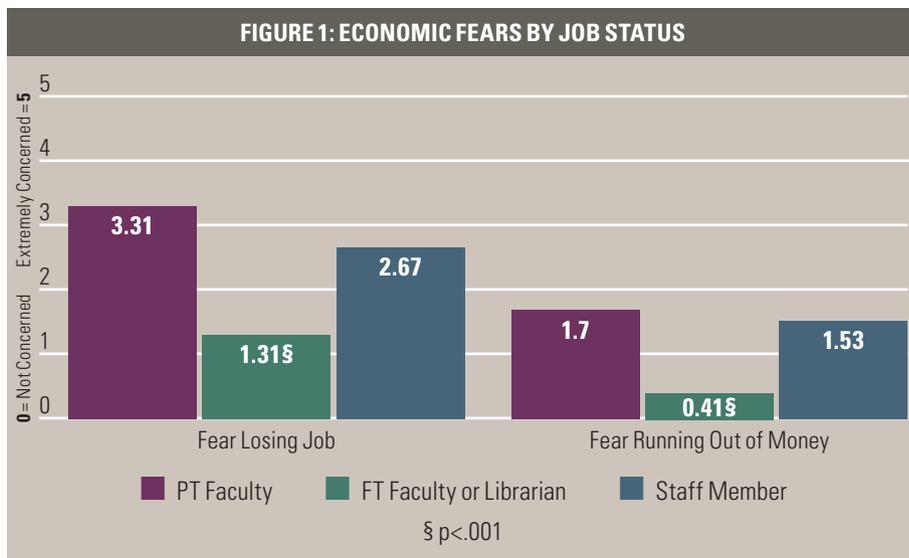
Though staff and part-time faculty experienced stress, fear, and anxiety about the virus, their experiences differed based on their job status, with part-time faculty being most job-insecure but with essential staff the most unable to ensure a safe environment for

themselves. One staff member wrote, "Lack of communication and consideration of staff safety (requiring reopening or pushing being back on campus too soon) has been a greater stress than getting sick." Work roles make clear the differing levels of privilege.

When we looked at our data broken down in terms of gender, other interesting patterns emerged. Research suggests that men participate in child-care much more than in the past, but that women still do the bulk of child-care and housework in heterosexual partnerships, a reality likely intensified by the pandemic. A female staff member said:

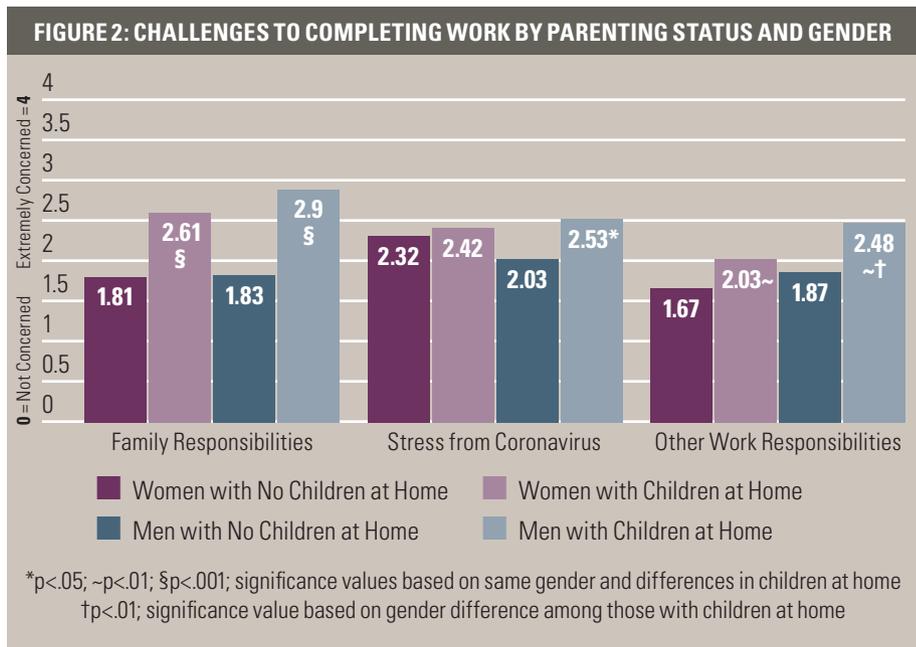
I'm either neglecting my children or neglecting my work... Even though my husband and I both are working full time from home, I'm bearing the brunt of caring for the kids... I try to work late at night but much of my job is supposed to be student facing during the day so I conduct those virtual appointments but then the rest of my work (projects, etc.) gets pushed back and I feel behind. This feels impossible.

Numerous respondents described comparable strains yet, interestingly, our data show that women experienced less stress being home than men. Predictably, parents with children at



home expressed significantly more difficulty getting work done because of family responsibilities (2.90 to 1.83 for men; 2.61 to 1.81 for women) and other work (2.48 to 1.87 for men; 2.03 to 1.67 for women) than those without children at home. There was no significant difference related to stress of the coronavirus on completing one's work for women (regardless of parental status) while men with children at home expressed significantly more work stress than men without children at home (2.53 to 2.32) underscoring the impact of parenting on people's work life (see Figure 2).

Men generally reported greater levels of stress staying home, handling family responsibilities, and difficulties getting work done than women, regardless of parental status, though men without children at home were least likely to feel that Covid stress affected their work. We hypothesize that women's everyday "invisible labor" helped facilitate a transition into lockdown while, for men, who are less likely to perform emotional and household labor, the shift was more pronounced. Especially fascinating is "other work," where men with children at home expressed more difficulty completing their university work than women with children at home (2.48 to 2.03). We cannot say categorically what "other work" means but suspect it includes housework and



childcare; though women likely found themselves doing even more household labor and childcare than usual, they may also be habituated to this imbalance in gendered work and, thus, possibly experienced less of an initial shock than men did.

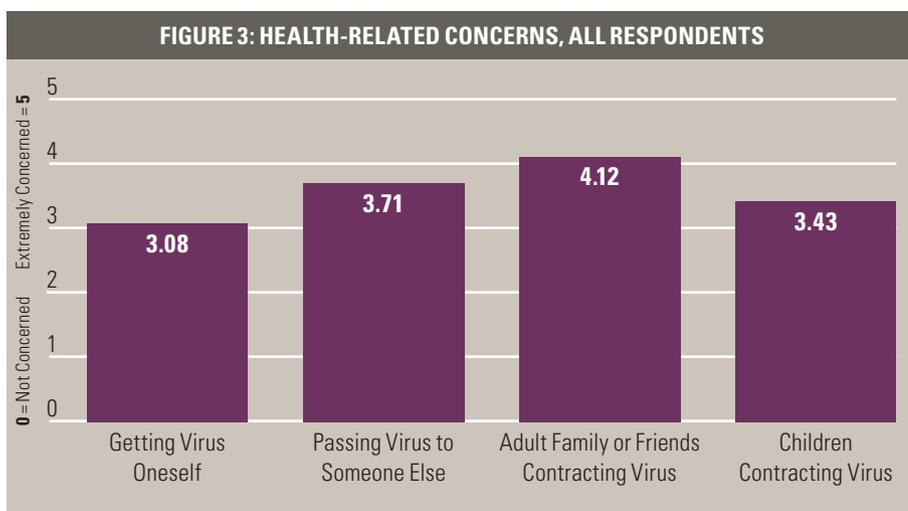
### Care and Inspiration

Our data showed that community members were more worried about the well-being of their adult family members and friends and about passing on the virus than they were about getting the virus themselves. Respondents had a mean response of 4.12 when asked how concerned they were about an

adult family member or friend contracting the virus and 3.71 for concerns about passing the virus on. This is higher than fears of getting the virus themselves (3.08) and even higher than worries of their children contracting the virus (3.43).

Early in the pandemic, reports were generally unequivocal that older people were contracting and dying from Covid at significantly higher rates than young people, thus fears for older adults make sense, but we find it notable that our respondents' greatest concerns centered on others, not themselves. This likely impacted their willingness to adopt health-related safety practices. In May 2020, only 6.2% of faculty and librarians and 1.4% of staff reported that they did not wear masks when leaving their homes while 79.7% of faculty and librarians and 75.2% of staff answered that they did not mind if lockdowns continued. One female staff member wrote:

I stated that I would be fine continuing to stay at home. Fine is not "fine." In this case, "Fine" is that I would feel safer keeping my child out of day care/preschool, which would require me to work from home... Does it come at a cost to



other aspects of my wellbeing? Yes, but medical health for my child is my primary concern.

Respondents' comments frequently focused on the experiences of others. A female faculty member wrote, "I do not have school-aged children... but it is extremely stressful for my colleagues and friends who are working from home with school-aged children." A male staff member encouraged extending virtual classes and keeping residence halls empty until a vaccine was available, saying, "Is it ideal? No. Might I lose my job? Yes, but I feel strongly that student and public safety should be our primary concerns."

and I don't think they were able to get much help. I tried to stay engaged with them hoping it would be helpful!" Our survey showed a remarkable concern for students by both faculty/librarians and staff and, overall, a focused concern outside of themselves, even as our sample also showed significant levels of stress for our respondents.

These comments highlight concern for, and efforts made to help, others as we all struggled with the stress and anxiety of the pandemic. One of the brightest spots for many faculty and staff was the response of the IT staff who provided support for teaching and working remotely. Among all comments, even

told us, "I am exhausted, depressed, and nearing the end of my limits on this. Sorry, just want to be honest ... I am completely sure a large number of faculty are having similar feelings, but may not report them."

We began this research because we felt overwhelmed and alone, and suspected others felt similarly. We finished the survey convinced that so many of us, faculty, librarians, and staff, were indeed floundering, yet put on happy faces and worked diligently, sometimes to the detriment of ourselves and our families, for the benefit of our students. We are left with the surety that those who worked at BSU through the pandemic worked hard, often with little recognition, and shouldered many burdens for others.

<sup>1</sup>We first examined our data in the following article: Fox, Kimberly E. and Norma J. Anderson. 2020. "Experiences of Life in a Pandemic: A university community coping with coronavirus." *Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and ADVANCE Working Paper Series 3(2) Special Issue*: 14-28. For a more complete analysis than we include here, please see our original paper.

---

## Staff reported greater unease about losing their jobs than faculty and were more concerned about running out of money.

---

While knowing someone with Covid was common in our sample, and surely played a role in adoption of safety precautions and general stress, it is striking that our respondents were so focused on others' well-being, whether they personally experienced Covid or not, and even as they experienced heightened stress and anxiety levels, loss of daycare, and a shift to schooling children at home, all while working. A female staff member told us, "I feel as if I never leave work these last few months... I tend to check my email more often than normally (and at all hours) because [students'] anxieties and fears are real now. I worry more about our students and feel less able to support them virtually. This has added to my stress." And a female faculty member said, "My main concern was for my students. So many struggled with mental health issues

those reporting difficulties, IT staff were universally praised for helping an entire campus move online. A faculty member wrote, "Kudos to the Teaching and Technology Center for constantly reaching out to show they care and offer support."

### Closing Thoughts

While this is just a tiny fraction of the information gleaned from our survey, the information presented here shows that the pandemic had different impacts on us based on work roles, family status, and gender, but that our whole community struggled in the first wave of the coronavirus. As one female faculty member said, "We're all going to come out of this with some form of PTSD." Worries about others, even more than themselves, weighed on folks. A male faculty member, discussing work,



*Norma Anderson is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology.*



*Kimberly E. Fox is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology.*