



COVID-19 Differential Impacts Focus Groups Summary of Conversations

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A university task force was charged with conducting focus group meetings with campus leaders and supervisors to gain a better understanding of their concerns regarding their ability to promote equity and success for faculty and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nine focus groups composed of campus leaders and supervisors met from February 9 to February 18, 2021. Of the 59 focus group participants, there were 4 senior administrators, 8 deans, 11 academic chairs and directors, and 36 administrative and classified staff supervisors. In addition, leaders and supervisors unable to attend a focus group session had the opportunity to respond to questions via an online survey, which received 21 responses.

The focus groups were facilitated by academic and administrative faculty and classified staff who served in a leadership and/or supervisory role: Savannah Baltera, Harriet Barlow, Jim Boyer, Robert Futrell, Juanita Hinojosa, Norma Saldivar, David Schwartz, Brigitte Sohn, and Anne Stevens. The focus groups were also provided with a scribe to record participant responses. The scribes were: Emma Bloomfield, Debra Coleman, and Kimberly Kendricks.

Together, the focus group facilitators and scribes identified 7 questions to pose to participants and place in a feedback survey: How has COVID-19 affected your faculty, staff, employees? What common concerns are you hearing about? What resources are available, and which are being most used? What resources do you wish you had more of? What guidance and/or resources would be useful to your program/office/college? What are obstacles you see to promoting equity and success for faculty, staff, and employees? Is there anything else you would like to add or anything that we didn't ask about that you want to share? For each question, participant responses were analyzed to identify common themes. Overall, five themes emerged from the feedback received. In addition, respondents provided suggestions for how UNLV can better support campus leaders in meeting the needs of their employees.

COMMON THEMES:

1. Campus leaders reported their employees felt anxious and stressed. Campus leaders reported that the health impacts of COVID-19, both physical and mental, as well as the need to shift to a remote work and instruction model made their employees (both faculty and staff) feel anxious and stressed. Many also reported that their employees felt anxious about what the future may bring.

For some employees, worry and fear regarding the health and well-being of family members who had contracted the virus, ended up in the hospital, or died from COVID were also contributing factors to their anxiety and stress. Employees who were caregivers (child- and/or elder-care)

reported that an increased workload due to the move to remote work was a top contributor to their anxiety.

The words most frequently used by leaders to describe their employees' experiences were the words "fear," "shock," and "survival mode," as well as "workday creep," which described the feeling by work-from-home staff that they were "at work" constantly. Campus leaders reported their employees working more than eight hours per day regularly, with a concomitant disruption of their work/life balance. Many employees experienced changing job duties, additional duties, and uncertainties around what might happen next (e.g., fears of catching the virus once they returned to work, unclear vaccine protocols), which increased anxiety. Further, faculty who relied on laboratory and field work for their research and instruction reported that doing meaningful work was difficult, and this contributed to their stress. Leaders reported that these challenges also emerged in comments as "lack of a social structure," wanting "more social interaction," and the "difficulties in collaborating and communicating virtually."

2. Flexibility was beneficial during the pandemic and continuation of flexible work practices may make UNLV run more efficiently and individual employees more productive. There was universal praise from campus leaders for the great work that the offices of Information Technology and Online Education did in moving the campus to remote instruction in Spring 2020 and preparing the campus for more remote instruction in Fall 2020. In addition, the Incident Management Team was cited for its response.

Leaders reported that some employees welcomed the flexibility that working from home brought, while other employees craved a return to working in person. Some employees had difficulty with remote work because of technical limitations, such as inadequate computers and poor internet bandwidth. Some leaders reported they were considering a "flex schedule" for staff even after the pandemic to support individual employees whose productivity levels were sustained or had increased in a remote environment.

3. Concerns that the pandemic was exacerbating divisions within UNLV. Several campus leaders felt that the burdens and stresses brought by the pandemic widened the gulf between the "haves," usually considered tenure-line faculty and administrators, and the "have-nots," construed as faculty in residence and contingent faculty, administrative faculty, and classified staff. Classified staff employees felt particularly left out of the loop and overlooked, as many communications and resources targeted students and academic faculty, and the duties to facilitate remote transitions for units fell to overburdened staff. In addition, existing divisions along racial and gender lines were exacerbated, with many references to how the pandemic had disproportionately impacted faculty of color and female faculty and staff who were responsible for shouldering additional childcare and home instruction responsibilities.

While some faculty and staff thrived while working remotely, with more time for work due to no on-campus distractions, others felt overburdened with working and juggling child- and elder-care responsibilities. Parents and caregivers reported a lack of recognition by leaders of the breadth of caregiving duties/responsibilities and the impact on work conditions and productivity compared to coworkers not having caregiving responsibilities.

4. More resources were needed for equitable care of faculty, students, and staff. Some of the resources that campus leaders reported they needed more of included mental health support,

guidance on safety measures, guidance for continued remote work, and guidance for transitioning back to in-person instruction/office work.

Some employees reported unequal access to technology and the internet from home, including varying workspace availability, which impacted work productivity. For these reasons, some specific technical resources were requested, as well: off-campus secure-transfer protocols to enable more productive work from home; computers for classified staff whose personal devices were not capable of supporting work from home; a university-wide Zoom plan; and funding to update technology.

Limited student access to Wi-Fi and computing resources at home was another concern. The feeling was that students writing essays on their phones, for example, were not going to perform as well as those working with PCs or even laptops. This led to stress for both students and instructors.

5. Consistent and transparent communication was essential. There was a difference of opinion reflected in the feedback regarding communication. Many participants lauded the campus leadership for its communication over the past year, saying that it was better than that from other institutions. However, others felt that the information shared was not complete or not timely enough. Both those who were happy with current communication practices and unhappy with them seemed in agreement that, for weathering and coming out of the pandemic, the campus was looking to the leadership for good communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Some specific suggestions for improving campus climate included:

Guidance and Communication

- Better guidance to assist with acknowledging the change in employee work schedules
- Better guidance to support employees with challenging work conditions
- Improved short-term crisis management
- More opportunities to share concerns with campus leadership
- Increased communication of digital resources such as guidance on using Google Jam

Policies and Resources

- Institutionalizing a remote/flexible work policy inclusive of those who originally were not eligible to participate (e.g., essential workers)
- Free/discounted parking
- Bringing back cost of living adjustments
- Granting pre-tenure faculty taking a tenure extension a pay increase during the year that they were originally slated for tenure, or back paying for the missing years after tenure was received
- More teaching lines
- More support for student success and returning students to campus
- Continuing technology resources such as Zoom, Jabber, G-Suite, etc.
- Possible scanning and emailing of physical mail sent to offices
- Support for continuing work from home for classified staff
- Ensuring comparable work from those working at home

- Structured promotion opportunities for administrative faculty
- Additional resources and support for the offices of Online Education and Information Technology

Mental Health Support

- Better guidance to support employees with mental health needs
- More facilitators for difficult conversations surrounding mental health and inequities
- More support for mental health emergencies for faculty, staff, and students
- More opportunities for social interaction among faculty and staff