

June 23, 2020

Dear Campus Leaders,

We are writing today to encourage each campus to design a clear, campus-wide policy on caregiving which offers the utmost flexibility for faculty, staff, and students in navigating the simultaneous responsibilities of caregiving, healthcare needs, and work responsibilities during the coming academic year. Not only does the UW System employ a great deal of parents with children, but many families, and a disproportionate number of first-generation students of color, will also need to care for grandparents, younger siblings, partners, and other family members as part of the COVID-19 landscape in the coming year. The UW System Women's and Gender Studies Consortium (WGSC) is a network of Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Programs and Departments across the state, and we work closely with faculty, staff, and students on issues relating to gender equity and intersectional inclusivity across the UW System and beyond. We have recently heard many concerns regarding childcare plans and caregiving demands for the coming academic year, including concerns about the lack of a clear policy on how faculty, staff, and students will balance these realities against in-person and online instruction, student advising, and other professional responsibilities in the fall and spring.

We appreciate that this is an evolving situation and are encouraged to hear that many campuses are already in the process of surveying faculty and staff to determine next steps. At this critical planning juncture, we would like to highlight the following concerns:

1.) Fundamentally, caregiving is a gender equity issue. As Women's and Gender Studies scholars point out, the bulk of the responsibility for coordinating childcare schedules, filling in caregiving gaps for other relatives and younger siblings, and maintaining household responsibilities still disproportionately falls upon women in many families. In times of health, social, political, and economic crises, gender inequities are exacerbated, and deepen when factors relating to income level, race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, non-traditional family structures, and ability are added to the equation.

2.) There will undoubtedly be a national childcare shortage and caregiving crisis in the fall and spring unlike any in recent history. The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families has already instituted a temporary rule limiting daycare class sizes to no greater than 10 children at a time, in addition to shortened hours, to accommodate cleaning and sanitizing protocols. Many of these facilities typically operate at more than triple this capacity. The Wisconsin Education Agency has also released recommendations indicating that public K-12

Women's & Gender Studies Consortium

University of Wisconsin-Madison

3301 Sterling Hall 475 North Charter Street Madison, Wisconsin 53706 USA

Phone: (608) 262-3056 Fax: (608) 265-2409 Email: wscoffice@uwsa.edu Website: consortium.gws.wisc.edu

Universities: Madison, Milwaukee, Eau Claire, Green Bay, La Crosse, Oshkosh, Parkside, Platteville, River Falls, Stevens Point, Stout, Superior, Whitewater

schools should consider instituting shifted schedules and smaller class sizes in the fall, which would either offer two days of public school instruction to families per week or a rotating schedule of four days in school followed by a full week off. For both daycare and public schools, public health officials are indicating that there will likely be additional temporary or permanent closures based on the public health situation. *The impact of this issue is further heightened for families with multiple children or students caring for younger siblings, because there are no guarantees that they can coordinate in-person school or daycare days amongst all of their children.* These changes are expected to last until a vaccine is in place.

3.) These childcare shortages are exacerbated by a simultaneous erosion of other caregiving contingency plans. The restrictions in place for daycares and public schools also extend to after-school care, community centers, and other enrichment and recreational centers which families rely on to fully cover childcare needs. Many families also rely on sharing responsibilities with other families or extended family networks, particularly grandparents, to fill in gaps when emergencies occur. Due to the vulnerabilities older people face from COVID-19 and the need to limit exposure amongst households, this back-up safety net will also be quite threadbare in the coming year.

4.) On top of all of these factors, a need to keep workplaces, schools, and childcare facilities safe will mean stricter sick leave protocols. The temporary guidelines currently in place from the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families require stricter standards for keeping children home who exhibit typical cold symptoms and other illnesses, and there are also protocols in place for completely closing in the event of staff absenteeism due to illness. These policies are completely necessary to offer the safest possible environments for childcare facilities and schools, but it also means that families will need to figure out how to cover additional unplanned childcare gaps due to serious and standard illnesses. Families with young children and multiple children will be particularly burdened by these demands as young children commonly contract regular illnesses in daycare settings, and it can take weeks for an illness to work through an entire household with small or vulnerable children and caregivers.

5.) Current evidence suggests that the pandemic is amplifying nearly every disadvantage that women in STEM already face including lower funding rates, lower journal submission rates, increased mentoring/service responsibilities, and exclusion from informal networks. For female-identifying academic caregivers, this is further escalated due to the lack of a daily school structure, childcare resources, and the increased cognitive demands of scheduling and schooling that all undermine attention and productivity as well as making it increasingly difficult to conduct on-campus teaching for long blocks of time or conducting scholarly work. Lack of access and time in research labs decreases scholarly output disproportionately for women due to the disruption of working hours and increased care responsibilities. It has also been widely

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noted that female-identifying researchers are starting fewer new scholarly projects due to the pandemic when compared to their male counterparts. **Failure to anticipate and respond to these inequalities could diminish years of work toward increasing gender-equity and undermine inclusive efforts for many years to come.** These same issues extend to care-providing students, especially students of color, who need to be on-campus for these types of activities or risk missing valuable lessons and opportunities unless alternative options or support are provided.

All of these issues are magnified for families with vulnerabilities of any sort—economic, health, ability (for parents or special needs children), gender make-up of families, mental health issues, and other factors related to systemic oppressions. Due to high-risk factors, it is understandable that some families will also completely opt-out of childcare or public-school instruction next year, and it is often financially untenable to substitute with private childcare. As Wisconsin institutions that promote and support inclusivity and diversity, UW universities should be leaders in rolling out policies that account for these sites of inequity and potential employment discrimination. We appreciate the efforts already in place to handle this unprecedented situation.

Based on feedback from professionals across the state and country, we would like to offer the following recommendations:

- **Create a specific emergency category that defines families and caregiving in the broadest terms possible. This should be a system-wide or campus-wide policy that ensures accessibility for all faculty, staff, and students.**
- **Allow flexibility for a swift transition to asynchronous teaching modes or work-from-home policies relating to childcare and caregiving responsibilities of any sort.** This should include a broad policy that would allow these choices to be made without fear of repercussion in terms of promotion or contract stability.
- **Create a leave policy that extends beyond utilizing accrued sick leave or FMLA.** Again, this becomes a gender equity issue as many women have already used FMLA for maternity leave and other health issues related to caregiving. The limitation of “family” as constructed by FMLA also overlooks the variety of families and caregiving situations which will arise in the coming year.
 - **Campuses should coordinate flexible attendance and assignment policies, keeping in mind the concerns and practices we recommend, with a particular emphasis on the need to offer the option of fully remote instruction as needed.** These same factors will affect students with caregiving responsibilities, many of

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whom are also working parents, first-generation students, and/or students of color.

- **Create a policy for leave and/or accommodation options for individuals with a variety of access needs.** The need for accessible childcare overlaps with other access needs, and some individuals may fall within multiple categories of vulnerability in the coming year.
- **Performance reviews and teaching evaluations should explicitly take into account the burden caused by pandemic-related childcare disruptions, and faculty should have the option to extend tenure decision deadlines.**

We deeply appreciate all of the thought and time going into a safe opening for the fall semester, and we hope these recommendations will help direct some of the decisions being made relating to employees and students grappling with unprecedented caregiving responsibilities in the coming year. We are eager to support this process as needed, and there are faculty and staff experts in gender equity on every UW System campus to help move this process along with an eye towards inclusivity, intersectionality, and proactive equity policies.

Sincerely,

The UW System Women's and Gender Studies Consortium
Director, Dr. Stephanie Rytilahti
srrytilahti@wisc.edu

Dr. Jennifer Schuttlefield Christus
Director, UW System Women and Science Program
schuttlj@uwosh.edu

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