



# Effects of COVID-19 on the Employees of UNC-Chapel Hill and Recommendations for Senior Leaders

## The UNC-Chapel Hill Employee Forum

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## Key Findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated feelings of mistrust between staff and administrators.
- Employees are anxious and frustrated. Staff, particularly, feel unheard and ignored.
- Administrators must advocate for creative solutions to find, generate, and expand resources and support for staff. Messages of appreciation without tangible actions are insufficient.
- There is an immediate need for increased transparency of budgeting, communication, and decision-making on campus.
- Staff need to hear regularly and directly from administrators on University plans, staff issues, and workplace concerns.

## Structure of the Report

This report begins with analytical considerations for readers followed by an analysis of main themes and ideas from the survey questions. The third section of the report synthesizes more data from the survey into global concerns for campus administrators and is followed by a recommendations section for addressing these concerns.

## Analytical Considerations

The enclosed report includes key themes and ideas from the COVID-19 impact survey sent by the UNC-Chapel Hill Employee Forum on August 25, 2020. The survey closed on September 9, 2020 with approximately 330 responses spanning faculty, staff, and graduate student employees from a diverse set of schools and work units across campus. Identifying information in responses has been removed from quotes used in this report to protect the anonymity of employees. Employees received the survey link through a Formal Notice email from the Employee Forum which also contained “feedback received so far” in the body of the email text which may or may not have affected employees’ responses in the survey. The report authors conducted an analysis of the survey responses using exploratory qualitative analysis to generate themes. Finally, this report includes the most common ideas and themes from the survey responses. It is not inclusive of every idea, comment, or suggestion voiced in the survey.

# Survey Response Analysis

The following section identifies and summarizes the major themes from the two main questions of the survey: “How has the current crisis affected your work unit?” and “What would you like to share with campus administrators about this situation?” A third question, asking employees to describe how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their families, was not included in this analysis. Responses from that question will be de-identified and shared by the Chair of the Employee Forum in different forms and venues. The end of this section includes a brief description of concerns employees were willing to share with the Forum.

## *How has the current crisis affected your work unit?*

Unsurprisingly, the most reported effects of the COVID-19 pandemic deal with the switch to remote working environments, new split-staffing schedules to accommodate social distancing, and pivoting existing work into new virtual formats or processes. In responding to this question, 12 percent of respondents explicitly stated that they were working more or harder than before the pandemic with an additional five percent of respondents noting they were now engaging in new, COVID-19-specific work. Many of the responses in this section identified a loss of connection between colleagues and feelings of exhaustion corresponding to a loss of productivity in work units.

*“Everyone is currently working from home, there has been significant disruption in our normal programming, the hiring freeze has meant that vacated responsibilities have fallen to remaining staff who are already very busy. Most notably, half of our staff have been working diligently on reopening preparations and plans with no clear change in expectations about getting their normal workload accomplished. People are feeling overworked, ignored, and burnt out.”*

Despite the challenges and stress associated with rapidly transitioning campus operations online, nearly six percent of respondents to this question stated that their units handled the transition successfully and, in some cases, grew closer together as a result of the process.

## *What would you like to share with campus administrators about this situation?*

When asked what they would like to share with campus administrators about the current situation, employees took the opportunity to share their emotions, challenges, and advice for administrators. The two most expressed emotions from employees were frustration and stress. Variations of those specific words appear in slightly more than 10 percent of all responses, and the content of many more responses displayed these same emotions without using the precise terms.

The following themes appeared most in the responses and are described below beginning with the most frequently mentioned.

### Be Flexible

*“The biggest gift campus administrators can grant to staff is flexibility, understanding, support, and grace.”*

The most common piece of advice to campus leaders from administrators was to be flexible. Employees identified many ways for administrators to demonstrate flexibility including the indefinite extension of teleworking, flexible work schedules, reducing unnecessary work from job descriptions, and accommodating parents who are assisting children with virtual learning.

### Provide Additional Compensation

*“I wish there could be some benefit for the folks that are required to physically report to campus to help offset the difference, either through a bonus or additional vacation time...perhaps bonus leave would be the least expensive, easiest means to provide compensation and show appreciation for these valuable workers.”*

Numerous employees commented on the need for some form of additional compensation, particularly for employees who have been required to work on campus throughout the pandemic. There were many requests for hazard pay, additional time off, and

#### **Advice from Employees to Campus Administrators**

- Be Flexible
- Provide Additional Compensation
- Be Transparent
- Protect Vulnerable Staff
- Take Responsibility

planned mental health days. Others noted the need to support employees with childcare obligations and several called for more graduate student employee assistance and removing costs for parking.

### Be Transparent and Address the Lack of Transparency

*"I wish that there was more transparency within the university. All too often we were learning about critical information along with the public and that is unacceptable. I'm unable to do my job/support students to the best of my ability when I'm constantly doing damage control."*

Employees frequently identified the lack of transparency as a challenge to managing the current situation and encouraged administrators to be more transparent. Responses identified the "game of telephone" from senior leaders to managers to staff, uncertainty of job security, obfuscating information about positive cases, and frequent policy changes as barriers to transparency. Most employee recommendations for improving transparency centered around improving communications.



### Protect Vulnerable Staff

*"The University is of the people and thus we must care for our people. I worry for our facilities, housekeeping, dining, and other staff who cannot work from home. I worry for our temporary staff who do not have as many benefits and protections as permanent staff. These employees are likely to be feeling the physical, mental, and economic impacts of the pandemic compared to faculty and the rest of Carolina's staff. We must protect them systematically."*

Many of the responses in this section asked administrators to protect Carolina's more vulnerable staff members who are unable to work from home and who might also be experiencing other difficulties related to the pandemic. Other responses in this section encouraged administrators to make equity a primary consideration if furloughs or pay cuts become necessary.

### Take Responsibility

*"You didn't listen to the people who were put at risk by your choice to reopen campus. Your mostly white and affluent administrative staff failed to address the disparities inherent in this pandemic and in your decision to reopen. And now you continue to pass the buck on responsibility in any direction you can."*

One theme arising from the responses was that the senior leaders on campus needed to take responsibility for the outcomes of the Fall semester reopening attempt. A few responses referenced the Provost's oft-quoted statement that he "would not apologize for trying," seeing that statement, along with comments from senior leaders about students failing to follow the community standards, as an unwillingness on the part of senior leaders to take responsibility for their role in the outcome.

### Administrators are Doing a Good Job / Did a Good Job in the Fall

*"I believe senior administrators are themselves working extremely hard and are as exhausted and anxious as we are. They are constantly in the spotlight and absorb criticism from all sides. I would like for them to know that I wish this situation were easier for them, too, and that I also wish people would extend to them at least a little more compassion, if not appreciation."*

While this theme appeared less frequently than the others, approximately four and half percent of respondents to this question believed that administrators on campus were doing their best and/or doing a good job given the difficulty of the situation.



## Global Concerns

### Culture of Mistrust and Fear

*"They have caused more paranoia and distrust in the community because of their decision."*

When viewed holistically, one cannot help but see the overwhelming mistrust of the University in the survey responses. Many employee responses indicated that the administration's decision-making in the Fall had broken trust with faculty, staff, and students. The road to earning back trust is long and difficult. It is obvious though, from the survey responses, that administrators cannot simply pretend like the Fall semester reopening attempt did not happen. Employees are skeptical about a Spring reopening and administrators have failed to authentically engage with employees to outline how a Spring reopening will be more successful than what happened in the Fall.

*"Please do not repeat our fall 2020 experience in spring 2021. We had more time to prepare for fall than we will for spring. If we consider a similar opening to the fall, it will require herculean efforts (again) in perhaps a shorter time frame."*

One symptom of the mistrust on campus is the fear employees, particularly staff members, feel in speaking out about the current situation. Multiple survey respondents explicitly requested their information not be shared with administrators.

*"I wish I felt comfortable sharing my name. But I trust absolutely nothing about this university right now."*

### Staff Feel Ignored, Unheard, and Left Out of Communications

*"Staff are often an afterthought in the decision-making process. Students' desires and faculty's demands are continually prioritized over the well-being and needs of the staff that keep this University running."*

A second, overarching theme apparent throughout the survey is that staff members feel like senior campus leaders do not consider their needs in the same way they consider the needs of faculty members and students. One of the most visible and obvious examples of this differential treatment is the University's creation of a CV-19 Student Care Hub (also known as "Keep Learning") and two separate websites for faculty ("Keep Teaching" and the CV-Faculty Care Hub) while stubbornly refusing to create a "Keep Working" website for staff. Information for staff members exists, but it is spread out across multiple websites including Carolina Together and the UNC Human Resources website and is often difficult to find and synthesize.

In official University communications, staff are frequently either left out or are added as an afterthought following information for students and faculty. For example, on October 1, Chancellor Guskiewicz announced that Friday, October 9 would be a kind of mental health day for campus. The first three paragraphs of that announcement were targeted to students, with instructions for faculty members on how they could go about "pausing" instruction. A brief paragraph at the end of the email directed staff to the Employee Assistant Program and encouraged them to have a "meeting free mental health break" that day.


The ad hoc nature of this mental health day also highlights how out of touch the administration is with "on the ground" employees. Asking faculty members to change their syllabus (rescheduling projects, papers, quizzes, etc.) and switch to asynchronous instruction without losing any instructional time creates more work and stress for faculty. Similarly, announcing a "meeting free" day does not magically eliminate meetings. In fact, it creates a great deal more stress and work for the administrative personnel who typically schedule those meetings and the staff members who have scheduled meetings that absolutely cannot be rescheduled.

The obvious question resulting from these overarching concerns is how staff can be more meaningfully represented on campus. There are currently some avenues through which staff concerns are voiced and heard by campus administrators. For example, one frequently mentioned request in the survey responses was for administrators to create on-campus testing for staff.

There are now two alternating testing sites offering COVID-19 screening on a weekly basis. The channels through which these employee concerns reach senior leaders, however, are unclear to many employees. Simply adding staff members to committees will not solve the problem. For example, staff members are well represented on the Campus and Community



Advisory Committee, but staff are not seeing any changes in their treatment – communications are still focused on students and faculty. Additionally, while it is an important organization, the Employee Forum is not a proxy for engaging with the broader community of University staff. The answer is unlikely to be simple and will require the University to make structural changes to the way it thinks about staff.



Top Concerns Employees Wanted to Share With the Employee Forum
Unequal Staff Treatment
Safety on Campus
Lack of Transparency and Unclear Direction from Campus Administrators
Confidentiality of Survey Responses
When Will Personnel Actions Happen and Who Will They Affect?
Who Will Hold Administrators Accountable?



## Recommendations

Based on the emerging themes from the survey, we recommend the following actions for senior leaders to consider immediately:

### *Advocate for Creative Solutions to Find, Generate, and Expand Resources and Support for Staff*

- Consider using the endowment, or interest from the endowment, to accommodate the emergency situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. If endowment funds cannot support traditional compensation or bonuses, consider using it to subsidize parking and transportation costs so that parking is again free to employees.
- Plan mental health days, like the student “sprinkle days”, during the Spring semester. Explicitly target these days to staff and give more notice prior to their occurrence.
- Think about creative ways to use leave. Could COVID-19 Voluntary Shared Leave or Community Service Leave be used to support employee mental health?
- Create special carve-out benefits for staff who must work on campus.
- Acknowledge that University decisions affect employees’ home lives. Employees aren’t only experiencing workplace tension—on-site employees are risking viral transmission to family members and are unavailable to support childcare/virtual learning in the home.
- Re-examine decision-making and committee structures and find ways to represent more staff diversity in terms of demographics and job descriptions/locations on campus. Stop inviting the same people to the table all the time.

### *Be More Transparent*

- Schedule a transparent budgeting conversation wherein senior finance leaders communicate the state of the University’s finances including what monies are available, what is already allocated, and what kind of deficit the University is facing. Trust staff with this information.
- Chancellor Guskiewicz meets regularly with faculty and student groups. He should also regularly meet with staff groups beyond the Employee Forum.
- Clearly communicate to staff the advocacy senior leaders are conducting on their behalf to other campus leaders, the System Office, the Office of State Human Resources, and General Assembly.
- Create communications targeted to staff concerns. Examples include:
  - Can staff members bring home their work equipment? (computer, chair, etc.)
  - Decisions about teleworking in the spring and summer—give people time to plan.
  - Encourage managers to be as flexible as possible and give them specific guidelines. All guidelines communicated to managers should also be communicated to all staff in order to avoid the game of “management telephone.”
  - Vice Chancellor Menghini stated at the October Employee Forum meeting that there would be no personnel actions until January 2021 at the earliest. This must be communicated to all staff on campus immediately to allay fear and anxiety.

### *Abandon Toxic Positivity*

*“The aggressively positive and upbeat communications that we’ve seen coming down over the summer has been really disheartening. Hearing the administration talk so much about moving quickly forward and trying to get back to normal (or even a ‘new normal’) makes it sound like no one wants to acknowledge how hard all this is.”*

Regular updates to employees are helpful tools. However, the constant stream of positive messaging with little regard for the difficulties everyone is facing during this time is unhealthy and displays a lack of emotional awareness by campus leaders. Acknowledge the collective anxiety and stress this community is experiencing. Be honest about the challenges facing UNC-Chapel Hill in the coming months and trust that Carolina employees will, as Chancellor Guskiewicz stated in his formal installation speech, “rise to the occasion because that is what Tar Heels do.”