Disproportionate Service: Considering the Impacts of George Floyd’s Death and the Coronavirus Pandemic for Women Academics and Faculty of Color

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on disproportionate service burdens faced by women academics and faculty of color in higher education created by COVID-19 and the massive, multilocation street protests that followed George Floyd’s death. Our work aims to inform provosts, deans, directors, and other institutional actors in academia who recognize the need for documenting structural inequities and investing in high-impact, long-term solutions. Recommendations are offered to meet challenges, given the need to raise colleague awareness of disproportionate service burdens.

This article focuses on disproportionate service burdens faced by women academics and faculty of color in political science. Here we spotlight challenges created by the protests following George Floyd’s death and the COVID-19 pandemic to the advancement of equity goals, drawing links that may not be readily seen due to preexisting inequalities, with an eye toward the future and best practices. Our reflection aims to inform provosts, deans, directors, and other institutional actors in political science and beyond who recognize the need for documenting and correcting structural inequities. If the discipline wishes to diversify its membership and tackle its long history of systematic inequality (Blatt 2018), understanding that disproportionate service burdens result in negative outcomes for women academics and faculty of color is central to achieving those goals (Alexander-Floyd 2008, 2015; Sinclair-Chapman 2015). Neither our focus on the aftermath of George Floyd’s death nor our attention to the coronavirus is meant to imply that these topics are the only contemporary examples that provide contextual evidence to support our claims about disproportionate service, nor are our recommendations restricted to them. We turn now to an in-depth discussion of disproportionate service in relation to these events.

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Claims of disproportionate service burdens have long been reported in the profession. In addition to well-documented assertions that departments, colleges, and universities are fraught with insult and degradation (Fraser-Burgess et al. 2021; Rodriguez 2012), existing literature reveals the ways women academics and faculty of color are overrepresented on committees that involve more service than prestige and that advance neither their salaries nor academic careers (Alter et al. 2020; Anonymous and Anonymous 1999; APSA Political Science in the 21st Century 2011; Mitchell and Hesli 2013; Nair 2018). Take, for example, ad hoc committees on institutional diversity in the wake of George Floyd’s death. Colleges and universities faced a moment of reckoning with demands for racial justice, putting faculty of color in a precarious position if they saw themselves as part of a continuum of activism linking police shootings, on-campus protests, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Although it is incumbent on us all to seek a more equitable and antiracist society, faculty of color can feel obliged to do so because of the insidious nature of racism on campuses. Still, it should not be assumed that they have such an interest.

Standing in solidarity with those who are marginalized is no easy task. Thus, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of ally training. The stakes are high, especially when universities, through their practices and policies, are as complicit in injustice as are police departments and juries that refuse to acknowledge the humanity of people of color (Fraser-Burgess et al. 2021). It is especially frustrating when departments and other academic units resist elevating the discourse and oppose efforts to remedy
systemic inequalities. Although the practice of cluster hires can promote diversity and the inclusion of faculty of color, especially Black faculty, or of scholars whose work focuses on racial and ethnic disparities, the recruitment and hiring process is time consuming and emotionally exhausting for those involved in such a campus-wide approach. Our concern is not with the initiative itself, but the labor costs associated with conducting multiple searches at once. Although many faculty have dreamed of such hiring initiatives, given the low percentage of faculty of color in political science who identify as Black (4.88%), Latino (5.92%), or Asian (7.34%), the labor involved in serving on these hiring committees is considerable, and more attention to work-life balance is needed for those involved in the recruitment process, especially women academics and faculty of color (APSA 2020 Dashboard Data Report).

The classroom is a diverse social setting and resembles an incubator for democratic inclusion. To respond effectively to the call to promote equity and inclusion, we in our respective departments, colleges, and universities, as well as disciplines, must—through the research we publish, the authors we invite to speak, the courses we teach, and the individuals we hire—raise colleague awareness and inform successive generations of students entering the workforce that these seemingly intractable problems are rooted in socioeconomic and political systems that entrench structural power and privilege in the hands of a few. As such, it becomes increasingly important for all faculty and students to develop and refine skills needed to practice political knowledge and cultural competence, which in no way displaces the collective responsibilities of educational institutions.

Take, for example, the protests that followed George Floyd’s death. They created the need for interpretive labor to help others within the university, discipline, and community write large understand state-sanctioned anti-Black violence. There was an immediate response and extraordinary desire to draft statements, organize forums, and coordinate workshops involving such antiracist activists as Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi. The demand for faculty of color to write op-eds and blog posts and to facilitate webinars was exceptional as well. Although most would concede that the work is necessary, it was arduous and unevenly distributed among these faculty. Given their low numbers and concentration in junior ranks, women academics and faculty of color necessarily serve above their skill level as the most junior and least experienced members of ad hoc committees for institutional diversity and inclusion, when they are not experts in handling grievances and demands on a university-wide scale. Absent

Absent diverse support networks, ally training, and a measured approach, women academics and faculty of color are likely to experience role strain.

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COVID-19
It is important to consider the disparate impact of COVID-19, just as we have the murder of George Floyd. Women academics and faculty of color, as a group, already juggled more domestic and affective, or emotional, labor prior to the pandemic (Argyle and Mendelberg 2020). For women with multiple roles—be they ethnic, gender, or familial—the coronavirus exacerbated inequities, making it more difficult to find balance between different kinds of work (research, teaching, mentoring, and service) while at the same time stripping them of supports—childcare—that better equipped them to strike that balance. Early data showed that COVID-19 adversely affected women’s research productivity as evidenced by “unusual” and “gendered patterns” of overall submissions according to editors of lead journals in the discipline (Flaherty 2020; Kramer 2020).

Studies have shown that women and men devote significantly different amounts of time to caregiving; for example, with preschool children or elderly parents (Jacobs and Winslow 2004; Schiebinger and Gilmartin 2010; Stack 2004; Windsor and...
shifted between weekdays and weeknights, the working week personal home offices, the amount of time spent on research the pandemic, as we moved from classrooms to living rooms and ranks, based on data from a national survey of postsecondary than 50 hours a week, regardless of institution type and at all and domestic duties at home simultaneously.

Because women academics and faculty of color are typically paid less than their white male colleagues, and single parents have fewer economic resources and support options, they will have a harder time coping with capitalist imperatives to impose furloughs, cancel merit raises, reduce salaries, extend budget cuts, and suspend matching contributions to retirement accounts.

Many women academics, especially Black women academics, have come to accept the expectation that they will neglect self-care to support children, parents, and extended family members; during the pandemic, this care burden increased as families were in isolation, and existing support networks were depleted (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Jackson and Pederson 2020; Matthews 2020). Black women are especially vulnerable to chronic psychological stress, a result of early health deterioration and the cumulative impact of their persistent, high-effort coping with systemic inequality as they strive to put others at ease and counteract negative stereotypes of themselves (Alexander-Floyd 2015; Geronomus et al. 2006; Matthews 2020; Michelson and Lavaria Monforti 2021; Simien 2020). The belief that Black women are tireless, deeply caring, and invulnerable has helped maintain exploitative hierarchical arrangements at home and in the workplace (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009) while contributing to negative health outcomes and such chronic conditions as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease that made the coronavirus more deadly (Simien 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS
Some of these systemic factors associated with George Floyd’s death and the pandemic may be beyond the scope and control of departments, colleges, and universities—and even the profession. Still, we offer a list of recommendations to counteract their negative impacts on women academics and faculty of color. If they prioritize these initiatives, universities can reallocate existing departmental, college, provost, and university funds to support them.

For faculty facing additional service following Floyd’s death, the hiring of additional faculty members of color may be a
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necessary action. It is critical to distribute the service roles related to diversity and inclusion more equitably, with ally training made available to all employees at the university. Institutions should provide additional resources that support faculty who wish to revise their course syllabi or offer programs that address anti-Black racism. Making sympathetic faculty aware of available funds, competitive awards, teaching center workshops, and technical support could be very effective, aiding faculty members of color who otherwise would be disproportionately burdened by these tasks.

As did the antiracism protests, the pandemic revealed the reluctance of federal, state, and local governments under the Trump administration to reduce social inequalities and systemic racism through newly created policy measures and additional resources. In these unprecedented times we should explore contradictions within higher education institutions that cause them, like government, to be slow to acknowledge faculty concerns, create new policies, and allocate resources. Policies that would provide robust support include the following:

- paid leave for parents with pressing childcare or elder care needs
- childcare subsidies
- flexible class schedules, including evening and weekend options, and offering multiple sections of the same course
- grading and teaching support from an additional teaching assistant
- alternative work arrangements like shared teaching responsibilities
- course reductions
- tenure clock extensions
- adjustments made to tenure standards, especially in areas that have normally undervalued the contributions made by women academics and faculty of color
- waiving all nonessential service for departmental or campus-wide committees, even recording departmental meetings so that they can be accessed asynchronously
- pausing student evaluations for the duration of the pandemic
- offering telehealth services among other resources for self-care and optimal safety

There must be a shift in what administrators, coworkers, partners, and families expect from women academics and faculty of color. Institutions have varied in their responses to the pandemic, many creating ad hoc systems whereby individual faculty members had to make a case before their chair or dean to receive accommodations.

Such ad hoc systems illuminate the power hierarchies that structure interactions between faculty members and university administrators. Given the tension between the faculty member’s right to privacy and the need to make a persuasive case that merits accommodation, the disclosure process can trigger an involuntary recall of personal trauma and evoke unanticipated emotional reactions. Ad hoc systems offer faculty members some degree of autonomy but heighten their vulnerability. It would behoove institutions to set up necessary resources, supports, and counseling in advance of these conversations. Although it is impossible to anticipate all topics that might be discussed, administrators might benefit from a forewarning of certain topics in preparation for hearing potentially disturbing narratives. Being sensitive to such candid testimony would help alleviate faculty members’ anxiety, given the additional emotional, cognitive, and physical labor that goes unrecognized at this unprecedented time (Kramer 2020; Scheiber 2020).

In keeping with this ad hoc systems approach, a self-assessment of service differentials should be administered across and within departments, colleges, and universities, controlling for such determinants as race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, and rank. This would raise the awareness of department chairs and deans of how service assignments are being allocated; colleagues’ awareness of service loads would also enable women academics and faculty of color to accept or decline service requests at the same rates as others (Flaherty 2017). In short, greater institutional efforts and accountability at the administrative level are necessary.

Although some institutions have conducted preliminary surveys on COVID-19 and its impact on faculty, we are unaware of any surveys that include items related to George Floyd’s death and the protests that followed this event. These data would capture how faculty members view these challenges as influencing their well-being and career trajectory. Any policies that are implemented to provide support should be evaluated routinely by faculty in terms of their efficacy. Regular data collection would facilitate sustained dialogue about the systems and policies put in place and indicate when reevaluation of them is needed to assess whether they are working as intended and effectively over time. Reforms that are instituted immediately may be short-term solutions to the interactive, cumulative effects of these combined events that exacerbated preexisting structural inequalities at universities. Yet, the long-term goal must be to institute a more comprehensive but targeted approach from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives for the purpose of dismantling the structures that perpetuate disproportionate service, thereby ensuring equitable treatment at higher education institutions.

Although considerable progress has been made in tackling the coronavirus pandemic and nearly all institutions of higher education have made the decision to return to in-person classes, the pandemic is far from over. Faculty continue to raise concerns about the health and safety practices on their campuses, given relaxed social distancing and other preventive measures, like volunteer masking versus mandates, absent a layered approach that includes masking, ventilation, quarantining, and social distancing (Olberding 2021; Petit 2021). For faculty with young children who are not eligible for vaccination or only recently became eligible, rising surges among the unvaccinated, while access to reliable childcare remains difficult, are particularly worrisome. And so, institutions of higher education must be adept at revising their support mechanisms and implementing policies for the benefit of those who have been disproportionately affected by the protests that followed George Floyd’s death and the pandemic.

Future research might explore explicit ways that allies can contribute to these efforts both in terms of antiracism and disproportionate service, including how legal structures outside academe might protect women academics and faculty of color from being the target of harassment by right-wing conservatives. It is recommended to compile a list of best practices at colleges and universities, including both bottom-up and top-down approaches that involve administrators, faculty, staff, and students alike. Finally, political science associations like the APSA or individual organized sections should consider ways they can similarly institute reforms to offset disproportionate service and
support anti-Black racism efforts via section awards, research grants, conference events, and short courses. Adding to the list of recommendations and identifying more ways that the profession can support these efforts can only enhance our current understanding of disproportionate service burdens for women academics and faculty of color. Whether the proposed reforms outlined here are accepted or contested by the discipline remains to be determined by our academic institutions and colleagues in the profession.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

NOTES
1. Although we focus on women academics and faculty of color, we understand that caregiving is not a woman’s issue alone and that this pandemic was and will be experienced differently by men who provide coequal parenting and by those who occupy intersectional space, such as same-sex couples and individuals with disabilities. We do not suggest that everyone is equally vulnerable and avoid making false equivalencies.

REFERENCES


