August 19, 2020

Dear Members of the Professional Standards Committee and Department and Program Chairs,

We write on behalf of the Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies Committee and the Committee on Faculty Diversity and Inclusion regarding the impact of Covid-19 on faculty evaluation. We do so out of concern for fellow faculty members, particularly our pre-tenure, female, and BIPOC colleagues who may be disproportionately affected by the pandemic for years to come. In addressing these issues, we echo concerns raised by faculty at other institutions. Indeed, the pandemic’s impact on higher education in general and on faculty in particular is a national conversation, one that has already begun at the College and should continue.

We thank the Professional Standards Committee for its policy announcement dated April 13, 2020 of an opt-out one-year tenure clock extension and an opt-in one-year senior review extension. We also value the statement issued by the Professional Standards Committee on May 25, 2020 acknowledging the additional burdens on faculty in light of the College’s new priority on teaching. The statement recognized the impact of Covid-19 on individual faculty research agendas as well as the demands on faculty, particularly parents of school-age children, to provide familial care during the pandemic. In particular, we applaud the decision to include a copy of the memo in the files of faculty members subject to review, and we are interested in confirming the longevity of that inclusion. We propose that
the time span for adding the memo to the files of all faculty under review be specified as six years to extend through 2026-27.

Moreover, we ask that the following broader considerations be made when reviewing faculty at all stages of their careers. While some of these concerns pertain to all faculty grappling with the impact of Covid-19 on their professional lives, others highlight the ongoing relevance of racial and gendered inequalities to American life and, by definition, the academy. Of those issues affecting all faculty, the mental health impact of the crisis is perhaps most widely shared. Fulfilling home and work responsibilities while navigating pandemic-induced restrictions on daily life has required extraordinary efforts on the part of all faculty. For some, these burdens have been overwhelming and taken a toll on their mental health. For others, maintaining mental health has meant sacrificing professional accomplishment.

The mental health impact of the pandemic has been especially significant for faculty with ill friends and family and of course those who have contracted Covid-19 themselves. In this regard, the racial disparities in public health and Covid-19 outcomes in the United States are significant and well-documented; statistically, BIPOC faculty are more likely to have family members suffer the ill consequences of Covid-19 or to suffer from the pandemic themselves. As the People of Color Alliance (POCA) wrote in their July 15, 2020 communication to the campus community, “The rates of infection and death within many communities of color, especially Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, are disproportionately high because of the legacy and persistence of systemic racism in the United States. A variety of factors have produced these levels of inequality, including segregation, inadequate health care systems, and health disparities caused by negligence in our governments.” Compounding the impact of the pandemic for Black faculty was the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 and the ongoing mental and emotional toll of witnessing repeated instances of racist violence in the United States.
Beyond the mental health implications of the pandemic for all faculty and BIPOC faculty in particular, the impact of Covid-19 nationally and internationally has been gendered, including in higher education. As demonstrated in an article titled, “In the wake of COVID-19, academia needs new solutions to ensure gender equity,” published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, 27 (June 17, 2020), women, LGBTQIA+ faculty, and faculty of color already perform disproportionate service in advising and teaching, including invisible service as student advisers. For example, BIPOC faculty routinely serve as teachers and advisers of students of color in addition to participating on College governance bodies concerned with diversity and inclusion; LGBTQIA+ and disabled faculty do the same. That this inequity has only grown as student needs have expanded during the pandemic has necessarily compromised research agendas, as has the inability to travel. Indeed, early research suggests that the impact of the pandemic on scholarly production has been gendered.

While delaying consideration for tenure may be an effective short-term means of recognizing the pandemic’s impact on research trajectories, studies have shown that stopping the tenure clock has effects that reverberate at the level of gender, race, and social class. Employing an analysis that is based on a gender binary, a June 27, 2016 article in *Inside Higher Ed* titled, “Unintended Help for Male Professors,” summarizes findings from an April 2016 study of Economics departments that demonstrated that, “[T]he success rate for male candidates increased by 19.4 percentage points after stopping the clock was offered. For women, the rate fell by 22.4 percentage points.” In her article, “Tenure Clock Extension Policies: Who Uses Them and to What Effect?,” *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education* 3, 1 (2010), Kate Quinn concluded that faculty who accept extensions suffer a higher rate of attrition than those who do not. In light of the evidence suggesting that women have shouldered more of the household responsibilities, including child care,
during the pandemic, it may be that female faculty were more inclined to
delay tenure by a year than their male colleagues or than they would have
been had their household responsibilities been more equitably shared.
Since stopping the tenure clock has financial implications for a faculty
member’s salary until retirement, it may also be that faculty members with
other financial means were more likely to accept the offer of a stoppage
than those for whom the salary difference mattered more. In particular, this
could be the case for faculty of color who, due to a relative lack of inherited
wealth, may have been less able to compensate for reduced research
funds or salaries.

Familial circumstances factor into faculty evaluations in other ways as well.
With local school districts requiring or offering remote education, faculty
with school-age children are hard pressed to balance full-time professional
lives with greater responsibilities at home. Moreover, faculty members
teaching without childcare find it challenging to offer the kind of “high-touch”
teaching and advising to which F&M students are accustomed and faculty
are expected and seek to provide. Faculty caring for ill or elderly family
members or those with special needs carry significant burdens as well.
Because these responsibilities fall disproportionately on female faculty,
such issues have special resonance for women on the tenure track. While
gendered concerns obtain for faculty at all stages of their careers, they are
amplified for faculty of color.

These realities are based in structural inequities in higher education and
are not solved easily or quickly. We ask that the College collectively
address this issue and think about long-term solutions to the multiple
inequities that will likely extend for years after this pandemic. In the short
term, there are some measures that we can adopt now. In that regard, we
respectfully request:

● that this letter be shared with department and program chairs at the
  first chairs’ meeting in 2020 and at least until AY 2026-2027.
• that this letter be included and highlighted in chairs’ training materials at least until AY 2026-2027.
• that chairs discuss with faculty members under review through 2026 the degree to which they want their review to address the impact of Covid-19 on their individual trajectory.
• that this letter be entered into the minutes of an early fall Professional Standards Committee meeting in 2020 and each year until AY 2026-2027.
• that this letter be included in any training materials made available to new members of the Professional Standards Committee through AY 2026-2027.
• that the Professional Standards Committee think systematically about how this pandemic will affect student evaluations and how to offset any negative consequences on individual faculty members’ SPOT forms.
• that the Professional Standards Committee address how it will consider the impact of Covid-19 at its annual meeting with tenure candidates.
• that the Professional Standards Committee consider the impact of the pandemic on research agendas when reviewing applications for and reports from junior faculty research semesters and sabbaticals.
• that service expectations be reduced for anyone who faces an emergency and/or is a caregiver during this time (when schools, daycares, and elder care are less available). A clear process to make this kind of request should be put in place.
• that committee chairs be encouraged to cancel or reduce non-essential meetings and that contributions to governance and service be evaluated accordingly.
• that the Professional Standards Committee reply publicly to this letter.