

# THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

## FACULTY

# Faculty Members Fear Pandemic Will Weaken Their Ranks

By Megan Zahneis | APRIL 09, 2020

The scenarios Christopher A. Makaroff was asking department chairs to consider were stark.

Makaroff, dean of Miami University's College of Arts and Science, recently sent a memo asking the college's department chairs to revise their course schedules for the fall, as part of "contingency planning" to account for the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Among the possibilities Makaroff's memo raised were a 20-percent drop in enrollment and teaching-load increases for faculty members. He also asked the chairs to create two schedules: one that included half as many visiting assistant professors as the department currently held, and one with no visiting assistant professors at all.



Photo Illustration by The Chronicle

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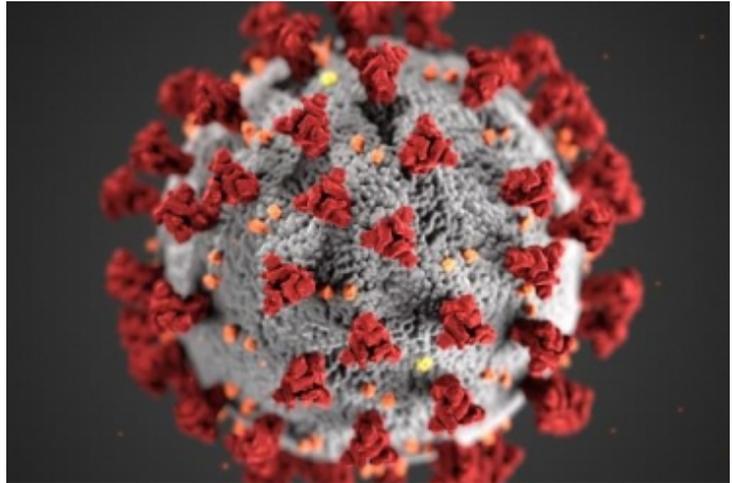
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## Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- How Will the Pandemic Change Higher Education? ✓ PREMIUM
- Colleges Euthanized Lab Animals to Protect Employees From Covid-19. Now They Face an Onslaught of Criticism.
- Covid-19 Is Scrambling the Job Market for Recent Grads. Here's How Colleges Are Trying to Respond. ✓ PREMIUM



The memo rattled faculty members at Miami and drew consternation from those elsewhere who heard about it, including Michael Bérubé, immediate past chair of Pennsylvania State University's Faculty Senate and a former president of the Modern Language Association. Actions of the sort outlined in Makaroff's memo would be "way pre-emptive," Bérubé said.

"This looked opportunistic, and I'm sure there's going to be places either increasing teaching loads or relying more on contingent faculty, where the motto is going to be, 'Don't let a good crisis go to waste,'" he said.

Carole Johnson, Miami's interim director of news and communications, wrote in an email that the memo was hypothetical, designed to generate discussion among department chairs and "certainly not intended to imply anything about Miami's future."

Nor was the memo unusual in the measures it proposed, Johnson said. "We imagine you will find similar contingency planning at most nationally ranked universities," she wrote.

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Covid-19 is being described as both a crisis and an opportunity for higher education. But how "opportunity" is defined depends on where one stands in the academic hierarchy. While some hope the pandemic provides a chance to reverse troubling trends toward the

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adjunctification and casualization of academic labor, administrators may see it as a different sort of opportunity, to realign institutional priorities or exert greater authority over their faculties.

Indeed, as colleges brace for a drop in fall enrollment and other financial hits, a crowdsourced list of institutions that have announced hiring freezes has more than 250 entries. Academics on social media have described having job offers rescinded. And in explaining hiring freezes as necessary to avoid layoffs, administrators have sparked fears among non-tenure-track faculty members that their jobs will soon be eliminated.

Central Washington University even declared financial exigency as a result of the pandemic, a step that would put it in a position to lay off even tenured faculty members with impunity. Its president told faculty members in a memo that he does not intend to lay off any faculty members.

Amid such maneuvers, professional organizations are watching for violations of shared-governance principles. The American Association of University Professors, for one, warned that “principles of academic governance apply no matter how exigent the situation.”

At Miami University, another memo, this one sent to the faculty by the provost, Jason W. Osborne, seemed to assert the opposite. “Unfortunately, economic and budgetary crises do not respect, nor respond to, shared governance,” Osborne wrote in the March 30 memo. “They happen, without our consent or input, and we must respond decisively to avoid even greater problems.”

Cathy Wagner, a professor of creative writing and the president of the campus’s AAUP chapter, disputed that notion. “Decisions do need to be made to change things in this crisis,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean that they can’t happen in a way that’s informed by faculty contributions.”

~~In an emailed statement to *The Chronicle*, Osborne said his original memo had been~~

“apparently ~~intended to~~ **Breaking news updates on the coronavirus** governance in these uncertain times.” He added that Miami’s University Senate **Sign up here** newsletter, first thing each morning.

“continues to meet and fulfill its critically important role in the university’s shared-governance process.”

## A Temporary Setback?

Faculty critics are also concerned that the pandemic will be used as a rationale to further undermine the traditional faculty model. A statement by the Tenure for the Common Good group offers 20 recommendations for administrators, including that they “resist using the current crisis as an opportunity to exploit contingency further by hiring more contingent faculty into precarious positions.”

Among the recommendations, “that one jumps out,” said Bérubé, a member of the group’s advisory board, “because that’s disaster capitalism 101.” It speaks, he said, to a “mentality that sees this as an opportunity for systemic structural change that isn’t actually warranted by the underlying economics.”

That viewpoint is not exclusive to administrators. In a recent interview with *The Chronicle Review*, Robert Zemsky, a professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, argued that colleges with many adjunct faculty members were in a better position to respond to the pandemic by eliminating “clutter” in their budgets. “Presidents will have to ask,” he said, “‘Is this the moment when?’”

Bérubé, for his part, expects the next year and a half to be difficult. But he says he’s taking his cues not from academic soothsayers who predict wholesale changes in higher ed, but from financial advisers who promise that the pandemic won’t prompt a repeat of the 2008 recession.

“I can understand the short-term panic, believe me. If you take a snapshot right now, it looks like a systemic collapse,” Bérubé said. But with economic recovery in mind, he added, “I really hope that any institution in higher education that puts things in place for next year does so in the spirit that they would be temporary.”

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Adrianna J. Kezar, co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, issued the same warning. “You don’t want to have responses in terms of a future faculty role that are unthoughtful, short term, and just a reaction to a

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pandemic,” she said. Instead, she hopes for renewed investment in full-time faculty members and an appreciation of the labor involved in online learning.

As faculty members are asked to take on greater teaching, advising, and administrative responsibilities, faculty development and retention “will be more important to institutional resilience — survival — than ever before,” Kiernan Mathews, executive director and principal investigator of the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, wrote on Twitter.

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread. At the top, a tweet from **Kiernan Mathews** (@Kiernan\_Mathews) dated Apr 4, 2020, is shown. It is a reply to another tweet and contains text 3/ (This brief exchange among #highered economists @kevinrmcclure, @cant\_b, @dhfeld1 + @rkelchen is helpful: twitter.com/kevinrmcclure/...). Below this is a quoted tweet from **Kevin R. McClure** (@kevinrmcclure) asking if any US universities are talking about teaching load changes this fall. Below that is another tweet from **Kiernan Mathews** (@Kiernan\_Mathews) dated Apr 4, 2020, at 12:35 PM, containing text 4/ So, strategic, designed, deliberate #facultydevelopment will be more important to institutional resilience—survival—than ever before. As Rumsfeld (in)famously put it, “You go to war with the army you have.” At the bottom of the screenshot is a link: [See Kiernan Mathews's other Tweets](#).

Mathews recognizes that advice might seem counterintuitive. “It sounds absurd, perhaps, to say, ‘You need to invest.’ They can’t invest in anything right now,” Mathews acknowledged. But he said retention and development costs pale in comparison to those an institution incurs by hiring a new faculty member.

If colleges fail to revise their tenure, promotion, and reappointment processes to account for the pandemic, Mathews said, an existing rift in higher education will only worsen.

“We will see, as we unfortunately expect to see in times of financial crisis, a further widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots, or the haves and the have-  
lesses,” he said.

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That widening, Mathews wrote on Twitter, will be most profound for women and faculty members of color. “All the efforts and gains that have been made in advancing a faculty whose diversity reflects the student body will be at risk of being stalled,” he said, “if not reversed.”

## ‘I Don’t Know How to Think About My Future’

Tom DePaola, who with Kezar and a fellow Pullias Center research assistant, Daniel T. Scott, wrote *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University*, said that it’s incumbent on faculty advocates and organizers to “convince leadership to not just suddenly start amputating limbs, but rather to come together and figure out a solution collectively.”

“No doubt there are administrators who see this as an opportunity to skip a few ranks,” DePaola said. “The university with a \$20-billion endowment is looking at the other universities that they might now surpass.”

To DePaola, the pandemic doesn’t pose new problems to academe as much as it magnifies existing ones. “Everything was held together with gum and paper clips, and coronavirus came and just sort of knocked it all down at once,” DePaola said. “I think none of the crises that this virus is causing are new. They’re just accelerated greatly. And the contradictions of the system are heightened all at once for people to see.”

Some of those contradictions lie in the academic job market, which DePaola said “was already strained to its absolute breaking point” when the virus hit. That leaves him in a difficult place; DePaola plans to receive his Ph.D. in May 2021, but doesn’t know if he’ll venture onto the academic job market at that time.

“I think the market is just way too thin to bounce back in any way,” DePaola said. “I don’t know how to think about my future. I don’t know how anyone’s thinking about their own futures in the academy right now.”

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Megan Zahneis, a reporting fellow for The Chronicle, is a graduate of Miami University of Ohio. Follow her on Twitter at @meganzahneis, or email her at [megan.zahneis@chronicle.com](mailto:megan.zahneis@chronicle.com). To keep up with the latest developments about COVID-19 and its impact on higher education, receive *The Chronicle's* Academe Today newsletter, first thing each morning.

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