

# “Put Your Mask on First before Helping Others”: Faculty Members as a Neglected Population During COVID

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In congruence with the conference theme, “Crafting a Resilient Future: Leadership, Education, & Inspiration”, our panel seeks to address the ways in which faculty members in LIS/IS programs have contended with the various changes and challenges stemming from the global pandemic of COVID-19 as well as broader –and related- trends reshaping the academic landscape. While most of the attention in the literature has been geared toward student engagement and learning online as a means of addressing students’ academic success and wellbeing (Rapanta et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2021), there has been disproportionately much less attention geared at teaching and research faculty members. Despite being the backbone of our educational programs and schools, and often the main reasons why students select to enter our field (Dali & Caidi, 2016), faculty members’ needs and the challenges they are facing have been largely ignored (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020; Gabster et al., 2020). In this panel, we seek to critically center our discussion on this key constituency, and question (disrupt, even) the notion of faculty resilience. Indeed, making use of the resilience trope sheds light partially on faculty members’ well-being, but it also contributes to masking the many inadequacies and failures at the organizational and systemic level, particularly around policies and practices dealing with the curriculum, workload, representation, accommodations, academic freedom, resource allocation, justice and dignity to name just a few. There is a much-needed engagement that needs to take place around these issues in LIS education if we are truly honest about resilience and sustainability.

Our international panelists present a cross-section of faculty members who bring their varied experiences in teaching and research in the LIS field to the discussion. Together, they

represent tenure and tenure-track faculty, and administrators across three countries (USA, Canada, New Zealand). The panelists, all LIS educators and professionals, will base their engagement on the following themes/questions:

- What efforts are LIS programs making to address the challenges faced by faculty members to ensure not only the sustainability of the educational program but also a dignified and fair treatment of faculty members?
- What are possible scenarios for a post-COVID future of LIS education, and how can faculty members be best supported and inspired to achieve resilience for a sustainable future?

The speakers will tackle different angles to address these questions. After a short lightning talk (7-8 minutes), a discussion among panelists will ensue as well as engagement with the attendees through a Q/A. Some of the topics discussed include the following:

- **Academic freedom: Dr. Nadia Caidi** will discuss the challenges of academic freedom in a culture and a moment characterized too often by oversimplification, instantaneity and a reactive culture (surveillance; social media shaming; cancel culture; controversy avoidance) thus reducing the complexity of the issues as well as the quality of the debates. Recent examples from academe in Canada (and elsewhere) will be used to highlight these trends and examine how faculty can navigate these challenges, gain support from their institutions and discuss the implications for the academic enterprise as a whole.
- **Disability and Neurodiversity:** The situation of the pandemic, which resulted in working from home and a rapid transition to online education, has posed unique challenges for faculty with disabilities and neurodiverse faculty. **Dr. Keren Dali** will address the importance of intersectionality when we discuss disability and neurodiversity in the academic workforce. The pandemic has blurred the lines between formally recognized disabilities (e.g., based on ADA in the US or ACA/AODA in Canada) and immunocompromising health conditions (which may not legally qualify as disabling). Being an immunocompromised faculty in academia has raised concerns about what the return to campus will look like: Will they feel safe to work onsite and how will the feelings of insecurity and apprehension affect their motivation to engage? Will they have a choice to continue working from home and will it negatively impact student satisfaction? Will our rhetorical commitment to inclusion and equity for disabled and neurodiverse faculty hold in the crisis and post-crisis environment? This talk will discuss concerns that faculty with disabilities may face in the future.
- **BIPOC Faculty: Dr. Shimelis Assefa** will discuss the issues black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) faculty face in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) through the lens of self-efficacy theory. During the pandemic, if there was one silver lining that favored academic institutions in bringing about a seemingly business continuation, it was the use of digital technology to deliver classes online. For programs that already have an existing online delivery experience and infrastructure, the shift was not much of an issue. However, for programs that suddenly pivoted to fully online delivery, the experience was jarring. Zoom and other technologies that enabled faculty to continue to teach during this difficult time tell a story of resilience in the face of adversity. For BIPOC faculty in PWIs, however, and despite their best efforts to promote innovative pedagogical approaches in integrating technology, the

experiences have often been mixed, and this talk will showcase examples and dilemmas emerging from some of their experiences.

- **Emergency Preparedness in/and Higher Education: Dr. Kim M. Thompson** will provide insights into the trends she sees for how universities are responding to the uncertainties of the COVID shut down and preparing for future potential shut-downs and disasters by strategically planning more online-only programs into the future and making other preemptive adjustments to allow future flexibilities. While this can be a good move for the institution, what does this mean for academics who are already experiencing layers of change in both their work (modes of communication, meeting, student-teacher connections, research, professional engagement) and personal lives (e.g., full-time career duties at home while working full-time from home as well, distanced from social network and supports, etc.). How can departments, schools, and colleges support the physical, social, and mental health of the faculty while still striving to innovate and remain a sustainable organization economically?
- **Information Cultures in Higher Education: Dr. Anne Goulding** will explore the communication and information strategies of universities during the pandemic, their impact on individual academics and what they might tell us about the information culture of higher education institutions. Universities have no doubt benefited from the use of electronic organizational communications during the COVID-19 outbreak, sharing vital information about decisions made and the practicalities of teaching during the pandemic, as well as making people aware of prevention strategies and the value of social distancing. At the same time, however, the stream of important information from multiple sources is often overwhelming and it can be stressful for academics on the front line to keep up. This discussion will focus on communication overload during the pandemic, the detrimental impact on cognitive capacities for attention, and the information culture in the university context.

**FORMAT:** Our format will be an interactive panel discussion that focusses on lessons learned and novel approaches to re-imagining the place of faculty members at the table, and the ways in which they can be supported to ensure they continue to strive toward innovative teaching methods and strategies for a shifting landscape in LIS education. The panelists will keep their lightning talks short to enable opportunities for audience interaction (through small-group conversations or breakout rooms (for virtual attendees)). Each panelist will prepare a discussion question to facilitate the interactive component of the session.

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