

*“Apologies in  
Advance for  
My Kids”:*

*Parenting  
and Academia  
During the  
COVID-19  
Pandemic*

*/Kristy A. Holmes/*

One of the many things the COVID-19 pandemic threw into relief was the difficulty and, at times, impossibility of trying to carry on with the academic work of administration, teaching, and research while caring for and homeschooling children for extended periods of time. This was exacerbated by the inability and/or unwillingness of many universities to accommodate or even acknowledge the grossly inequitable position that many faculty were put in. When the first major lockdown in Canada went into effect in March of 2020 my children were eight, six, and twenty-three months old—the oldest two were in school and the youngest was in full-time daycare. I was in my second term as Chair of a small visual-arts department and, luckily, only teaching one course that semester. My partner was then a casual employee for a Crown corporation of frontline workers, which meant that when the lockdown went into effect, he was called up to work full-time, as many of the permanent employees were able to take various leaves of absence. While we were grateful for this financially, it meant that I was essentially left on my own during the week to work, homeschool, and take care of my children. As we live in northern Ontario, we had the extra stress of delayed delivery of vaccinations and raging COVID cases that were far worse than southern Ontario, which meant our schools and daycares were shut for longer periods of time. I taught my classes and took meetings online during the day, but I primarily worked at night after my children went to bed.

Let me be clear that I wasn't writing book chapters, here—my research completely stopped during the pandemic and I focused on preparing teaching material, marking, responding to students, and dealing with the constant administrative busy-work of being Chair. This was compounded by the fact that we were one of only a handful of departments that continued to run courses that required students to be on campus. Trying to disseminate the constantly shifting protocols mandated by the province and university and addressing problems, complaints, and questions from faculty and students was overwhelming.

As the two-week lockdown rolled into months and then years of successive shutdowns and re-openings, I approached my Dean exasperated and defeated. I told her that I didn't think I could continue as Chair; I couldn't juggle full time childcare, homeschooling, and work; I was exhausted from working nearly every night and I would wake up in an anxious, almost panic-like state; I felt like I was letting my students down because I couldn't adapt quickly enough to Zoom; I felt guilty over ignoring my kids every day trying to put out administrative fires and needing to constantly be online; and I felt like I was letting my department down because I was only able to do the bare minimum. My Dean was the only person at work I was honest with about my personal situation and she was incredibly empathetic and kind—upon reflection, I think she saved me from complete burnout. She listened, asked me not to resign, and promised to get me whatever support I needed to continue being Chair—which she did.

I also approached my union several times asking if there was any leave I could take or anything available to me through our collective agreement that would help ease the stress of my situation. The only options were to take an unpaid leave of absence or a partial leave of absence with a salary cut and a reduction in one area (e.g., a lessened teaching load). While the university had quite quickly implemented some one-off, pandemic-related exceptions to our collective agreement, such as permission to delay a sabbatical, there was nothing related to leaves of absence based on daycare/school closures. I ended up taking a partial leave of absence, which meant I taught a half-credit less for a reduction in salary. I couldn't understand how this was equitable or even legal; how could faculty be expected to keep working (the reduced teaching load was for one semester only) while homeschooling and caring for children full-time? It's as if childcare wasn't even an issue, that we were just expected to do both. Even though my union and Dean were sympathetic, ultimately the options were to take an unfeasible unpaid leave or just keep working, to just keep going.

I want to acknowledge that despite how challenging the pandemic was for me personally and professionally, I was (and continue to be) enormously privileged. As a tenured Associate Professor protected and supported by a collective agreement, I had health benefits and I could cover all our household expenses, even with the pay cut. I could buy food and access vaccines. I knew things could be so much worse, which is a hugely privileged position to be in during a pandemic. If working and parenting through the pandemic was hard for me, in the extremely privileged position that I occupy, what was it like for those in far more precarious situations?

I spent much of the pandemic trying to hide the stress and exhaustion of juggling work and childcare. I not only felt compelled to hide the realities of my situation but to even erase them. While my colleagues and students knew I had children at home, I never discussed how I was managing this, nor the toll it was taking on me mentally and physically. I don't know how many times in online classes or meetings I said, "apologies in advance for my kids." I not only felt obligated to apologize for the interruptions and noise that I knew would inevitably happen, but even for their very presence. When I reflect on why I did this, I think I was terrified that students and colleagues would perceive me as unprofessional, disorganized, and unable to handle my job. Working diligently to create this illusion of normalcy and erase the presence of my children was exhausting and unsustainable but it felt necessary. Why was that?

Academia, especially under neoliberalism, conditions us to believe that our personal lives, our bodies, and our emotions are, at best, inconvenient and, at worst, major impediments to achieving success. It promotes and rewards unrelenting work at the expense of all else. The pandemic only exacerbated the untenability of this model, which discounts the realities of life, of bodies that get sick, that need physical and emotional care, the humanity of workers and the realities of their lived lives. While I understand that in the moment of the pandemic it would have been difficult for any university to radically pivot to a deep, inclusive culture of care, perhaps now we can start to think about how we might do that.

After four years of pandemic living, how can institutions change to better support the humanity and lived realities of their employees? I certainly don't have concrete answers to this question but I would like to share a few thoughts. I think it's important that institutions seek out administrators – Department Heads/Chairs, Deans, Vice-Presidents and Presidents – who possess deep empathy and compassion and are willing to resist the neoliberal structures of the university complex when necessary. Having administrators understand that hustle culture isn't necessarily conducive to good, scholarly work or contented faculty is vital. I think talking about this, being honest and open with colleagues who you trust and having professional organizations like UAAC and scholarly journals like *RACAR*, support hosting sessions and publishing these ideas is hugely important. It normalizes the reality of how difficult and complicated academia is. Could we also start to push for more radical collective agreements where paid time off for personal reasons or exceptional circumstances, without the requirement of medical documentation, could be taken? Or flexible salaries where faculty could negotiate a pay reduction in lieu of time off without extensive paperwork being involved?

I also wonder about some of the ideas that have been circulating around the "culture of care" at postsecondary institutions. In 2021, Jesmen Mendoza published an article entitled, "Creating a Culture of Care: Addressing Student Feelings of Isolation, Stress and Hopelessness," in *Academic Matters*.<sup>1</sup>

1 Jesmen Mendoza, "Creating a Culture of Care: Addressing Student Feelings of Isolation, Stress, and Hopelessness," *Academic Matters*, January 20, 2022, <https://academicmatters>

[.ca/creating-a-culture-of-care-addressing-student-feelings-of-isolation-stress-and-hopelessness/](https://academicmatters.ca/creating-a-culture-of-care-addressing-student-feelings-of-isolation-stress-and-hopelessness/).

Mendoza argues that universities are “learning communities” that should have academic and research goals but also “create a culture of care.”<sup>2</sup> A culture of care, he suggests, “fosters compassion for others and recognizes students who are in distress...[it] recognizes that learning is at its best when the student learner is healthy and one that acknowledges we all have a responsibility to show compassion in our learning communities.”<sup>3</sup> I agree with Mendoza but I wonder if this should also not extend to faculty as well?

The discussions I have read around the culture of care tend to be focused solely on students and the role of faculty, staff, and administrators in connecting them with appropriate support. While I absolutely support this idea, I wonder how faculty can extend care, compassion, and guidance when they’re exhausted, struggling, or burnt out? Surely learning is at its best when faculty are healthy, both mentally and physically? I think a culture of care, for faculty, staff, administrators, and students, should be a pillar of Academic and Strategic Plans, which might give this idea some real traction and translate into actual change. Changing deeply ingrained systems and structures that ultimately support capital and profit at the expense of well-being feels, understandably, insurmountable. Perhaps if there’s one thing we can take away from the pandemic, it’s that change can happen quickly and radically when the only option is change.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.