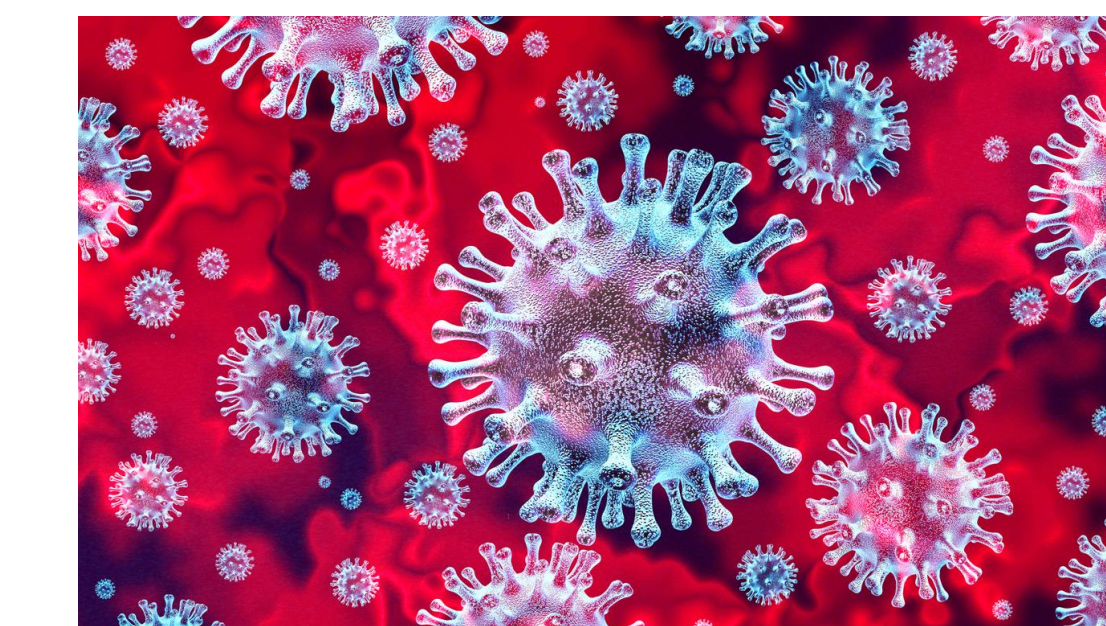




# Differential Impacts of COVID-19 on Scholars at a Large Research University



Cynthia Werner (Professor of Anthropology and Director of ADVANCE),  
Kevin Johnson (PhD Student) Aigul Seralinova (PhD Student), and Michelle Yeoman (PhD Candidate)  
Texas A&M University

## OBJECTIVES

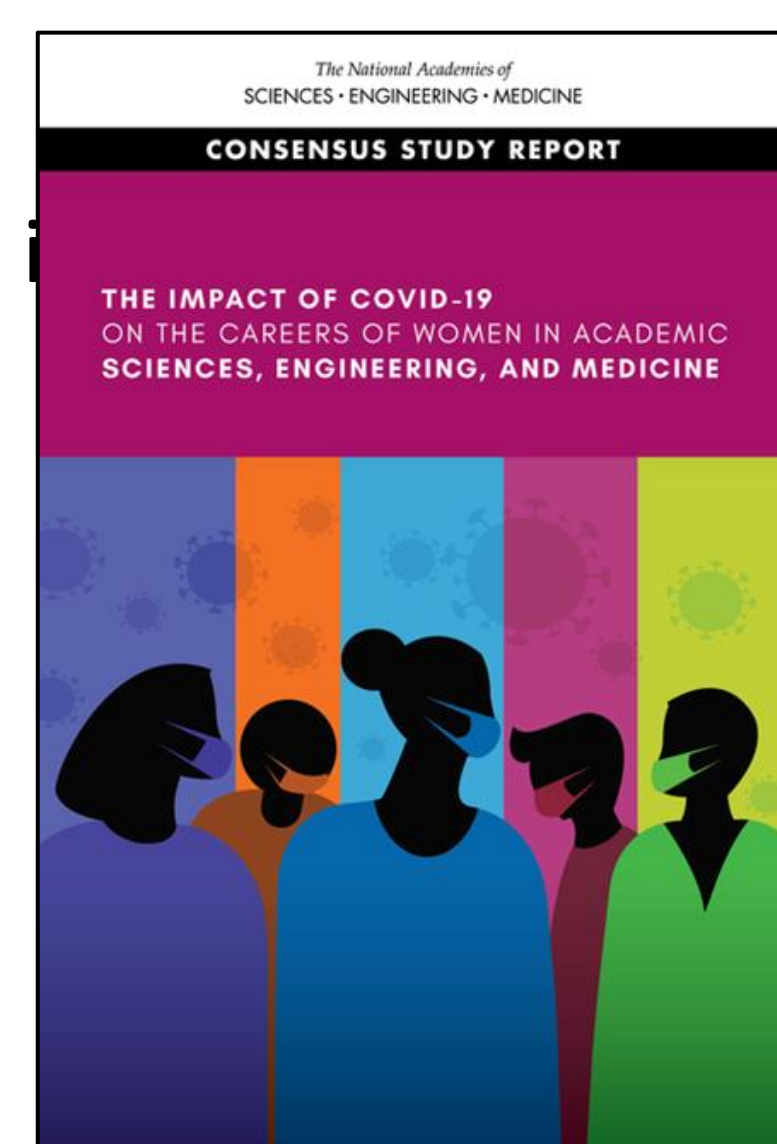
This research project examines the following questions:

- (1) How has COVID-19 affected the work and work-life balance of scholars at a public university?
- (2) How do the impacts of COVID-19 affect some groups of scholars more than others? Do these differences have the potential to undo the slow, albeit steady, progress that has been made to increase gender, racial, and ethnic diversity within academia?
- (3) What strategies can be implemented to minimize the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the categories of scholars who have been most impacted?



## RELEVANT LITERATURE

A number of reports have been released about the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women faculty and working women in general (Gonzalez and Griffin 2020; Htun 2020; Malisch et al. 2020; Mickey et al. 2020). These studies indicate that women faculty, on average, have been publishing less and submitting fewer grant proposals during the pandemic. These reports stress that increased caregiving responsibilities, combined with the gendered nature of caregiving in our society, play a key role in how women are affected in disproportionate ways. In the spring of 2021, the National Academies released a report that shared similar findings, while also noting that there have been disproportionate impacts on scholars of color. Of central concern in all of these studies is the long-term impacts on efforts to diversity institutions of higher education.



## RESEARCH METHODS

A team of 8 interviewers conducted two rounds of qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of 100 participants based on the College Station campus of Texas A&M. We intentionally sampled scholars in the pipeline to become faculty, as well as current faculty. Our sample therefore provides us with the unique opportunity to compare the experience of five different groups of scholars:

- PhD Students
- Postdoctoral Scholars
- Academic Professional Track Faculty (non-tenure-track)
- Tenure-Track Faculty
- Tenured Faculty



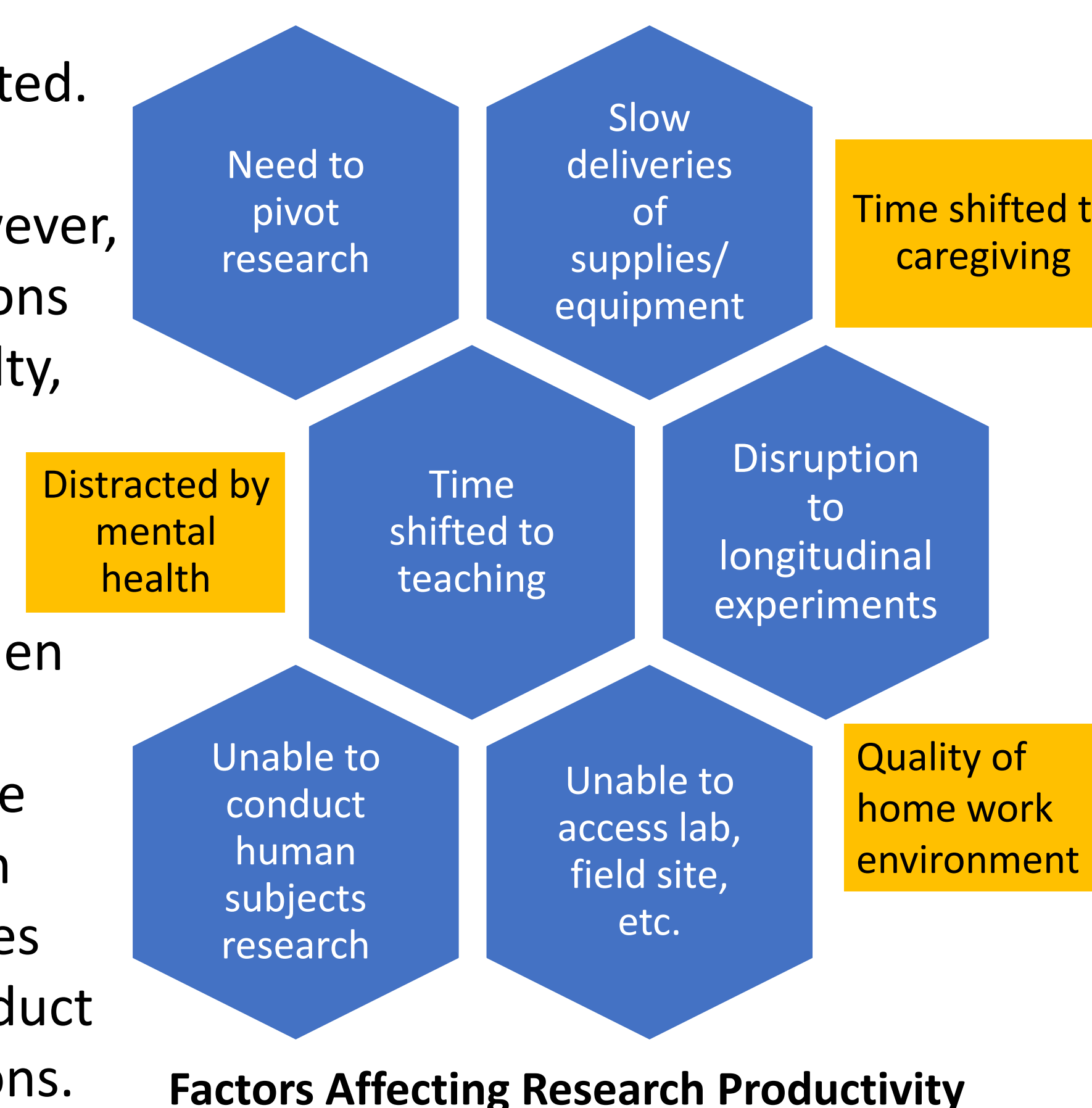
Each interview lasted approximately an hour, with questions addressing work productivity, research and teaching challenges during the pandemic, work-life balance, and attitudes towards the university's handling of the pandemic.

## FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO RESEARCH PRODUCTIVITY

As shown below, the majority of our research participants with research responsibilities experienced negative impacts to their research productivity:

- 59.1% negatively impacted
- 31.2% not impacted
- 9.7% positively impacted.

This does not mean, however, that all negative disruptions are equal. For some faculty, the disruptions have occurred in multiple, significant ways. This is particularly true for women faculty with school-aged children who did not have time to focus on research because of school closures AND were unable to conduct research due to restrictions.



## SIGNIFICANCE

Our interviews demonstrate that the pandemic is having differential impacts on research scholars. Participants who have experienced significant disruptions are concerned about how this will impact their careers, but their specific concerns vary depending on their position within academia:

- PhD students and postdoctoral scholars who experienced research delays due to travel restrictions and social distancing measures were concerned about their ability to complete their degree (before funding ran out) and their ability to get an academic job in the near future (due to widespread hiring freezes and a likely surplus of applicants in future years).
- Many of the non-tenure-track faculty in our study also expressed concerns about job security, including the renewal of their existing contract.
- In comparison, tenure-track faculty were more focused on how pandemic impacts would affect their tenure packages, the pros and cons of taking a COVID-19 clock extension, and the impact of travel restrictions on their ability to expand their professional network (for research collaborations and external review letters).
- Tenured faculty reported similar research and teaching challenges due to the pandemic, yet they were not very concerned about their own job security.

These findings suggest that multiple mitigation strategies are needed for different categories of scholars.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This is a partial list of recommendations based on this study, a review of relevant literature, and survey of policies enacted by other universities:

- Hiring committees need to be trained to review candidates in an equitable way that factors in the differential impacts of COVID-19.
- Faculty should be strongly encouraged to write a COVID-19 impact statement (with an emphasis on professional disruptions), and review committees should be trained to review candidates in an equitable way (for annual, mid-term and promotion evaluations).
- Departments should revisit promotion guidelines to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to accommodate COVID-19 impacts (i.e. ensure the bar remains feasible and realistic).
- Departments should find ways to recognize and reward those who made heroic efforts in teaching & service during challenging times.