

April 1, 2021

Dr. Walter Wendler
President
West Texas A&M University

Dear President Wendler,

In response to your letter dated January 28, 2021, opinions and suggestions for returning to normal campus operations were collected from Staff Council members. The questions from the original letter were used as the framework to collect and organize the information below.

Effectiveness of remote work

In general, remote work served its purpose as it relates to overall personal and institutional safety, but the effectiveness of remote work was perceived differently depending on the employee's role at the University. Certain employees were not able to work from home at all due to the nature of their jobs. Some of the advantages of remote work include:

- Ability to get the work done and tend to family needs, in a healthy environment.
- Improved level of services provided to distance-only students.
- SSC staff had more opportunity to work on some projects that normally would require to wait until breaks.
- New jobs were created by adding a "sanitizing crew" to the SSC staff.
- Flexibility of work schedule and dress code.

Challenges encountered related to digital teaching, learning, advising, or hybridized activities

- Certain tasks cannot be completed remotely.
- Spotty Internet connections.
- Longer time to complete group tasks; delay in responding to emails or calls in a timely manner.
- Challenges engaging students digitally; they tend to talk less, body language and visual clues are difficult to read.
- Lack of technical skills and proper training for employees and professors/instructors.
- Lack of a dedicated work space or necessary equipment at home.
- Disrespect and laziness that breed from virtual settings.
- *Zoom* fatigue and limited face-to-face contact; people missing small non-verbal behaviors and opportunities for informal conversations.

Anticipated hurdles of returning to face-to-face interaction after a year of remote work and suggestions to make the transition most effective

Many staff members have already returned to work on-campus, either fully or on rotating basis, and their experience with the transition back to it has been mostly positive. In general, staff members agree that maintaining some level of flexibility and consistency across departments effectively makes people feel safe and more comfortable. Anticipated hurdles and suggestions expressed by staff members include:

- Fear from people who are genuinely scared of or vulnerable to COVID-19. Maintaining a hybridized system, in which people can have the option to work in person or remotely, if appropriate, could help ease their hesitation to return.
- People sharing small offices spaces. As a suggestion, consider investing on filtration systems in certain places, especially those with a larger number of people in a relatively small space, or provide individual air filters to spaces that may need it.
- Consistency in returning to work across campus. Without consistent rules across campus, it is difficult to know who is or is not accessible on campus.
- Personal safety and ability to continue serving our students are key. We should continue to request students who visit us in person to wear masks, until the risk of infection is reduced on campus.

Impact of limited face-to-face interaction on campus

Staff members have missed the typical day-to-day interactions on campus. This feeling is shared by many university employees outside of the Council and SSC staff alike.

With the exception of people experiencing medical issues, most staff members are ready and excited to get back to working from campus; as the pandemic continues to present a risk for many, it is imperative to maintain rules and regulations to ensure employees safety and health, and to slowly reintroduce them to regular campus operations.

Suggestions to better support our WT staff community

The WT staff community demonstrated true commitment to the University during the pandemic and was able to keep the University running by quickly adapting to the new work conditions and by going above and beyond during such critical times. Even with obstacles, the work performed during the past twelve months is an indicative that the staff are an essential part that came through when the University most needed them. Suggestions from staff include:

- Offer a "work-from-home" day to staff members whose work duties can be accomplished remotely.
- Provide training to staff so we can effectively engage students online, and offer workshops on how to utilize different tools to be successful with hybrid systems. There are faculty and staff members across campus that are doing an excellent job at this and whose knowledge can be shared with others.
- Remind all students, faculty and staff the importance of caring for others' health. One concerning issue brought up by the SSC staff was that the residence hall designated for students' quarantine was extremely "trashed;" students did not properly dispose of their "COVID-19 waste," including infected masks and gloves, and the SSC employees were much more exposed by the students' unhygienic practices.

The members of Staff Council and the entire staff community of WTAMU have always prioritized the well-being of our students. We are certain that the Administration, working jointly with the main university constituency groups, can effectively implement practices to resume regular campus operations in the Fall semester of 2021. Staff Council appreciates the opportunity to express and share our voices and suggestions on behalf of the staff members of WTAMU.

Respectfully,

Carolina Galloway

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President of Staff Council, 2020-2021