

# Lighten the Load

Ideas for leaders supporting their faculty members



At UNC SOM we value collaboration and teamwork, and the pandemic is challenging our faculty, staff, and learners more than ever before. We all need to pull together to help each other, and ensure that when we look back on this a decade from now we feel good about how well we cared for each other. We need to focus on what is important, and protect our community and its values.

## Creative ideas for leaders to help lighten the load on faculty at this crucial time

- Tell faculty and staff they are valued. Express gratitude with compassion, and state that this is a very challenging time for each of us. Acknowledge the extra stressors faculty are facing
- Invite ideas from your teams about how to make life easier for them at this challenging time. Supervisors might ask others “what is the one thing I can do to lighten your load?”
- Regarding promotion, make sure all faculty know that the promotion clock can stop for the pandemic if the faculty member would like it to. Any faculty who wants it can ask for a year extension on the promotion clock. The University is granting these generously with the support of the department chair
- Note we are in the process of changing the SOM promotion guidelines with a desire to work toward more equity
- Acknowledge that “our homes have become our classrooms” and share ideas of how people can make their home setting more conducive to teaching effectiveness
- Regarding research, allow teams to focus on funded opportunities and discovery, without pressure to publish just for the sake of publishing
- Remind people they can take home things from their office if that would make their work easier (for example, multiple screens, their desktop computer, even a good office chair, etc)
- Consider allowing faculty and staff to pair up in “buddies”. Buddies assure that each other is updated on pertinent points from meetings, represent the views of the other on important issues, and cover for each other allowing individuals to miss some virtual meetings. Encourage that people formalize this and “tag out” at times
- Record all essential meetings so people have flexibility on when and how they listen to the updates
- Cancel unnecessary meetings
- Shorten meetings to a baseline of 25 minutes. Allow time in between scheduled meetings to be sure everyone has a break to attend to their needs
- Allow faculty, staff, and learners to focus on only what is essential at this time. Give permission to faculty to decline to launch planned new initiatives or do things that one would consider “extra.” Ask yourself “is this effort needed at this time?” or “Can this wait a few months?”
- Make it clear that it is acceptable to “sign out” during non-work time (evenings and weekends when not on call) and not check and/or respond to e-mail or other forms of work communications
- Consider establishing fixed “email free” hours. Set expectations for email responsiveness that encourage people to take breaks away from the screen



(cont.)

- Try to reduce email traffic and especially on Fridays and over the weekends. Pause and ask yourself “is this email needed?” “would it be easier to resolve the question with a quick call”
- Use the delay send function in outlook. When ready to send an email, look in the “Tags” box and use the “Do not send before” timing. That way, work that you do on Saturday afternoon can be sent to your team on Monday
- Help reduce the expectation that emails should be quickly answered. If an issue is urgent, text or call
- Consider creative ways to share joy, appreciation, and build community. Some ideas include sending handwritten notes to home addresses, sending funny short videos to laugh together, calling or texting colleagues just to check in, allowing ice breakers in virtual meetings, or scheduling safe and physically distanced in person gatherings when possible



## Build Social Support

- Allow social time before and after virtual meetings
- Consider novel fun activities such as virtual talent shows, comedian presentations, wellness activities such as mindfulness or group yoga, concerts, etc
- Gather outdoors in small groups as appropriate...maybe a small group distanced picnic or walking one-on-one meeting in masks



## Other Considerations

Note that it is difficult to know all that a member of our community is facing at this time. Some are caring for elderly loved ones, individuals with special needs, or managing complex situations outside of work.

One of the biggest stressors faced by our faculty include the challenge of navigating virtual school for kids at home. Consider the following targeted toward that group -

- Be as flexible as possible with expected work hours. For clinical faculty consider offering ambulatory clinics in the evenings and on weekends in case that variety helps people manage
- Explore part time schedules for faculty or staff who need that. If that is possible, invite the community broadly to explore that with you if needed
- Both fathers and mothers should be encouraged to meet the needs of their children. Recognize the gender gap often in the care of children, and encourage dads to share in the challenges while we ensure support for all parents
- Needs for childcare should be regularly discussed/acknowledged
  - Groups should be told that its fine for children to appear in the background of virtual meetings - “Don’t stress about it, we know this is real life”
  - Parents of young children should be told to consider doing only what is essential at this time
  - Allow faculty/staff to be voice only while engaged in virtual meetings, so that they will be more relaxed when having to multitask with kids



**Each of us should consider what we can do to lighten the load of others.  
This is a time to be generous in helping each other in each of our mission areas.  
Thank you for all you do!**

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