

# Pouring From An Empty Cup:



The Overlapping Burdens for UMBC Staff  
Caregivers in the Era of a Global Pandemic



After nearly fifteen months of remote work for much of UMBC's staff, we are preparing to return to campus. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the notion of work culture and what productivity looks like, including what we can do to create a holistic and supportive workplace, particularly for those employees who have dual roles as caregivers.

The UMBC Professional Staff Senate designated a Caregiving Committee, who in turn developed a survey and collected responses from a broad cross-section of UMBC staff. The survey gathered quantitative and qualitative data regarding productivity, mental and physical health during the pandemic, work-life balance, and staff attitudes regarding an array of potential benefits that would support caregivers returning to campus.

This is an opportunity to leverage what our community has learned during the pandemic to address challenges around **accessibility, child care/elder care responsibilities, mental health, and chronic illness/disability**, with the goal of creating a workplace that is more accessible, flexible and responsive to the needs of staff, and consistent with UMBC values.

### **Professional Staff Senate Caregiving Committee**

# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a framework and arbitration process to increase the availability of flexible work scheduling for all employees.
2. In revising the University's formal telework arrangement, allow consideration for maximum flexibility provided the individual's roles and responsibilities.
3. Embrace staggered shifts, leveraging flexible work schedules and remote work to enhance service to students. Prioritize the acquisition of computer hardware, software, and IT systems to more fully support this recommendation.
4. Designate a position in Human Resources to coordinate family care resources and to assist staff in crafting flexible scheduling and remote work agreements.
5. Increase the number and variety of supports available to staff caring for young children, older adults, or people with chronic illness/disabilities.
6. Amplify a holistic well-being philosophy for UMBC employees.
7. Each division of the university should develop a wellness framework that gives staff, and particularly staff caregivers, relief.
8. Develop trainings for supervisors that include information on how to both support staff caregivers and build staff morale and team unity.
9. Inventory each staff and faculty position to determine which positions or parts of positions are most amenable to remote work, while maintaining UMBC's exemplary culture of teaching, research, and service. Following a completed inventory, job descriptions should be updated to reflect the capacity for partial or full remote work.
10. Work with Human Resources and the Council of University System Staffs (CUSS) to increase the number of personal days allocated each year. Explicitly allow for the use of sick leave to take "a mental health day."



# INTRODUCTION

A committee of the Professional Staff Senate designed a Caregiver Survey which, in the interest of systematic data collection, was modeled after a similar survey commissioned by the Faculty Senate. The survey garnered 334 responses, for an approximate response rate of 35%\*.

The COVID-19 pandemic and an abrupt pivot to remote work for a majority of UMBC staff has upended our lives, our routines, and our conceptions of work. With flexibility as a focus from the top down, we adapted, learned, and grew over the time to use new tools and collaborate in new ways. We learned that with increased flexibility, staff could find the balance that allows them to maintain their personal needs and effectively attend to work.

An insight from the past year is that flexibility that acknowledges and supports the needs of employees is critical to the success of our community. As the momentum to “Return to Campus” increases, we propose to incorporate the lessons learned during pandemic remote work to continue to build the kind of workplace that fosters employee well-being.

The definition of caregiving used in the survey and in this report is inclusive of those who provide care to another person, as well as those with chronic illnesses, disabilities, or other situations that require increased levels of caring for oneself. Staff need a work culture that sees them as whole people and honors the realities of family, health, and disability. What staff want and need most is flexibility. The coming year will test whether or not UMBC is truly a “great place to work.”

\* Members of the Non-Exempt Staff Senate ListServ were invited to participate, so this response rate is approximated

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Create a framework and arbitration process to increase the availability of flexible work scheduling for all employees.

Flexible work-scheduling (inclusive of modified work hours and telework) enables employees to be more productive and better caregivers, and results in higher levels of employee morale and loyalty.

- Of those expressing a preference, **95% of respondents indicated that a more flexible telework policy was extremely or moderately appealing.**
- Most survey respondents self-reported that they were **more productive during remote work**, because there were fewer distractions than in an office environment and because commute times were repurposed to task completion.
- **Nearly 60% of respondents indicated they may or would consider leaving UMBC for more flexible work accommodations.** If UMBC is not able to embrace and institutionalize more flexible work agreements, it risks losing talented members of its workforce.
- On average, staff reported an improvement in their physical and mental health during pandemic remote work. Flexibility in work schedules allows for employees to have increased access to physical activities, in addition to maintaining preventive care appointments.
- The modified work hours that remote work during the pandemic has enabled has been a revelation for some staff. One respondent stated: *"I think so much of the conversation is about working from home [a certain] number of days a week. I think that is less important than flexibility in individual days. I would rather be able to discuss options like work 2 hours from home and 6 hours on campus. There is no reason that we all are fighting rush hour at the same time to answer emails for a few hours a day. I also would like to see more individual day options such as when kids (or ourselves) have doctor's appointments. Having flexibility each day to tweak schedules has been really wonderful."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 2. In revising the University's formal telework arrangement, allow consideration for maximum flexibility provided the individual's roles and responsibilities.

Over the last 15 months, UMBC staff have demonstrated a flexible and dynamic approach to working through a pandemic, with positive results and outcomes for work/life balance.

- Flexible work schedules enable staff to make convenient well- and sick-visit appointments for self or others.
- Flexible work is enabling staff to get more exercise, eat healthier foods prepared in the home, and be more engaged with their families. Staff report feeling happier, healthier and more balanced, which in turn leads to higher levels of staff morale, staff loyalty, and productivity.

## 3. Embrace staggered shifts, leveraging flexible work schedules and remote work to enhance service to students. Prioritize the acquisition of computer hardware, software, and IT systems to more fully support this recommendation.

- Staggered shifts enable crowded work spaces to be de-densified to expand accessibility for students and other stakeholders while also limiting the spread of infectious diseases.
- State budget cuts and suspension of student fees have decimated operational budgets for some units, to the point they are unable to purchase hardware and peripherals to support remote work. Centralized funds should be made available so that all staff have the tools they need to optimize work-from-home capabilities.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 4. Designate a position in Human Resources to coordinate family care resources and to assist staff in crafting flexible scheduling and remote work agreements.

By March of 2021, the University of Maryland-College Park had hired a program manager in their human resources department to coordinate family care resources. [The UMCP Family Care website](#) is supportive, comprehensive, and symbolizes an acknowledgement that staff play a key role in the continuity of university operations at the same time they are balancing the dual role of providing a continuity of care for self and family. UMBC should emulate the work of UMCP in this area.

- Of those survey respondents expressing a preference, 61% found the idea of a staff position at UMBC to coordinate family care resources moderately or extremely appealing.
- As we navigate the post-pandemic era, there will continue to be COVID community spread in schools and child care settings, necessitating the rapid deployment of a back-up plan for staff with young or school-age children.
- While 62 respondents indicated that they had accommodating supervisors that positively affected the level of support they felt they received from UMBC, 47 respondents indicated that their supervisors were not supportive or flexible." Staff need an HR advocate to assist in creating flexible work and remote work agreements that are mutually beneficial.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 5. Increase the number and variety of supports available to staff caring for young children, older adults, or people with special needs.

Even during non-pandemic times, there is a dearth of affordable, high-quality child and elder care. The stress and anxiety experienced by workers who care for young children or elders detracts from workplace productivity.

- 35 respondents identified child care or elder care disruptions as factors that decreased their productivity during remote work.
- The cooperative networks that UMCP has facilitated for its staff should be mirrored at UMBC and would be of significant assistance in helping UMBC caregivers locate primary and back-up child care or elder care providers.
- The responsibility for caregiving is often disproportionately gendered. A commitment to fully leverage flexible work-scheduling, modified hours, and telework will make UMBC a more equitable workplace. One respondent stated: *"The more I feel supported as a mom, the more I feel supported as an employee. Being able to work from home for this past year has been a blessing. I have been able to support my child in their therapies and schooling while also managing to get my job [done] virtually. I have grown as a professional over the past year as I evolved my job to meet the evolving needs of our students. Growth has happened both in and out of the virtual workplace. I have been happier working from home and avoiding the commute. This ability to work from home has been priceless and I hope to have the flexibility to remain to work from home a few days a week moving forward."*
- Another respondent spoke into the same theme: *"Even when the world `goes back to normal' I am still very concerned about kids not being vaccinated. I am considering homeschooling my kids for another year and I have a lot of friends who, like myself, are trying to figure out the best way to keep their families safe. I hope that this doesn't push me to decide between my career and my family well-being...2020 was a very difficult year and I hope they understand that particularly female workers had a very hard time. I would love for UMBC to provide some benefits like a flexible schedule so I can stop paying for aftercare for the kids in school to drop them early and pick them up late, provide some help to pay day care, something to make us believe that our work is important and that advancing females in their career not only applies to faculty, staff has career aspirations, too."*
- A third respondent addressed the misalignment of school and child care schedules with the standard work schedule: *"It is very difficult to find childcare, and the schedules of school systems are in no way aligned with most work schedules. Being able to access safe, high quality childcare at a reasonable cost is a huge priority which is usually not accounted for by employers."*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 6. Amplify a holistic well-being philosophy for UMBC employees.

Whether working on-campus or remotely, UMBC staff need encouragement and systemic support for their well-being.

- Amplify the wellness opportunities available through the UMBC Wellness Initiative offered by Workplace Learning, OD, and Wellness.
- Similarly, amplify the availability of nutrition consultations through Chartwell's, our food service provider.
- Make employee well-being a touchpoint in the PMP process so that both supervisors and supervisees revisit this topic at least three times annually.

## 7. Each division of the university should develop a wellness framework that gives staff, and particularly staff caregivers, relief.

- Different divisions of the university have different meeting cultures, but some staff find themselves in constant back-to-back virtual meetings. "Zoom fatigue" and the eye strain caused by looking at computer monitors all day are real.
- One example developed by the Division of Institutional Advancement/Athletics was to suspend meetings for a half-day once a week to allow staff the opportunity to unplug and have uninterrupted time for task completion. Additional solutions could include limiting meetings to 50 minutes, and recording meetings so that employees can catch up later.
- Create a blog or other storytelling device where UMBC community members can share their strategies for physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8. Develop trainings for supervisors that include information on how to both support staff caregivers and build staff morale and team unity.**
- Staff are happier, healthier, and more productive when supervisors do things *with* them, rather than *to* them. Paradoxically, by flexibly granting time away from work, supervisors will get more work from their happy, healthy employees.
  - As university policy is established for return to work, staff need a unified and consistent experience and message. Supervisors can best support their team members by receiving consistent training with clear messaging, accessible documentation, and the ability to ask questions of informed representatives from Human Resources.
  - One respondent stated: *"I love that my supervisor is trusting of us to get our jobs done at home, which we do. It makes me feel more confident since I am not being micromanaged."*
  - In contrast, another respondent has not felt supported by their division head: *"Telework at UMBC, at least within my division, has always been discouraged and only made available due to extreme circumstances, such as physical injuries. Clearly the pandemic has proven that most of us are able to be effective while working from home, even under these extreme circumstances. I hope that going forward, more accommodations are made for all employees, including those with caregiving responsibilities."*
  - A third respondent sees that the paradigm has shifted in ways that will be beneficial to all: *"My hope is that this time has made people realize not only how beneficial working from home can be, but how possible. 100% of my job can be done remotely -- being home during the pandemic has not made a single aspect of my job more difficult. In fact, I'm a much happier and healthier employee being able to work from home."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

9. Inventory each staff and faculty position to determine which positions or parts of positions are most amenable to remote work, while maintaining UMBC's exemplary culture of teaching, research, and service. Following a completed inventory, job descriptions should be updated to reflect the capacity for partial or full remote work.
- Both Human Resources and each Division should undertake this inventory, to ensure that there is some consistency in the application and availability of telework for staff across the university.
  - Respondents (190 of 257 or 74%) ranked a flexible work schedule as the first or second most important factor for them, more important than salary, benefits, or the mission and values of their employer.
  - The Retriever Ready Return to Campus [web page states](#) that only non-exempt staff are eligible for compressed work schedules. As long as offices are appropriately staffed, the definition of a duty day is met, and work is being completed, there should be no impediment to extending the compressed work week option to exempt staff.
  - Reducing the number of staff on campus on any particular day increases the number of available parking spaces, reduces UMBC's carbon footprint, and creates more flexibility for UMBC staff caregivers.
  - One respondent stated: *"I believe people flourish when they feel trusted to get their work done by their employer...as long as it doesn't affect quality."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 10. Work with Human Resources and the Council of University System Staffs (CUSS) to increase the number of personal days allocated each year. Explicitly allow for the use of sick leave to take “a mental health day.”

The addition of personal days would permit greater flexibility, resulting in increased worker productivity and employee morale, more than counterbalancing the impact of the employee’s absence.

- Although personal leave is defined and allotted by the University System of Maryland, UMBC should advance a proposal to the Board of Regents to amend Policy VII-7.10, increasing the number of personal days for each calendar year.
- Of those expressing a preference, 88% of respondents indicated that an increased number of personal days each year was extremely or moderately appealing.
- Additional personal days each calendar year would assist staff who are managing their own chronic illnesses, enable options for when day care or elder care is unexpectedly unavailable, and create added flexibility for those staff without approved telework or flexible work schedules.
- One respondent stated: *“Not all illnesses (especially chronic) are always visible. I have a chronic mental illness but I don’t feel able to use sick time because of it. Instead, I try to schedule vacation time to accommodate it. UMBC should make (and emphasize) that sick time can be used for taking a mental health day.”*

# APPENDIX A: Survey Design

1. Please select your division at the University (drop-down box with 15 choices)
2. Please select all of your caregiving roles (respondent could choose multiple answers)
  - Self
  - Self (chronic illness)
  - Other (chronic illness)
  - Caregiver to young child(ren)
  - Caregiver to child(ren) with special needs
  - Caregiver to older adult(s)
  - Caregiver to older adult(s) with special needs
  - Caregiver to young child(ren) or child(ren) with special needs residing outside my home
  - Caregiver to older adult(s) or older adult(s) with special needs residing outside my home
3. How would you rate your work productivity during the pandemic? (0=less, 10=more)
4. What has made you more or less productive during the pandemic? (free response)
5. How would you rate your mental health working from home during the pandemic? (0=worse, 10=better)
6. What has made your mental health better or worse during the pandemic? (free response)
7. How would you rate your physical health working from home during the pandemic? (0=worse, 10=better)
8. What has made your physical health better or worse during the pandemic? (free response)
9. How would you rate your ability to balance your caregiving responsibilities in relation to your work responsibilities? (0=unable to balance, 10=able to balance)
10. What has affected you ability to balance caregiving and work responsibilities? (free response)
11. How would you rate the level of support you feel from UMBC related to your caregiving roles? (0=very unsupported, 10=very supported)
12. What is affecting the level of support you feel from UMBC related to your caregiving roles? (free response)

# APPENDIX A: Survey Design

13. Please rank the following in order of importance to you by dragging and dropping your selection into position:
  - Salary
  - Flexible Work Schedule
  - Benefits
  - Commute Time
  - Mission & Values of Employer
14. Would you consider leaving UMBC for more flexible work accommodations? (yes/maybe/no)
15. Please indicate the degree to which the following workplace benefits would appeal to you:
  - Backup care for children or adults
  - Tuition discounts for center-based child care
  - Flexible spending account for eldercare
  - Increased number of personal days each year
  - Increased number of campus lactation rooms
  - Increased number of family bathrooms or changing stations
  - A staff position at UMBC to coordinate family care resources
  - A more flexible telework policy
16. What do you wish the University knew about being a caregiver right now? (free response)

# APPENDIX B: Methodology

The PSS Caregiver Feedback Survey contained 16 questions.

Six questions were qualitative, free-response and five questions were quantitative, Likert scale questions anchored to a ten-point continuum.

The remaining questions allowed respondents to choose from among nominal drop-down boxes or ordinal, rank-ordered selections.

The survey was intentionally modeled after an earlier survey distributed through the Faculty Senate to allow for comparisons to be made between faculty and staff responses.

The survey was distributed on April 19, 2021 via the Qualtrics platform to 876 end users and remained open for 18 days.

During the time the survey was open, 334 full or partial responses were received for a response rate of approximately 35%.

The response rate is approximate because the survey was also shared informally through the Non-Exempt Staff Senate listserv, to which there are about 70 subscribers.

The survey was structured to prevent a single respondent from submitting their responses more than once.

Quantitative and descriptive statistics were exported directly from Qualtrics.

For the free-response questions, a single researcher, experienced with qualitative data analysis, coded by hand using the NVivo software.

Approximately, 1250 responses were reduced to a codebook containing 219 themes, many of which overlapped due to the overlapping nature of the qualitative questions.

Both qualitative and quantitative data were used to synthesize the recommendations contained in this report.

# APPENDIX C: Survey Results

Division of the University	
No Response	81
College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences	32
College of Engineering and Information Technology	14
College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences	10
Division of Administration and Finance	36
Division of Enrollment Management and Planning	19
Division of Information Technology	11
Division of Institutional Advancement/Athletics	32
Division of Professional Studies	14
Division of Research	17
Division of Student Affairs	28
Division of Undergraduate Academic Affairs	12
Office of the President	2
Office of the Provost	15
The Graduate School	8
Caregiving Role(s)	
No response	34
Self	66
Self (chronic illness)	14
Other (chronic illness)	1
Caregiver to young child(ren)	40
Caregiver to child(ren) with special needs	5
Caregiver to young child(ren) or child(ren) with special needs residing outside my home	1
Caregiver to older adult(s)	3
Caregiver to older adult(s) with special needs	3
Caregiver to older adult(s) or older adult(s) with special needs residing outside my home	9
Two of the above	107
Three of the above	36
Four or more of the above	19



# APPENDIX C: Survey Results

## How would you rate your work productivity during the pandemic?

0=less productive, 10=more productive

Average= 6.7

Standard Deviation= 2.3

## How would you rate your mental health working from home during the pandemic?

0=worse, 10=better

Average= 5.6

Standard Deviation= 2.8

## How would you rate your physical health working from home during the pandemic?

0=worse, 10=better

Average= 6.1

Standard Deviation= 2.6

## How would you rate your ability to balance your caregiving responsibilities in relation to your work responsibilities?

0=unable to balance, 10=able to balance

Average= 7.1

Standard Deviation= 2.4

## How would you rate the level of support you feel from UMBC related to your caregiving roles?

0=very unsupported, 10=very supported

Average= 7.1

Standard Deviation= 2.7

## Please rank the following in order of importance to you by dragging and dropping your selection into position (211 completed responses) :

	Salary	Flexible Work Schedule	Benefits	Commute Time	Mission & Value of Employer
Ranked it #1	68	125	24	10	29
Ranked it #2	75	65	62	37	18
Ranked it #3	67	37	78	34	41
Ranked it #4	28	21	63	91	54
Ranked it #5	18	9	30	85	115

# APPENDIX C: Survey Results

## Would you consider leaving UMBC for more flexible work accommodations?

Yes 110 (33%)  
 Maybe 87 (26%)  
 No 56 (17%)  
 No Answer 60 (18%)

## Please indicate the degree to which the following workplace benefits would appeal to you:

	Extremely Unappealing	Moderately Unappealing	Not Sure How I Feel	Moderately Appealing	Extremely Appealing	Not Applicable	No Answer
Backup care for children or adults	15	13	57	68	60	-	121
Tuition discounts for center-based child care	19	9	32	46	77	-	151
Flexible spending account for eldercare	14	10	54	67	39	-	150
Increased number of personal days each year	6	8	19	80	154	-	67
Increased number of campus lactation rooms	16	5	53	46	37	-	177
Increased number of family bathrooms or changing stations	18	7	54	59	32	-	164
A staff position at UMBC to coordinate family care resources	14	12	67	71	72	-	98
A more flexible telework policy	6	1	6	22	228	-	71