

College of Information Studies COVID-19 Field Impact Statement

(Approved and adopted by College of Information Studies APT Committee Members on December 2, 2022)

The College of Information Studies (INFO) is an interdisciplinary unit that covers a wide range of sub-disciplines. Thus, the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic in research, teaching, mentoring, and service is varied for each faculty's sub-discipline. There were some baseline commonalities and challenges, which are documented in this impact statement below. All individual faculty members are encouraged to provide a separate optional COVID-19 impact statement (which complements this document) that addresses the detailed impact in their specific sub-discipline to contextualize further and share their challenges. If desired, faculty who are going up for promotion can request their Record Preparation Committee (RPC) to prepare a sub-discipline field impact statement which will go through the approval of APT members that are eligible to vote in the promotion case.

Research

INFO faculty experienced heightened challenges to research execution as access to data collection sites and labs on and off-campus shut down, resulting in challenges working with human subjects. Work with many partners was suspended. Moving these largely lab-based or community-based studies to a virtual equivalent was difficult, and in some cases, impossible for an extended period of time. Even after the faculty received permission to resume in-person research, research participants were, and continue to be, less willing to expose themselves to potential risk, making recruitment difficult. Many of our collaborators have found themselves too overwhelmed to participate fully in the collaboration. New faculty working interdisciplinarily also faced challenges in establishing new research programs with both on and off-campus colleagues. Travel restrictions have also disrupted in-person work with non-local collaborators and at research sites, though video conferencing has partially ameliorated this disruption. As a result, most planned research projects were on hiatus for Spring '20, Fall '20, and Spring '21, and the following return to research activities required restarting requests with participants and community partners that some faculty are still navigating. Almost all external funding agencies and organizations that support research for INFO faculty, notably U.S. government agencies, sustained regular operations during the pandemic. However, there were significant processing delays as they virtualized the review and award management processes. Research dissemination was another significant source of upheaval. Many key conferences were canceled, postponed, or re-envisioned as virtual events. International travel was limited until May 2022. Research dissemination activities such as invited talks and conference presentations were almost exclusively virtual until Spring 2022. Despite all the merits associated with virtual meetings, they inevitably reduce the effectiveness of research dissemination and professional networking, making it difficult for faculty to share and have rich conversations about their work. Also, because of the pandemic, there has been a shortage of reviewers for peer-reviewed publication outlets in many fields. Committed reviewers often cannot complete the reviews in a timely manner. INFO faculty have experienced significant delay in receiving journal, conference, and/or book reviews and editorial decisions. New faculty joining the INFO College during the pandemic restrictions faced challenges with relocation and experienced delays with purchasing of startup equipment and materials. Construction of research spaces and labs were delayed because of supply chain issues.

Teaching

At the end of March 2020, all of the College's instructional sections transitioned to remote learning with the closure of the campus. The switch to virtual teaching during the 2020-2021 academic year required faculty to quickly learn and master new teaching techniques and content, which is especially challenging for faculty teaching large-size classes and faculty who have been teaching exclusively in-person. The change in class delivery formats has increased the time needed for teaching preparation and demanded extra time allocated to solving emerging problems associated with virtual teaching. Instructional curricula that involve field and community components are particularly difficult to transfer to an online or a hybrid format. Many faculty and students were able to recalibrate their activities to an online environment and then had to pivot back to in-person or some form of hybrid configuration this past year. There were also significant additional course and student support loads to INFO faculty with increased student absences due to personal or immediate family impacts from illnesses and the rise in student mental health issues. An expectation of increased tolerance for self-signed medical absences and student mental health challenges has decreased the ability for faculty of large courses to create and enforce straightforward attendance policies that apply to all (or even most) students at all times. As a result, some aspects of course evaluations may reflect whether students respond positively or negatively to these changes, rather than the effectiveness of the instructors.

Mentoring

Faculty also had fewer and generally only more formal interaction opportunities, and thus the initial mentoring and onboarding process extended over a longer time. INFO continued its commitments to GA student financial support. This included continuing to fund GAs on external grants, often operating under no-cost extensions. This reduced the scope of many projects. The COVID-19 pandemic has similarly disrupted students' professional and personal lives. INFO faculty has sought to adjust expectations to accommodate students' needs during this difficult time. The changes in how we interact with students and how their work is evaluated resulted in additional mentoring time from our faculty. During the pandemic, our faculty continued to provide strong mentoring to students on their research projects as well as teaching and career guidance. Some doctoral students have had to pivot their research projects due to restrictions on collecting human participants' data and travel. Others have had delays in reaching milestones. Most have needed significant additional mentoring and support from faculty to cope with the pandemic. Students who come from marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to the hardships caused by the pandemic and have needed additional support from the faculty. This was a decidedly traumatic experience for many students, and faculty had an additional advising burden.

Service

There were no significant changes to the College's service expectations, however, the shift to less collocation has greatly decreased the efficiency of work (due to the inability to efficiently exchange information and tacit knowledge), resulting in more meetings and emails. The burden of external service, such as reviewing for journals and conferences, increased significantly.