

Heller Staff Town Hall
Thursday, December 3, 2020
Q&A

1. After we are permitted to return to campus, will we still be able to work remotely more than was commonly acceptable pre-COVID?

Since March, we have learned a lot about the benefits of working from home. Most notably, working from home increases flexibility and reduces time spent commuting. We will take advantage of this learning and develop a hybrid model for when we return to the Heller building. This hybrid will consist of opportunities to work in both remote and on-site settings in ways that take into account personal needs and preferences while maintaining our current standard of service to students and others and to fulfilling the mission of the School. Having some staff work remotely some of the time will enable us to consolidate office space and use it to greater effect.

2. How much longer are we likely to be working 100% remotely?

The current remote-only model will remain in place until there is significant improvement in the outlook for public health. We anticipate this may occur in the spring, but we will make plans based on the facts on the ground at the time. Brandeis will continue with testing protocols, and we may move to a model in which nasal swab testing can be done at home and brought to campus. If this change is made to the testing protocol, Heller will regain use of the Zinner Forum, though this will not have a direct impact on our work from home policy. Anyone who needs to enter the Heller building should continue to follow the process of making a request to Ron (Administrative Staff), Cindy (Researchers) or Ravi (Students and Faculty).

3. With new staff/faculty who joined us during the COVID-19 pandemic and incoming hires as we transition back to campus, what can we do to make sure we're welcoming to all and help them feel they are an important, valued part of the community at Heller and Brandeis?

How do we share campus culture especially as we're re-entering campus spaces? What can we do to relate the message like they do at student orientation that "This is OUR HOUSE"?

These questions are fundamental to our continuing efforts to build community. Staff have found a number of different ways to stay engaged with each other while working remotely:

- Kate Kaplan suggested a buddy system for new staff members and offered to be a buddy herself. Ideally, buddies would be someone outside of the new staff member's institute or department.

- Once we return to campus, we should mindfully rebuild opportunities to spend time with each other to have fun, get to know each other and catch up.
- The first Coffee with the Dean in the Spring semester should focus on an activity to help us get to know new staff members.
- Ron Etlinger invited anyone interested to set up an informal one-on-one meeting with him to talk about anything.
- Emails introducing new staff members are extremely helpful. Bethany Romano, Director of Communications, offered to help supervisors craft and distribute email announcements of newly hired staff.

4. What is the outlook for promotions?

The current financial difficulties are not over yet, and this will not be a V-shaped recession. Even after we resume 'business as usual,' it will take a long time for the economy to heal. Congress has been slow to act in ways that would have shortened the recession. This has implications for Brandeis and for the Heller School. There continues to be a question of how many international students we will have in Fall 2021. We have weathered the storm very well, with no furloughs or layoffs, but these financial difficulties are created by the outside environment over which we have no control.

At this time, we are not able to provide salary increases for anyone at Heller--faculty, researchers or staff--and we do not want to promote staff without providing the appropriate increases. Following the principle of equity, we will not be moving forward with any staff promotions at this time because it is not financially tenable for us to do so.

For clarification: we are moving forward with promotions on the faculty and research side because the process is required by their contracts. In addition, there is an 8- to 10-month external review process. Suspending this process would result in a significant backlog. However, the faculty and research promotions currently underway will not be accompanied by salary increases until the freeze is lifted for all.

5. When will Brandeis' contribution to our 403b retirement funds resume?

Due to COVID-19, the university has experienced a \$38M negative impact on the budget. The suspension of contributions to retirement funds was one of the measures instrumental to helping Brandeis cover the shortfall. There is a strong intention to resume contributions to 403b contributions at the university level starting July 1, 2021. No final decision has been made at this time and the decision will be contingent on the financial status of the university. Both Brandeis and the Heller School have endeavored to be transparent about these issues and will continue to keep the community up to date.

6. What kind of technical support is available for staff working from home?

Ron Etlinger invited staff to reach out to him if they need technical support. This includes purchasing equipment such as laptops and even, in some cases, proper desk chairs. Demand for computers has been higher than usual, leading to lengthened delivery time. Ron suggested staff back up their files, either on the Brandeis server or in Box, and that they reach out sooner than later if their laptop is beginning to fail.

7. Would you please outline again what the process is for using discretionary days and the balance of vacation time?

President Liebowitz generously announced five discretionary days for staff to use for additional time off, in response to the stress of the pandemic and to recognize the extra effort staff have been making. Ron Etlinger encouraged Heller staff to take advantage of these five days, which should be used by August 31, 2021. These discretionary days appear in a drop-down menu in Workday as “special time off.”

In addition to the extra five discretionary days, the university has extended the usual vacation time carry-over. No one will lose the ability to carry-over unused vacation time from 2020 to 2021.

Finally, the University will close at 12:00 PM on Thursday, December 24, 2020 and remain closed through Friday, Friday, January 1, 2021. As always, this is time off for staff, with pay.

Ron invited anyone who has questions about their vacation time to speak with their supervisor or with himself or Linda Purrini, Associate Director, Operations.

8. What kinds of staff engagement has there been during this work-from-home time period and how can I get involved?

Victoria Felson, Program Administrator, MA-SID and Heller BUSAC representative, shared that BUSAC exists to address staff concerns, ideas and suggestions. Heller is one of 11 BUSAC districts at Brandeis. She shared contact information for herself, Bethany Romano, and our at-large BUSAC member, Mangok Bol:

- vfelson@brandeis.edu
- bromano@brandeis.edu
- Mangok Bol – mbol@brandeis.edu

Victoria noted that some staff expressed interest in the book club coordinated by Institutional Advancement. Bethany shared Stacey Winkler’s email address

(swinkler@brandeis.edu) for staff who would like to be added to her book club email list or just learn more. Victoria suggested that Heller staff could coordinate their own book club as well. Additional activities include a crafting group coordinated by Vicki Corpian and a walking challenge that Victoria will coordinate.

Bethany asked that staff contact her or Victoria with questions about serving as a BUSAC representative. These are elected positions.

Joanne Beswick in the Dean's Office, Amy AbuShanab in the Lurie Institute, Wanda Rifkin in IBH and Dianne Qualter in Operations shared that they have been holding smaller get-togethers called "coffee breaks," "cafés" and "sanity checks" to provide opportunities for staff to stay connected on an informal basis. Some of these informal events have included scavenger hunts, show and tell and spy games.

9. Addressing Institutional Racism, Heller Community Reading for Social Justice and a 21-Day Challenge, January 4-25

Maria Madison reminded staff that they were sent the links to the [Brandeis and Heller draft plans to address institutional racism](#). She would like the Heller community to focus on "cultural humility" rather than "cultural competence." She stated that achieving racial equity at Heller only becomes real when everyone takes responsibility. An inspiring result from the 2018/19 student climate survey showed that students turn first to staff as a trusted resource when they experience discrimination or hardship. This suggests staff are driving positive results in student satisfaction. Going forward, Tynika Booth, our new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Administrator, will be instrumental in helping to implement changes toward our EID goals.

Maria described the forums in which topics raised by [Heller Community Reading for Social Justice](#) have been discussed. The community book, "#From Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation" by Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor provides a starting point for conversations across the community about systematized racism. Topics raised in the book have been discussed at the new student orientation in August, a Teach-in event with the author in October and many other forums, including faculty and committee meetings. A 21-Day Challenge is now being planned as part of wintersession, to involve students as well as all Heller community members.

Sarah LaMorey, Practicum Program Manager, noted that the 21-Day Challenge is aimed at meeting participants 'where they are,' to deeply engage with these topics in a variety of ways. She asked attendees to look for more information to be shared in the coming weeks.

Dean Weil added that we will continue to cascade conversations, forums and activities around the community reading topics over the rest of the academic

year. He noted that community members can strive to build what they learn into their own actions in their roles at Heller.

10. Staff Announcements

Sheryl Seller, Assistant Director, Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy, announced that the recent round of Giving Circles has been completed and checks have been received by grantees. Grantees are:

- [Massachusetts Communities Action Network](#)
- [Community Change, Inc.](#)
- [Boston Area Gleaners](#)

Kate Kaplan, Director, Development and Alumni Relations, thanked staff for their participation in GivingDeisDay. She noted the great turn-out from the Heller community. Final numbers are not yet in, but it appears that the amount raised was at least as much as last year, and there were 147 donors.

Lanni Isenberg, Senior Program Administrator, CYC, noted that the Heller Impact Report recently arrived in the mail and it looks excellent. It was re-thought and re-designed and very effectively highlights the great work being done at Heller.

David invited staff to reach out to him and to other members of the Office of the Dean if there are additional issues they want to raise.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS FROM THE CHAT:

Question: Are cost of living increases also impacted by the salary freeze?

Answer: Yes, the salary freeze applies to all aspects of salary. We are not approving increases related to promotions, cost-of-living adjustments or for any other reason.

Question: Are there any raises for grant-funded researchers?

Answer: Salaries at Heller will remain frozen during this time even if you are funded by external grants.