

Sacrificing Kids and Parents under the Guise of COVID-19: UVM Must Do Better

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The COVID-19 crisis should not be a moment to turn back the clock on gender equality. Intentional or not, this is exactly what the University of Vermont is doing, undermining the many years faculty and staff have worked for UVM to become a family-friendly workplace with greater gender equality in hiring, promotion, and representation in leadership.

This past week, UVM leadership summarily announced—without consultation with affected parties—the closure of UVM’s high-quality childcare center. The decision was presented as a cost-cutting measure to save \$500,000—that’s \$200,000 less than President Garimella’s salary and benefits—and slightly higher than the salary and benefits of UVM’s new hockey coach. This decision was made despite the fact the center’s deficit had already been reduced by half with a variety of structural and other changes and there were plans in place to continue to reduce this deficit.

Securing quality day-care in Chittenden County and in the state is notoriously challenging, if not impossible. And so, UVM’s day care facility has been a godsend to UVM’s faculty and students. For 80 years, the Campus Children’s School has been both a site for the education of UVM students interested in early childhood education and for faculty and staff who seek convenient, moderately-priced, but most importantly excellent care for their pre-school children. The center has an international reputation for teacher education and best practice.

Childcare fees at the UVM center are lower than other centers and it pays its staff a livable wage. Our UVM center was doing right by childcare teachers, overwhelmingly women in a field where pay is often little better than a poverty wage. Parents are able to check on their children throughout the day, mothers can drop by to breastfeed, and most importantly, parents are able to be productive members of a caring community that supports their work in offices, classrooms, laboratories, and in the field.

Most top universities have first-rate day care facilities, many of which also provide care for the children of students. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, for example, has the largest day-care center in the state of Wisconsin; it provides care for all those associated with the university as well as alumni and offers care for babies as young as six weeks, after-school programs for older children, and “College for Kids” during the summer months on a sliding scale to accommodate a range of family incomes. President Garimella could most likely have heard those children from his office at UVM, and is certainly aware that Purdue University, another great university with which he was associated also has a well-regarded day-care center. Truly great universities make provisions to support their employees in their roles as parents and workers.

High quality daycare is not a luxury. It is as essential as health care, wages, and food, for at least the first five years of a child's life. Folks simply can't work without it. Childcare enables the recruitment of all faculty, but is especially essential for women for whom the burden of caring-giving, especially for the very young, is heavy.

A large body of research has demonstrated the positive effects on children's well-being of childcare availability and of gender equality. Many of UVM's own faculty have contributed to this research. The mantra in the face of COVID has been "follow the science." Why does the leadership of Vermont's flagship institution of higher education fail to follow the science on the matter of childcare?

This decision to close the center tells a sad story of UVM's priorities. It lays bare the difference between UVM's purported commitment to a healthy, productive work environment that promotes equity in contrast to its actual values—values that are now laying the cost of addressing the financial problems at UVM on women and young parents, as well as faculty and staff.

This move follows others by the current UVM leadership that will take our campus back 50 years. The administration also decided to cut the hours and salaries of 72 lecturers by 25%. The majority of those lecturers are women, some single parents, who will be forced to seek part-time work even as they search for nearly impossible-to-find childcare. These are deeply gendered issues as lecturers face supporting their families on less than a living wage and as women faculty struggle with how to advance as scholars and creators in the absence of supports and with so many other demands on our time.

We need to address the financial impact of the COVID crisis, no doubt. But the burden should not be borne disproportionately by children, women, and young parents at UVM. UVM's finances are not yet clear. If cuts *are* necessary, joint faculty-administration decision-making would lead to solutions that were academically sound and acceptable to a wide range of university citizens. There is absolutely no reason that the Faculty Senate and United Academics, which represent faculty, and the administration cannot get together, look at the numbers, and consider a progressive plan for budget adjustment.

President Garimella, follow the science and follow other leaders of great universities like UVM. Reverse this decision and seek cuts where they make sense—not on the backs of children and those who care for them.

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