COVID Response Team: Working from Home

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COVID Response Team: Rough Draft

**Executive Summary**

One of the underlying contributors to CO2 emissions at Western Washington University is the commuting of staff and faculty. Due to the cost of living, as well other factors, many employed by WWU live outside of the City of Bellingham. This project addresses the issue of lowering the university's CO2 commuting emissions by adapting the university’s response to COVID-19 of telecommuting. Data was collected through interviews of staff and faculty of Western Washington University to judge the viability of continuing part-time work from home after the pandemic. Seven WWU staff and faculty were interviewed to learn about their work commute and opinions on telecommuting. All of the respondents showed support for continuing part-time telecommuting, some preferring only one day a week and others suggesting up to three days a week.

Many studies have been done to show the environmental damage that occurs due to long commutes, as well as the emotional toll it takes on people. This project will both lower WWU’s CO2 emissions and result in a more productive staff. All of the interviewed staff and faculty have stated that they feel more productive while working from home and continuing the option when normalcy returns will result in better work being done. This is backed up by a study that found 91% of employees said they got more work done when working remotely and remote workers rated themselves as happier and feeling more valued than those who commuted (TINYpulse, 2016).

Through this study's findings, it is recommended that staff and faculty be allowed to work from home if the nature of their work allows it and they choose to do so. It is recommended that the administration change the strict rules concerning telecommuting and learn from COVID-19, allowing staff and faculty to perform their duties how they see fit.

**Introduction**

Our team’s goal is to address the CO2 emissions at Western Washington University by utilizing some of the methods used to combat the COVID-19 crisis. WWU has been searching for innovative ways to reduce university carbon emissions including creating a Sustainability Action Plan to address some of these issues. The largest and most expansive measure taken in response to COVID-19 was converting all classes to online and all work to telecommuting. It is recommended in this report that the administration allow work from home for staff and faculty when they see fit. This report addresses the advantages and disadvantages of working from home, most likely a couple days of week for staff and faculty, and how they think obstacles could be overcome. This project is planned to have multiple stages, this being the first one; to get these recommendations heard and changes enacted.

**Methodology**

Seven staff and faculty at WWU were interviewed for data collection in this study. Each interviewee was recommended to us by our faculty advisor, Lindsey McDonald. Two of the interviews were conducted as a group, those with Lindsey McDonald and David Crook, and the other five individuals were split up between us, each conducting 1-2 interviews. Each interviewee was emailed asking to schedule a Zoom or Microsoft Teams meeting during the work week of May 11th-15th, 2020. If they were not available for a meeting that week, emailed written responses were accepted for them instead. Two out of seven staff/faculty responded to the interview questions via email, and one person did not get back to us within our timeframe.

The goal for these interviews was to collect responses from WWU staff and faculty to questions, feelings, and concerns about working from home. We asked for thoughts about working from home now and continuing into the future for 1-2 days a week or however often they feel would be productive.

Questions:

* If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?
* Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?
* What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?
* How far do you commute to campus?
* How would increased work from home affect you?

**Results**

The results from the seven interviews of staff and faculty members showed that all of them would be open to working from home, ranging from one day a week to three. The number would depend on their schedules and what kinds of work they do, as some lends itself better to telecommuting than others.

Some interviewees already walk or bike to work but would still appreciate being allowed to work from home some of the days of the week. It should be considered though that this was a small sample of the staff and faculty working for WWU. Lindsey MacDonald and Julia Burns are among the staff and faculty who walk or bike, but they would like dedicated time to work from home so they can focus on their projects and actually get more work done. Travis Tennessen uses public transportation because he lives close to campus but would like to work from home multiple days a week, arguing that he is more productive when working from home and his job lends itself well to do so. Natalie Baloy also utilizes public transport as well as biking, due to her close proximity, but telecommuting appeals to her so she has more time to bond with her new baby.

Of the people we interviewed, only two drive to work regularly; Jocelynn Kelley and Laurel Hammond. Kelley has a new baby as well and needs to be prepared for any emergency which biking, walking, or public transport may not be adequate for. Hammond lives in Ferndale and has a young child, making public transport or other means difficult as well. All of the people we interviewed are pushing for increased work from home when things start returning to normal. They see it as an opportunity to get more work done with less distractions, spend more time with their families by getting rid of commute time, and help the planet at the same time.

David Crook has been pushing for increased work from home for years and he, along with Julia Burns, sees the COVID-19 experiences as a sort of trial run. Both Crook and Burns hope WWU can continue with the effort and make improvements along the way so work from home can be smoother in the future.

An issue we encountered in our interviews is the lack of administrators we interviewed, so a lot of the issues with telecommuting are assumed and not directly told to us by the administration. We hope that in the coming phases of this project the students will reach out and interview the administration as well to learn about their specific barriers and how to move past them.

**Recommendations**

Telework would allow for greater accessibility, productivity, and flexibility across the greater Westen Washington University community. Furthermore, telework can eliminate some carbon emissions given off by commuting to campus. Staff and faculty make up a considerable amount of carbon emissions for the university, measured by the Sustainability action plan. Our recommendations fit into the larger picture regionally as it would reduce carbon emissions which will impact the overall surrounding community. The systems at play are both social and environmental.

Based on the results of our interviews, our recommended course of action for the university is to grant greater access to teleworking for staff and faculty. Allowing one work from home every five day work week could result in ⅕ less CO2 emissions from commuting. We suggest that the university use our survey, based on interview results, to gauge the opinions and pros and cons of telecommuting of all of the university's employees rather than just the few we interviewed. Opening up the opportunity for more teleworking provides staff and faculty with more flexibility in their schedules and can often increase productivity. Furthermore, the recommended expansion of telecommuting allows for more accessibility to and for the University's extension sites which benefits the greater Western community and allows for more even dispersion of resources to sites that may have been neglected.

**Timeline**

We have broken down a rough timeline that puts this project into phases. We hope that classes later on will pick up the project and further the efforts.

We are currently in phase one. Multiple staff and faculty members have been interviewed to identify issues and potential barriers to the project that they see and have given recommendations to overcome them. At the end of phase one, a survey will be created that will be administered during the next phase to all staff and faculty to gauge their willingness to work from home and gain more insight into the barriers and resolution recommendations.

Phase two will be administered by students in a later quarter; it will involve dispersing the survey and analyzing the results, refining the recommendations that this paper will give, and working toward surveying students as well. The second phase will be analyzing the successes and failures of the hybrid teaching systems that the school will be administering in the fall quarter, and tweaking the project as they see fit.

Phase three may involve surveying students asking about the successes and failures of hybrid learning and if they would like to delve deeper into hybrid learning to reduce commutes for staff, faculty, and students.

The fourth phase will involve bringing the completed analysis to administrators to change the rules or restrictions currently in place. Phase four may bring about change and allow staff and faculty to work from home and students to have a blend of online and in person schooling.

**Monitoring and Evaluation**

Multiple follow up surveys throughout the year to monitor staff and faculty performance, productivity, and change in commute (change in carbon footprint) with increased work from home are encouraged as means of measuring success. Any working from home policies reviewed and changes in benefit of working from home should be documented as well as a comparison of CO2 emissions from staff/faculty commuting in 2019 to that of 2020.

**Budget**

This project should not require a new budget because it would simply be working from home. There is the possibility that more money could be spent buying faculty and staff laptops adequate for their needed software and bringing to and from home. David Crook mentioned in his interview the idea of shifting the way the university's computer budget is spent. Instead of buying new computers every 5 years, the school could give staff and faculty a $500 stipend per year to buy themselves a laptop and maintain it. This could have the effect of actually decreasing computer costs. Other than that, there is not a foreseeable budget needed for this because this project is suggesting the reduction of the staff presence/staff commuting to campus.

**Conclusion**

Increased work from home will reduce carbon emissions from commuter traffic while also allowing for a more flexible and potentially productive work schedule for staff and faculty. The recommended course of action for the university after assessing new systems and behaviors adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic is the overall inclusion of telework and the further expansion of telework across the university including more online learning as well as the opportunity to participate in telework several times per week. A general four stage timeline was included that could serve as a potential guide to the implementation of this project. The project itself is relatively simple and does not require a detailed budget. The overall goal of this project is to implement adaptive behaviors and systems that were put in place during the pandemic that should be continued on beyond in an attempt to lower the university’s carbon emissions.

**Collected Findings**

Responses will be categorized based on the area of concern for their mentioned pro/con or comment regarding telecommuting.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Area of concern | Pro | Con |
| Work/life balance | * Ability to care for small children and elderly * Ability to be more present for family. | * Can be difficult for some to balance personal life with work (especially currently, due to the pandemic). |
| Productivity | * Overall staff have said they are more efficient. |  |
| Technology |  | * Not everyone has access to the equipment needed to do their jobs * Lack of good internet and/or computers |
| Commuting | * No long commute for staff that live far from campus means more time spent working. * Lower individual carbon footprints because many are not travelling long distances to work. |  |
| Workspace |  | * Lack of ergonomic workspace. * Space constraints. * Issues with technology, or lack of. |

**Interview transcripts (notes):**

**David Crook**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Yes, he would telecommute a couple times a week to focus on individual work/projects; still wants to have commute days due to productivity from unplanned interactions with colleagues.

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

No, he does not.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

Lives too far/no transit.

**How far do you commute to campus?**

30 minutes.

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

His work is involved with the WWU extension sites in Port Angeles and Poulsbo, and has given them more attention and connection with WWU main campus.

**Lindsey MacDonald**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Would telecommute, maybe once a week, dedicated day per week for focusing on projects.

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

Rides bike to bus stop, takes bus to work in the morning, and then bikes home after work.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

N/A

**How far do you commute to campus?**

Takes about 20 minutes.

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

Would give her a day every week to focus on projects.

Has increased trust, communication and connection with colleagues.

Concerns about supervising others have been resolved through trust and communication.

**Julia Burns**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Mix of the two, working from home is less stressful, like interacting face to face, create fun engaging ideas → hard to feel fun if not around people, once a week

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

Most days she walks, besides that she may also bike to campus.

Good for the environment.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

Biggest barrier is resistance to change, systems in place. Good thing about covid is giving new inspiration about being able to make changes

**How far do you commute to campus?**

20 min walk.

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

Positive: a little more time to be focused, relaxing. Negative: no negative if scheduling time right, having meetings is tiring so don’t schedule them those days

**Natalie Baloy**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Yes, I’ve already spoken with my coworkers about an idea I have for the post-pandemic time when we resume a “new normal”: I would like to work from home for computer-related work and come to campus for in-person work, such as meetings, classes, etc. I would prefer to consolidate this to 2-3 days a week, working from home 2-3 days a week. One of the reasons for this is that I have a small child (she turns one next month!), so working from home allows me some flexibility and a little more time with her without the commute back and forth.

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

Yes, before the pandemic, I rode my bike a few minutes to my closest bus stop, then loaded my bike onto the bus and rode the bus to campus. Then I biked home at the end of the day. I really liked this routine for a few reasons. First, biking uphill at the start of my work day is a tough sell – my bike doesn’t have gears and I get sweaty! Second, riding the bus in the morning allows me to check my email on my phone and transition into my work day while in transit. Third, I love public transit as a public service and want to support it! Fourth, riding my bike home at the end of the day is a great way to transition out of my work brain and into my home and my community.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

The biggest obstacle relates to my baby… I don’t have a bike trailer or bike seat for her yet. I’m considering getting an electric bike in the next few years that we can ride together. Other than that, I don’t have many obstacles. I live in the Lettered Streets neighborhood and it’s super easy to get to/from campus on foot, bike, or bus. Sometimes I carpool with my husband, who also works on campus.

**How far do you commute to campus?**

I live two miles from campus.

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

Less transition/transit time, more time with my kid. More focused time with people while on campus and more focused time on my computer when at home. Looking forward to less Zoom by the way!

Just a quick note to say: another reflection I’ve been having during this pandemic time is that we all could just be working \***less**\* and the world would still go round! What if we all had four day work weeks, for example? Or we worked 11 months instead of 12?

**Jocylynn Kelley**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Yes! I have a 7 month old, so telecommuting has given us the opportunity to extend our bonding time and increased odds of continued breastfeeding. In the long term, telecommuting 2-3x/week would be ideal. It would allow me to have a few days of uninterrupted work, while also still allowing for meetings on campus/necessary in-person work. This would also allow for me to reduce my carbon footprint, which is important to me.

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

No, I do not.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

I carpool with my spouse to work and going home we drop off a coworker as well. We often have doctor appointments (my mother lives with us, so we take her to her appointments) and in the event of an emergency, I would like to be able to access our vehicles for the quickest response to our children.

**How far do you commute to campus?**

18 miles round trip.

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

There are positive effects: increased family time (lunchtime outings, etc.) , alleviated stress knowing my mom is safe (vulnerable population), and more control over diet (no unhealthy snack temptation from the markets!).

If we continue to work from home full-time, here would be my issues of concern:

* Ergonomic workspace; I need a chair, desk, Bluetooth keyboard, how to avoid screen fatigue, and different lights.
* Childcare/Education: I also have a 4 year old son and if the CDC continues to be closed, he would be home 100% of the time, too. My mother watches both kids while we’re “at” work, but I would want to ensure my kids get their age-appropriate education and engagement. Also, much of my son's learning occurs through social interaction, so he wouldn’t be able to play with kids his age.
* Create an office: we currently work in the living room due to space constraints. This means getting creative when meetings require no background noise.
* Exercise: My daily step count has drastically decreased (12-15k down to 3-4k). I typically exercise at Wade King Rec Center either before work or over lunch (yay Faculty/Staff Wellness Classes and pick up basketball!). Our lunchtime currently is not a “break”, but spent being more present with the kids and ensuring they are getting attention and outdoors.

**Laurel Hammond**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Yes. It is more effective for her job. Her job is more community based so she does not need to be in the office all day, every day. The commute takes a lot of time out of her day and is inconvenient. She has been more productive teleworking. She said she would work mostly from home and come in when needed (like a couple times a week). System can be put in place where the office rotates who’s in person that day and who’s teleworking.

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

No. She would drive to Bellingham and then take the bus to campus but the bus system is not good enough for that to be tangible. She lives in Ferndale with a young child so it’s hard.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

Living far away, child care, lack of infrastructure.

**How far do you commute to campus?**

Around 20-30 minutes via drive.

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

More productive but there haven’t been obstacles. Her work is pretty optimized for working from home.

**Travis Tennessen**

**If given the option to telecommute to campus, would you? Why or Why not? How often?**

Yes, pretty often. His work doesn’t require him to need to be in the office every day and he’s been more efficient teleworking.

**Do you use public transportation, bike, or walk to campus? How often? Why or why not?**

Yes, very often. Utilizes the bus system, zip car, etc. He lives close to campus and he believes staff and faculty should lead by example in lowering carbon emissions in their own daily lives.

Faculty and staff should all use public transport and lead by example.

**What are your biggest obstacles for not driving to campus (using public transportation, biking, walking, carpooling instead)?**

N/A

**How far do you commute to campus?**

Lives very close to campus (within a couple of miles).

**How would increased work from home affect you?**

Work is pretty optimized from home in his case. He’s a lot more efficient.

Works Cited

TINYpulse (2016). *What Leaders Need to Know About Remote Workers* [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/443262/pdf/TINYpulse_What_Leaders_Need_to_Know_About_Remote_Workers.pdf>