



# UMB News

## Town Hall Addresses Telework, Return to Campus

**February 26, 2021** | By [Alex Likowski](#)

After a nearly a full year of telecommuting, University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) employees remain mostly positive about the experience, according to a recent survey of University employees taken by the UMB Staff Senate. The survey asked about changes in productivity, whether respondents felt they were adequately supported by managers, and whether they would like to continue teleworking indefinitely.

Analyzing survey results and answering questions from UMB staff was the topic of *Virtual Face to Face with President Bruce Jarrell*, the regular, hourlong webinar hosted by UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**. Joining Jarrell on the panel were **Dawn M. Rhodes, MBA**, chief business and finance officer and vice president; **Juliet Dickerson, MS**, interim associate vice president, Human Resource Services; **Jonathan Bratt, MS, CEM**, executive director, Office of Emergency Management; and **Christina Fenwick**, vice president, UMB Staff Senate.



(clockwise from top center) Bruce Jarrell, Christina Fenwick, Jonathan Bratt, Juliet Dickerson, and Dawn Rhodes

“COVID has increased my workload,” wrote one survey-taker. “I get quality sleep. I have been able to have a better work-life balance,” wrote a second. And many others wrote something along these lines: “Sometimes, it feels as though

you are ‘on call’ and are more apt to answer emails as they come in whether it’s the weekend or evening, but I definitely prefer being at home with the main advantage being not having to drive into the city.”

About 90 percent of the 257 survey respondents said they do currently telework. And more than 95 percent said they want that to continue, most favoring teleworking “a few days per week.”

Despite whatever supervisors may have been worried about going into telework, self-reporting indicates productivity is better than ever. More than 92 percent said their productivity had not decreased, and a majority said they were actually more productive working remotely, although, as one person noted,

“Productivity has increased. However, my day is also much longer because I have to stop throughout the day because I have a toddler.”

Staying productive even in the face of Zoom fatigue and the loss of personal contact makes one wonder “How did we do it? How did we get it all done remotely?” According to the survey, the answer is: with a lot of flexibility. More than 95 percent of respondents said their direct supervisor gave them the support they need, and almost 90 percent said they had the tools and supplies necessary to get the job done, despite the suddenness of the move to telework last March and the belief at that time that telework likely would be a temporary situation.

Many of the comments from survey respondents painted a picture of staff working to fit work into already busy lives at home. “I have the technology I need to do my job but do not have dedicated workspace at home. I often have to move rooms throughout the day to have a confidential space,” wrote one staff member.

Others took the opportunity to list each of the irksome but surmountable challenges they faced. “The internet needs to be upgraded. I am using my personal phone. That should stop. I need an updated computer. The one I was given temporarily shuts down, runs slow, and generally seems to have problems.” Others complained of ergonomic issues at home and trouble getting office supplies, and several pined for a second monitor.

But the greatest area of concern expressed in the survey seemed not to be the prospect of continuing telework, but rather of ending it. Comments like these as well as similar questions from the audience sparked the most discussion: “I will feel safe returning only when a vaccine has been widely distributed.” “I feel that it will be difficult for students to be socially distant in the classroom. Most of our classrooms are very small.” “How will compensation be adjusted as those working from home would not have the same expenses as those still commuting to work?”

Fenwick primed the discussion with some of the questions the Staff Senate has heard most frequently from UMB employees. “Is the plan to return to campus predicated on most of us being vaccinated?” she asked.

“The more people who get vaccinated, the better it is, there’s no debating that,” Jarrell answered. “I think you should be thinking of vaccine not as the cure to this, but as an additional measure that will keep it under control and make it more safe to be on this campus. COVID’s around for a while. It’s not going to go away, and I can tell you that no vaccine is going to be 100 percent, even with the high coverage that we have today. So, I don’t think it’s an expectation that 80 or 90 percent of the University be vaccinated. I again say, the higher the better.”

“Prior to mandatory telework, my institute administration leadership was very strict and, honestly, not as forward-thinking with telework,” one audience member who asked to remain anonymous asked. “Will there be a telework agreement at the University level that supervisors and staff can sign, review, amend as a template for starting the conversation with your supervisor to telework, even one day a week?”

“I think many managers and supervisors have learned a lot through this process,” Rhodes replied. “Those who thought that it wasn’t possible to telework have learned that it definitely is.”

The group was pressed on this point from several angles throughout the hour, including this question from Financial Services employee **Glenda Randall**, who worried that supervisors might deny flexible schedules despite evidence that her office has run efficiently during telework. “If my team members will want to have a flexible schedule, meaning teleworking one or two days a week, and if it’s up to the supervisor or the department head to allow that permission,” she asked, “if the telework is not allowed, who can we go to?”

“I love teleworking, quite frankly,” Rhodes responded. “But we don’t know the impact of telework on team cohesiveness, on any number of things.”

“We have seen some research out there that the hybrid model supports stronger output than 100 percent telework,” Dickerson added. “We had to pivot quickly to go out on the pandemic, and now we’re going to be thoughtful on coming back. But the expectation is that we will slowly increase density and you’ll have more information on what that will look like.”

To watch the entire discussion, please access the link at the top of this page.

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