INSIGHTS REPORT

The Shifting State of Faculty Hiring

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The Shifting State of Faculty Hiring

By Michael Anft

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INTRODUCTION

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Given the uncertainty and funding turmoil buffeting many campuses, headlines about hiring freezes and budget contractions understandably are cause for concern. The political and economic headwinds make it difficult to predict what may happen across the sector. But at the present moment, higher ed, now in the interregnum between the anxieties of the pandemic and the nail-biting about the demographic cliff to come, can take note of more positive news: colleges had resumed hiring.

All signs indicate that college hiring has recovered from the initial shock of the Covid-19 pandemic and that era's plummeting enrollment levels.

After steep downturns in 2020, hiring of the full-time professoriate saw a jump from 2021 to 2023, though the effects have moderated more recently, according to the most recent research from the American Association of University Professors, a faculty organization.

All signs indicate that college hiring has recovered from the initial shock of the Covid-19 pandemic and that era's plummeting enrollment levels. The immediate post-pandemic period was bleak: There was a 12-percent downturn in hiring from 2017 levels to those in 2021, when the effects of the pandemic were most felt.

As more colleges are positioned to add more educators, the talent pool appears deep. Faculty members continue to be highly educated people, with nearly 93 percent holding doctoral degrees. The nation's colleges continue to churn out doctorates — nearly 58,000 of them in 2023 — about 20 percent more than a decade earlier.

But that good news comes with asterisks.

Federal grant funding for research is currently up in the air, leading some institutions to at least slow down their hiring for some projects backed with National Institutes of Health dollars. At press time, a court had frozen a White House executive order that would eliminate federal payments to cover administrative costs for university researchers. But some institutions and faculty candidates are already feeling the order's effects.

As higher education fights fresh battles in the here and now, it continues to face longstanding challenges, as do academic job seekers.

Only 10 percent to 20 percent of Ph.D.s land permanent academic positions. An ongoing mismatch between the types of degrees job seekers hold and available positions remains, experts say.

Pay, especially for tenured or tenure-track employees, remains flat and behind the pace of inflation. One study found that while some types of college employees earned historically high pay raises in 2023-24, faculty salaries were lagging, experiencing the largest pay gap of all types of college staff when comparing pre-pandemic levels of pay with post-Covid levels.

Tenured or tenure-track faculty earned nearly 10 percent less and non-tenure-track faculty 8.2 percent less following the pandemic, in inflation-adjusted dollars.

Colleges, besides lacking a consistent supply of tenure-track jobs, often must compete with private industry for talent. By comparison, the jobs institutions offer now may not be the draw they once were.

Though there have been fresh gains in faculty hiring, they have been unevenly distributed. Even as faculty hiring increased overall, some institutions have refrained this year from adding new hires as they continue to recoil from Covid-era financial aftershocks, including downturns in paid tuition and public support. Some institutions, including Portland State University, St. Louis University, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, are either laying off faculty, dropping academic programs, or freezing hiring.

Meanwhile, worries remain about the quality of jobs that colleges have to offer. The hiring of tenured professors may be on a slight uptick, per AAUP, but there are few signs that the decades-long trend toward hiring more faculty on contingent appointments than tenured or tenure-track faculty is slowing. Instead, colleges are continuing to use contingent professors — adjuncts, instructors, and graduate assistants — at high levels.

Around two-thirds of all full-time college faculty members are on contingent appointments. They are often deprived of professional-development opportunities typically afforded to tenured professors. They often receive lesser benefits and protections than tenured professors or those on the way to gaining tenure. At the same time, they cost institutions less money while allowing them the flexibility to cut their faculty size during tough times. In 1987, far fewer (47 percent) of all college faculty served on a contingent basis, according to the AAUP.

Meanwhile, the hiring landscape remains full of other inequities. Women who are full-time faculty members earn only 83 percent of what full-time male faculty members make, per the AAUP. Women also remain underrepresented in tenure-track jobs, while holding more non-tenure-track lecturer and instructor positions than men, according to the American Association of University Women. Black and Latino faculty members also hold more nontenure-track jobs than jobs that include tenure or the prospect of gaining it.

Ongoing concerns about how the meritocracy has reshaped not only the academy but also American life often revolve around the role institutions play in maintaining inequality. A study that looked at where faculty are coming from found that 80 percent of all U.S.-trained faculty members were educated at just 20 percent of institutions. And just five — the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Stanford University — graduated more than 13 percent of all faculty in the United States.

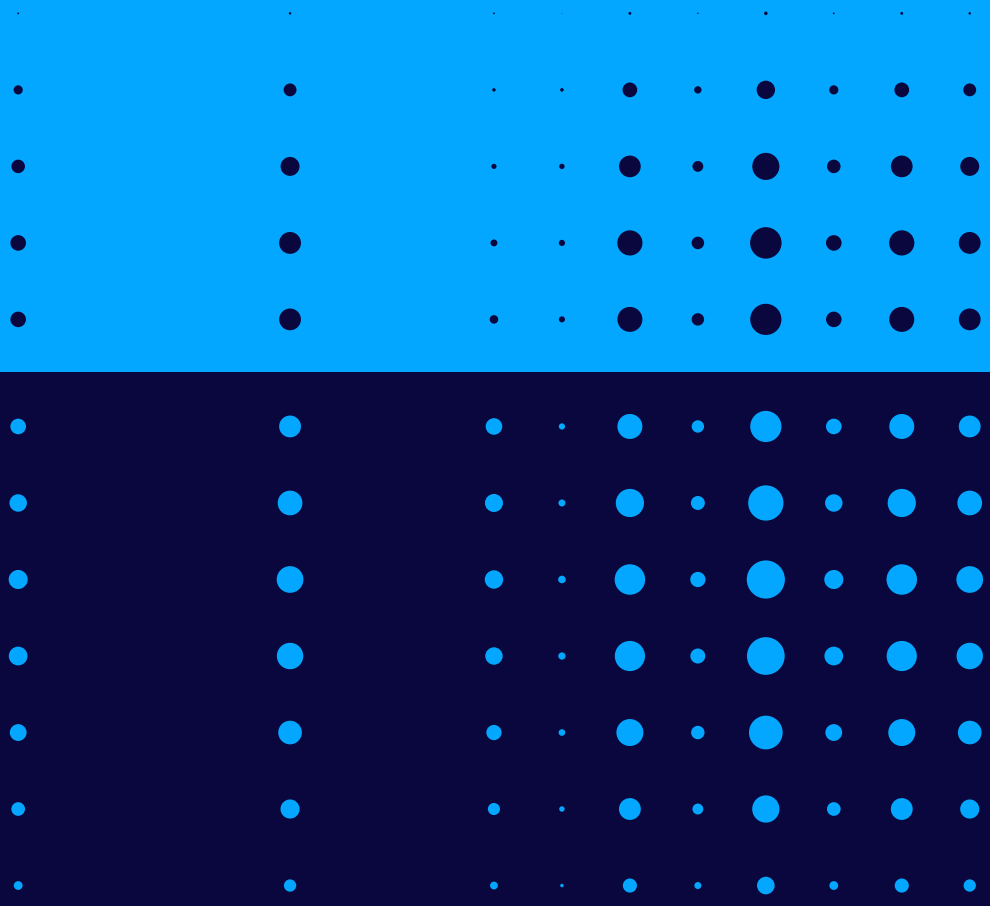
The current political landscape has put certain issues important to faculty candidates into higher relief.

Finally, the current political landscape has put certain issues important to faculty candidates into higher relief. Concerns over whether they will be able to teach courses in the way they want have morphed from state-level issues into national ones. Diversity, equity, and inclusion statements, long required of faculty applicants, have gone the way of many campus DEI programs. The closing of DEI offices clouds the mission of some institutions to become fairer and more equitable in their hiring and other practices. At press time, several organizations had recently filed suit against a White House executive order that targets DEI programs in higher education.

Which is to say that while the specter of the pandemic and its effects on hiring may be receding in the rearview mirror, today's rosier academic hiring landscape features some storm clouds of its own.

SECTION 1

Positive Signs for Hiring



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Most of the recent growth in tenured hires comes from larger institutions that feature a variety of doctoral programs, says Glenn Colby, a senior research officer at the AAUP.

A handful of those institutions have decided to use their gains in enrollment and finances to develop large interdisciplinary programs to take on some of society's most pressing problems — including climate change and health-care access — and biggest opportunities, such as artificial intelligence. To make those plans work, they have decided to hire tenured professors or add new ones to the tenure track.

The University of Wisconsin at Madison is moving forward with a bold plan to create or bolster such interdisciplinary programs, even as it advises caution when making hiring decisions for federally funded positions.

"The whole notion of solving big problems is huge for Ph.D.s coming out now."

In 2022, after the Wisconsin legislature came through with higher funding levels and its enrollment grew by around five percent annually, UW began hatching plans for the RISE Initiative. An increase in out-of-state tuition, extra revenue from research, and some private grants also helped the university map out a plan to build cross-department programs in AI and health sciences, and an environmental-sciences initiative that focuses on sustainability.

Drawing in talented people who want to work across subject areas is key to the effort. "The

whole notion of solving big problems is huge for Ph.D.s coming out now," says Charles Isbell, the university's provost. "The ability to work together with others in a community of talented people, to me, is a major selling point."

Since the RISE Initiative was officially unveiled a year ago, UW has hired 45 tenured or tenure-track professors and plans to hire around 100 more. That represents a 40-percent increase above the university's typical hiring level over a three- to four-year period, says Isbell.

Faculty members who seek to work across disciplines — the AI program will likely include four different departments, for example — are lining up for jobs. "We're seeing different people apply than before," Isbell says, adding that the initiative will include groups of faculty and new buildings organized around broad themes, and not separate colleges or departments.

Such "cluster hiring," designed in part to draw applicants willing to work across department lines, is also underway at the University of South Carolina, where professors are being brought on to both match the need for instructors presented by an enrollment bump of around 10 percent over the past five years and to strengthen existing multidisciplinary programs in brain health and environmental sciences. The university plans to hire 100 new faculty members in 16 of its colleges during the next two years.

As it does so, South Carolina is bucking the nationwide trend toward hiring more adjuncts, graduate assistants, and part-timers.

"We care deeply about our part-time faculty, but for this initiative, we want to do more than just hire more professionals who teach. We're focused on tenure-track people," says Donna Arnett, executive vice president of academic affairs and provost at South Carolina. "From a student-success perspective, it makes sense. Tenured faculty are really on top of their fields and do research that is really inspiring to students."

Virginia Commonwealth, a midsize public university, is also making plans for tenure-level cluster hires to fill its "convergence labs" in AI and other subjects. But like many non-elite private and public colleges, it is hiring more contingent professionals than tenure-track ones until its finances improve.

"Large public institutions can hire more tenure-track people because they have the resources," says Mangala Subramaniam, senior vice provost for faculty affairs at Virginia Commonwealth. "Enrollment is only just starting to come back for many of the rest of us. So, we move more slowly."

Endowed universities, including top-level private and public research institutions, receive many more applicants because they have more resources to draw from — and to offer candidates. During hiring, those resources add up to better salaries and work arrangements. Poaching faculty members from private colleges is common.

"We had one faculty member who told us he was leaving for a top research institution where he could work in his lab and not have to teach," Subramaniam says. "He didn't even want to negotiate with us."

Cash-strapped colleges are much more likely to make contingency hires even during times when institutional finances are generally on the upswing, notes Colby, from the AAUP.

The percentage of new hires among tenured professors has grown slightly in recent years, but the total number of tenured people has gone down. Most often, tenure-holding professors are replaced by those without tenure. "Tenured people are leaving the profession," says Colby. "But we don't know why."

Since fall 2020, the total number of full-time tenured faculty members has decreased each

The percentage of new hires among tenured professors has grown slightly in recent years, but the total number of tenured people has gone down.

year, while the total number of nontenure-track appointments has increased.

"The narrative has been that tenure is under assault and that the percentage of tenured or tenure-track faculty has been down in the last 40 to 50 years," he adds. "The total numbers of tenured people have remained flat, or worse. That's a sign that institutions are dealing with fluctuating enrollment by hiring more contingent people rather than those on the tenure track when they need to teach more students."

College administrators appreciate the flexibility in hiring faculty for the years when they'll need them — and no years beyond that, as would be the case with a commitment to tenured faculty members. Such a strategy could increase as the enrollment demographic cliff nears, some say.

For now, though, an increase in non-tenure-track faculty hiring is mostly due to a post-pandemic enrollment surge.

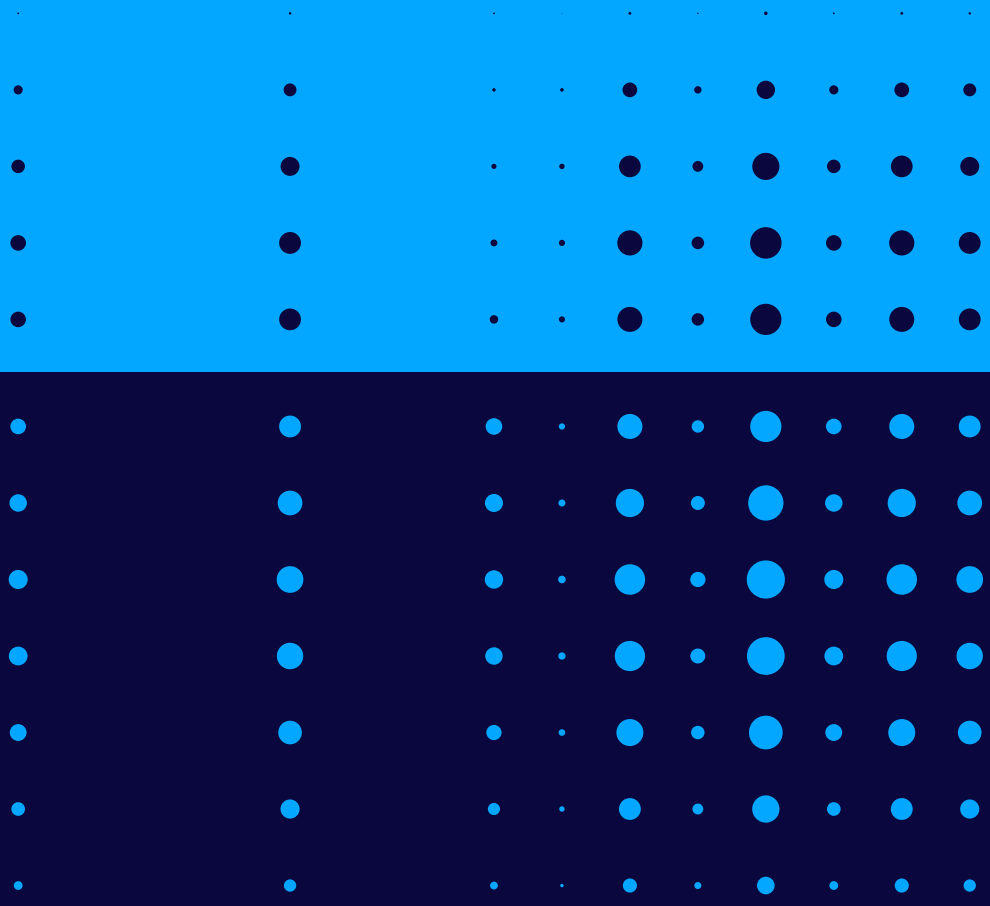
"The growth in contingent hiring isn't being driven by fear of the demo cliff, but by the ongoing increase in the need for teachers, especially in areas like STEM or AI," says Isbell.

Meanwhile, worries about the declining quality and quantity of applicants, prevalent in reports two years ago, may be on the wane.

Preliminary data from one study, not yet peer reviewed, show that first-time applicants for professorships offer much more in the way of academic and professional accomplishments than those who sought their first faculty jobs a decade ago, says Anthony J. Olejniczak, director of the Academic Analytics Research Center, an organization that crunches data on faculty hiring.

SECTION 2

What Faculty Candidates Want



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Along with workers across other sectors, higher-ed employees reacted to the Covid era by seeking out a better work/life balance. Now that the pandemic's worst effects are over, faculty still want more flexibility in their schedules to deal with families and health. And even as they try to land jobs in a market overloaded with Ph.D.s, experts say, they are assertive about asking for it.

Faculty directors and provosts say that an institution's childcare benefits, family-leave policies, remote-work options, and scheduling protocols arise far more often in faculty job interviews than they did five years ago. Many colleges have responded by allowing some faculty to carve out their own teaching and office hours.

"We have people who basically write their own schedules," says Arnett, from South Carolina.

"The current generation of scholars has high expectations that they will be able to create a healthy work/life balance."

"We tell them that the great thing about an academic job is that you can shape it to be what you want it to be," adds Andrea Romero, vice provost for faculty affairs at the University of Arizona. "The current generation of scholars has high expectations that they will be able to create a healthy work/life balance. They don't want work conditions that are not flexible enough for families."

Though pay rates, which have fallen in real dollars in recent years, remain a sticking point, faculty and faculty candidates seem happy enough with health and retirement benefits, experts say.

During Covid, many institutions rolled back or froze their contributions to employee retirement plans, saving $728 million in plan contributions in 2019 and 2020. Residual losses from those freezes may still negatively affect the benefits of faculty members at some colleges, but virtually all institutions now fully fund their retirement plans.

"We've seen a lot of people become emeritus professors earlier than we used to."

Nearly all institutions include at least one type of retirement plan in their benefits packages. While most offer a pension or matching plan in which an institution pays in some percentage of a faculty member's contributions, retirement plans are typically not a big part of the benefits discussion colleges have with faculty job seekers.

"It's not a negotiable benefit," says Robert K. Toutkoushian, a professor of higher education at the University of Georgia who regularly writes reports on college retirement plans. "It's not like you'll hear people say, 'I want eight percent of my salary amount to go to my retirement, even though everyone else gets five percent.' You get what that college offers."

Colleges have been more likely to reshape their retirement plans in recent years with an eye toward making their overall faculty younger. Early-retirement plans have been on the rise, with the aim of both making room for new professors and offering opportunities for seasoned faculty members to contribute to campus life even after they retire. Modified teaching schedules, new volunteer leadership roles, and continued lab privileges all may be part of the mix.

At Arizona, more older faculty are taking advantage of those programs. "We've seen a lot of people become emeritus professors earlier than we used to," says Romero. Their replacements represent a generational shift, she adds.

Those younger faculty hires, many of whom are the first in their families to hold academic jobs, lack the generational wealth to afford homes on their own. More often, they ask for help from their college employers to purchase a home near campus, says Romero. Other campus leaders report more interest in how a college's sabbatical system works or whether it has a liberal leave policy.

These days, college interviewers are more likely to hear questions about an institution's culture. "It's what I call the 'mood quotient,'" says Abram Van Engen, chair of the English department at Washington University in St. Louis. "People want to know if your department is one where people are angry all the time or whether the humanities departments are going to get slammed. Basically, they want to know if they'll be happy there."

Faculty satisfaction became a major question during the Covid era. In a 2021 *Chronicle* survey, 55 percent of college faculty seriously considered changing careers or taking early retirement due to the stress of the virus and the large-scale shift to remote instruction.

Most of those concerns have passed. In their place have come long-simmering points of political tension that continue to spill over into higher education — and the fears that come with them.

Many faculty candidates, particularly those in the humanities, worry that an institution might not allow them to teach the courses they want, or that they will lose control of the content of those classes, if they are seen as running afoul of the

politics of the area, the institution's leadership, or the White House. More often, colleges may offer the same courses in, say, race studies, as they have for decades, but may no longer require students to take them, Subramaniam, from Virginia Commonwealth, says. The result may be that fewer of those courses will be offered or taught.

Other candidates have expressed worry during interviews that free speech, such as faculty comments about the recent violence in Gaza and Israel, may be curtailed, or that the current attack on DEI policies will prevent them from landing a job. Some academic researchers are reconsidering both their job applications and grant applications, says Dan Larremore, an associate professor of computer science at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and a researcher who studies the academic labor market.

Ongoing political division in the United States has caused faculty candidates to make geography one of the key factors in their job searches.

"The red state/blue state divide in academia has become very prominent," says Van Engen. "We're in a blue city in a red state. A lot of people don't want to work in a red state. I need to explain why they shouldn't feel threatened at a private institution like ours."

About half of faculty members who responded to an AAUP survey in September 2023 reported a decrease in the number of applicants for faculty jobs in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas and more hesitancy about taking jobs in those red states.

At the same time, conservative leaders have long complained that academe is an almost monolithically liberal bastion, and that right-leaning faculty candidates are at a disadvantage.

With a change in the White House, their concerns may soon be addressed.

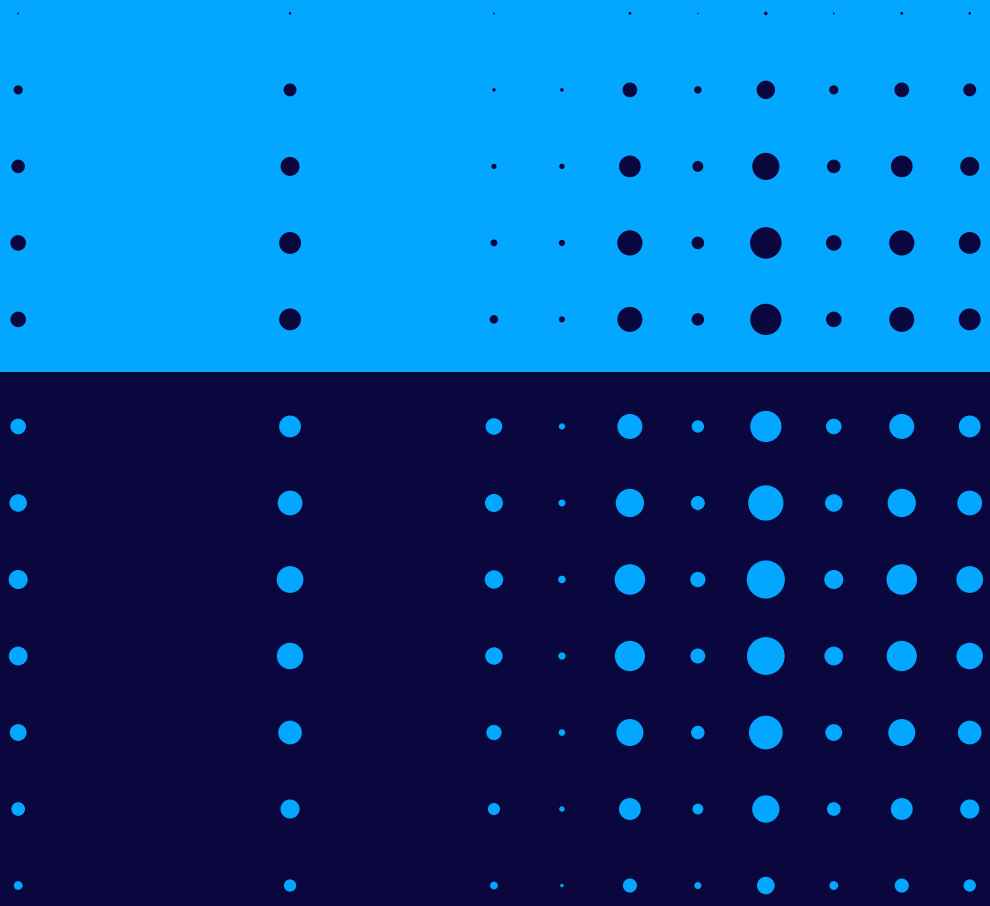
For those worried about the effects on DEI and other liberal-leaning policies, anxiety has ratcheted up. "Along with increasing concern about their well-being overall, many faculty members are leaving red states, especially at regional public colleges, or staying at their blue-state college because of politics elsewhere," says Rebecca Pope-Ruark, director of the office of faculty professional development at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

As many state-level policies have morphed into national ones, faculty who have opted to leave jobs in red states may find their options limited.

"As they pursue careers and tenure, faculty members must ultimately be able to align their values with those of their institution," says Andy Brantley, president of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, or CUPA-HR. "The political environment is becoming a key driver as they make their employment decisions."

SECTION 3

New Approaches to Finding Talent



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Despite entering a new hiring era, post-pandemic, colleges have done relatively little to develop how they mine, attract, and sign faculty talent, experts say.

"Movement has been slower than people anticipated, mostly due to institutional practices that place hiring in the hands of faculty members," says Peter Lange, lead senior adviser for Academic Analytics, a firm that conducts academic-labor research. "Outside of the changes in DEI, it's kind of unreasonable to think there will be a sharp shift in how searches are conducted."

However, college leaders and faculty-search committees have begun to at least nibble around the edges by putting remote technology, emerging faculty data, and a heightened emphasis on college culture and faculty quality of life to work tracking down and wooing strong candidates.

In recent years, databases capable of compiling and analyzing the accomplishments of job candidates — the amounts of grants, numbers of publications, and range of teaching experiences — have come online.

Virginia Commonwealth uses such tools to determine how its faculty measures up against those at other institutions, as well as to guide its decisions regarding job openings and potential hires.

South Carolina uses emerging data-analysis tools to learn where its lab productivity ranks among its peers. It will weigh out the information to determine which areas to invest in so it can work to procure more grants and, hence, take on more research faculty. Other institutions use databases to identify strong candidates for teaching jobs.

Technology has streamlined hiring in other ways. Initial interviews with faculty prospects

are now conducted by videoconferencing much more often than five years ago, with most institutions reporting that they save in-person meetings for second or third interviews with the same faculty prospect.

"Our whole routine is different in the sense that the days of doing all our first interviews in person at the Modern Language Association conference ended during the pandemic," says Van Engen, from Wash U. "Now, we'll do a bunch of Zoom interviews, then bring three or four top people to campus after that." That strategy helps a search committee stretch its workload more evenly, while saving them time and travel costs, he adds.

Many institutions, including Arizona, use search tools to connect via social media with professional groups that offer hiring resources online.

As the University of Wisconsin tries to create a large multidisciplinary operation, it has formed a joint team of deans from various colleges to coordinate an approach for hiring faculty. If deans from different disciplines are considering the same candidates, they can work together to figure out what value a prospect might add, as well as how best to use them, says Isbell, the UW provost.

Beyond the bells and whistles of technology, some colleges are hoping that their brand name or campus culture can lure in and keep top prospects. Their approach sounds more like marketing than recruiting.

The University of Arizona leans on the strong ties it fosters among faculty. "We're really good about relationships and in offering support to colleagues," says Romero, citing a three-year effort to "emphasize the faculty mentoring we offer here, as well as the career-long professional development that helps develop our culture."

Arnett, from the University of South Carolina, touts "the community vibe" the campus offers as a selling point. Like others, South Carolina will handle get-acquainted calls and early interviews via video. "But after that, we want candidates to come to Columbia," Arnett says. "We want them to see this culture of belonging. People love it here."

"Now, we'll do a bunch of Zoom interviews, then bring three or four top people to campus after that."

The result of a successful job search, Van Engen adds, should be a new hire who can not only serve on committees and teach well but also feel comfortable enough to stake their claim to a place. Along with talent, colleges are looking for someone who makes for a good fit.

"I understand the need for work/life balance, but we're not all that interested in divas who only want to come in two days a week," he says. "We tend to hire people who understand that, as a small college, we're a community — one they want to be a part of."

Now, however, the funding concerns jolting higher ed have caused the landscape to change again in recent weeks. "Hiring has halted in many programs," Van Engen adds. "It began with the announcement of the NIH indirect cost rate, and has built from there."

After a downturn in faculty hiring during the pandemic, colleges have made up the losses, with even tenured positions making some gains during the past three years.

College-faculty hires of all types — contingent, tenure, and tenure-track — have begun to rebound from the Covid era. Several institutions are building on regained financial health to develop interdisciplinary programs that feature the hiring of large numbers of tenure-track professors.

But challenges — some new, some longstanding — remain. During the inflationary time following the pandemic, tenured and nontenured faculty saw the real value of their salaries plummet.

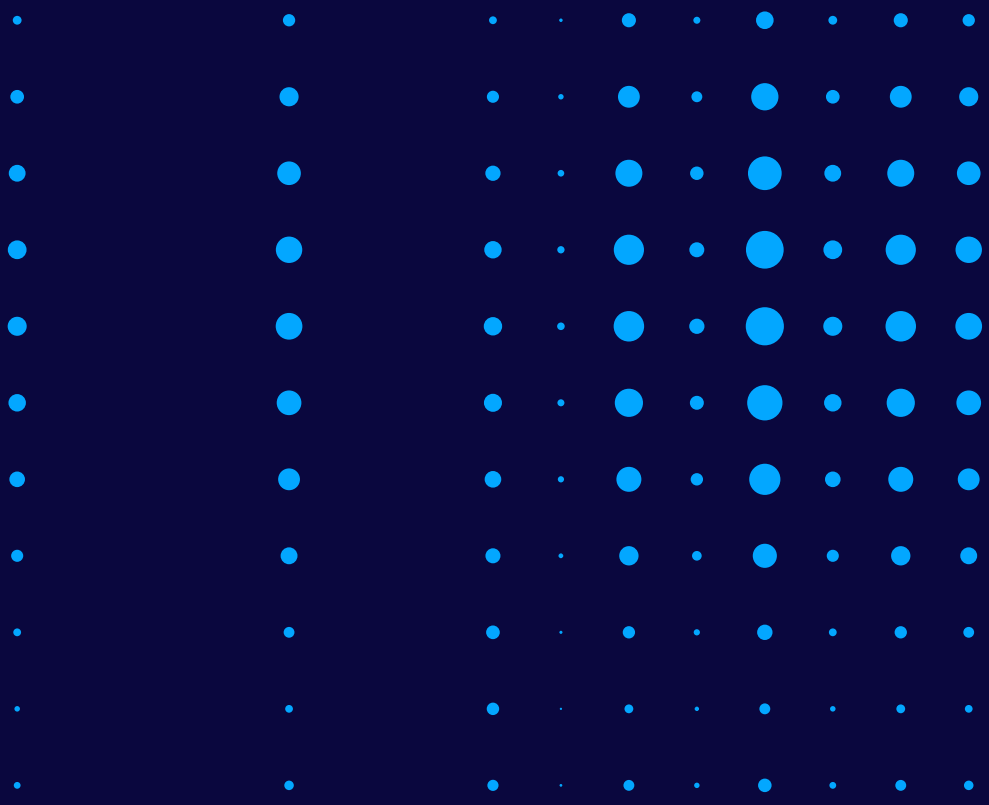
The long-term shift away from tenured positions to contingent ones saves colleges money, offering them the financial wherewithal to withstand hardships. But it has also resulted in less pay, benefits, protection, and access to professional-development programs for nontenured educators.

Women and underrepresented faculty members are more likely to be less paid and less tenured. Politics continue to cast a pall over efforts to be fairer and more inclusive on campus among those groups, though conservatives argue that a new campus landscape that features more right-wing faculty would actually increase inclusion. Long-held notions of academic freedom and unfettered research are up for grabs in the current politically charged climate.

Long-held notions of academic freedom and unfettered research are up for grabs in the current politically charged climate.

A legacy of the Covid era — schedule flexibility — is still sought after by many faculty members. During job interviews, they also ask for more of existing benefits, such as childcare help and family-leave policies, as well as some newer ones, such as assistance in buying a home.

Colleges' approach to the academic labor market combines the quaint with the high-tech. They use digital tools and large databases to help them track down strong candidates and guide their research programs, while extolling the value of living and working in a campus community.



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