



The Non-Exempt Higher Education Staff Workforce: Trends in Composition, Size, and Pay Equity

By Jacqueline Bichsel and Melissa Fuesting

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Introduction

A non-exempt employee is one that is covered by (not exempt from) the Fair Labor Standards Act. As such, they are required to be paid overtime for every hour worked over 40 hours per week. Non-exempt staff must track their hours and be paid at least the federal minimum hourly wage.¹

Non-exempt staff currently make up more than one-fourth (28%) of the higher education workforce (Figure 1).² This percentage is much less than in the U.S. workforce overall, in which non-exempt workers make up more than half (58%) of employees.³ Examples of non-exempt staff in higher ed include electricians, police officers, photographers, custodians, office assistants, and food service workers.⁴

Most reporting on this segment of the higher ed workforce focuses on the numbers and types of exempt positions that are being reclassified as non-exempt because of changes to the FLSA Overtime Rule.⁵ There is a dearth of reporting that characterizes the non-exempt higher ed workforce beyond those parameters that are used to describe how they are paid. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to describe the makeup of and trends in the higher ed non-exempt staff workforce from the academic years 2016-17 through 2023-24. In particular, we'll focus on changes that have occurred subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020.

¹ Currently \$7.25, which is the equivalent of \$15,080 annually for a full-time employee with no overtime.

² CUPA-HR. (2024). [Higher Education Workforce Surveys, 2023-24](#) [Data set]. Percentages are based on headcounts reported in the Institutional Basics section of CUPA-HR workforce surveys.

³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020). [Characteristics of Minimum Wage Workers, 2019](#). *BLS Reports*.

⁴ Consult the [Staff Survey Participation and Information Template](#) to view a more comprehensive listing of non-exempt staff positions in higher education.

⁵ See CUPA-HR's [FLSA Overtime News and Resources](#) site for more information.

Makeup of the Higher Ed Workforce, 2023-24

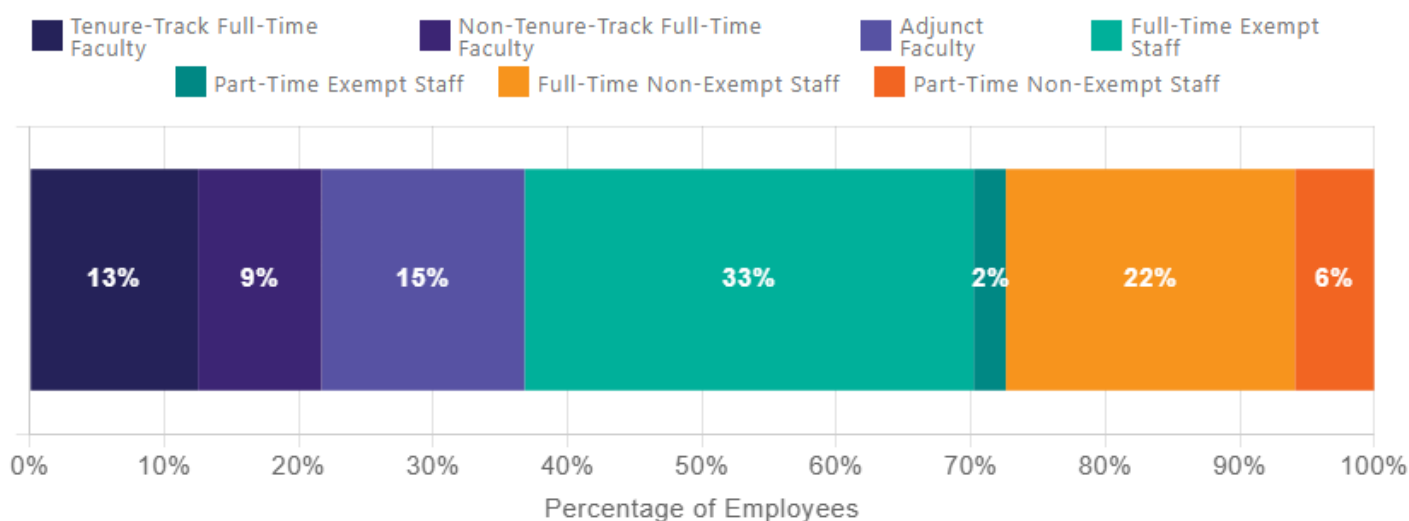


Figure 1. Makeup of the Higher Ed Workforce, 2023-24

The Higher Ed Non-Exempt Staff Workforce Is Shrinking

Since 2017, there has been a 9% decrease overall in the *full-time* non-exempt higher education workforce. The largest annual decrease (-9.0%) occurred in 2022 (Figure 2).⁶ The largest annual increase (3.7%) occurred the year after that, in 2023.

There was a sizeable *decrease* (-7.6%) in the *part-time* non-exempt workforce in 2023. As Figure 2 shows, there is much more vacillation in the size of the part-time workforce, with large *decreases* occurring in 2018 and 2020 and a large *increase* in 2019. Overall, however, there has been an 8% decrease in part-time non-exempt staff in the time period depicted.

The COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020 (indicated by the shaded area on the graphic). In the year immediately prior to its onset, higher ed institutions increased both their full-time (by 1.1%) and part-time (by 14.3%) non-exempt staff. The year after the pandemic saw a sharp reversal with decreases for both full-time (-3.3%) and part-time (-17.2%) staff.

⁶ The effective date for most data on CUPA-HR surveys is November 1 each year. Regardless of when institutions provide data, they are asked to provide employment headcounts that were effective on November 1 of that academic year. On the graphic, “2023” reflects the change in size between November 1, 2022, and November 1, 2023.

Percentage Change in Size of the Non-Exempt Staff Workforce From 2017 to 2023

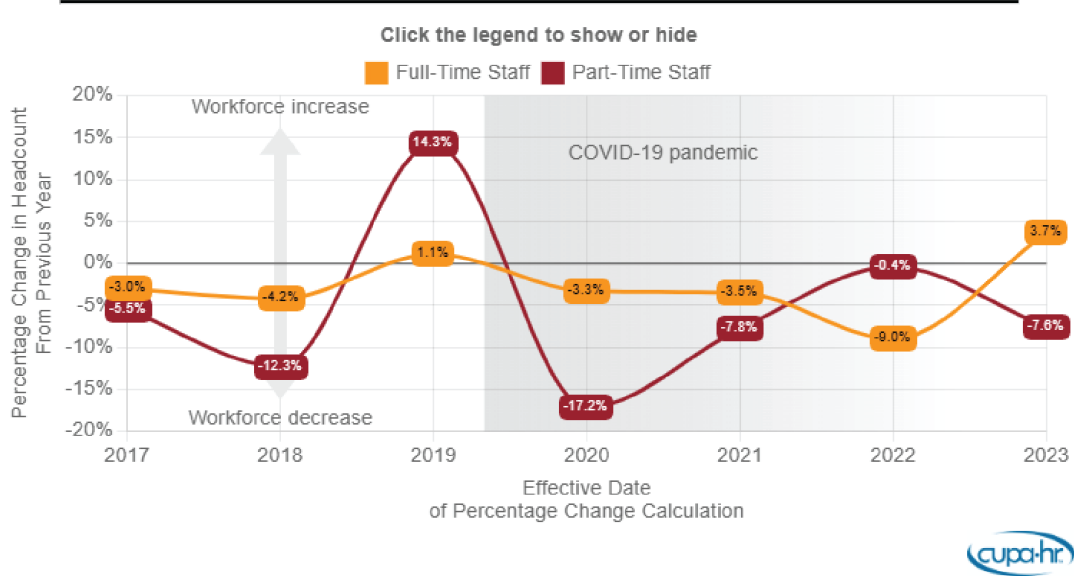


Figure 2. Percentage Change in Size of Non-Exempt Staff Workforce From 2017 to 2023⁷

Looking more specifically at workforce areas, we can see which types of non-exempt positions have experienced shifts in size since 2017.⁸ Figure 3 depicts changes in the size of the non-exempt staff workforce in four areas: office/clerical (e.g., clerks, department assistants); technical/paraprofessional (e.g., technicians, specialists); skilled craft (e.g., carpenters, electricians); and service/maintenance (e.g., custodians, food service workers).⁹

⁷ This and many of the graphs in this report are interactive. It is recommended to [read the online version](#) of this report to fully experience these data visualizations. Labels in the x-axis reflect the year of the effective date of data collected. For example, “2023” reflects percentage change from November 1, 2022, to November 1, 2023. The gradient delineating the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020–May 2023) derives from the starting and ending periods determined by the [World Health Organization](#).

⁸ CUPA-HR (2024). [Staff in Higher Education Survey, 2016-17 to 2023-24](#) [Data set].

⁹ Data represent headcounts of employees that work at least half-time (0.50 FTE). For more information on the methodology of the *CUPA-HR Staff in Higher Education Survey* (including participants, data collected, and sample sizes) and to see all positions that underlie each workforce area, consult the resources on the [CUPA-HR Signature Surveys](#) site.

Percentage Change in Size of Staff Workforce Areas From 2017 to 2023

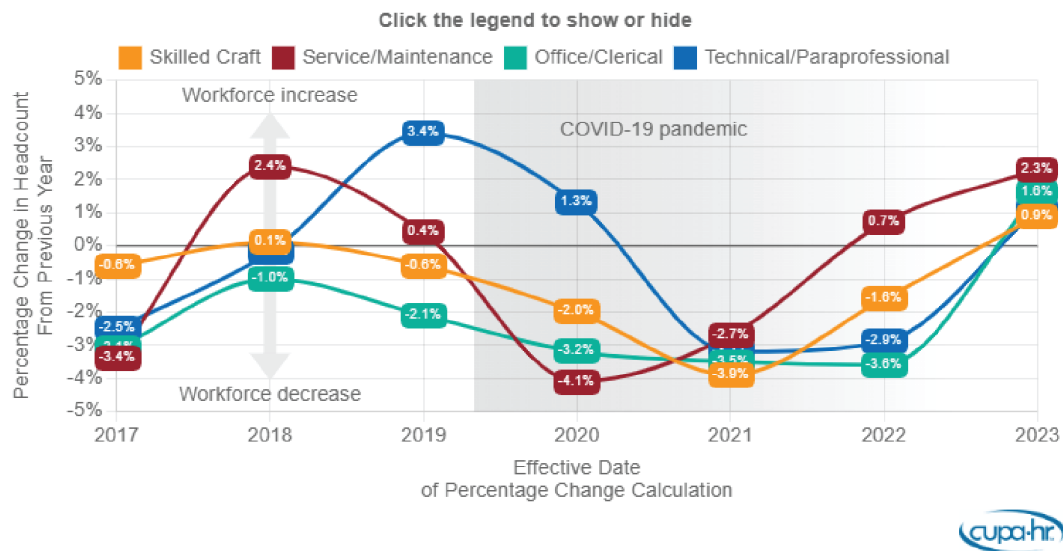


Figure 3. Percentage Change in Size of Staff Workforce Areas From 2017 to 2023¹⁰

There are multiple factors that could impact the change in size of the non-exempt workforce over this period. One obvious factor is the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fall of 2020, many campuses were shut down, and some were forced to lay off employees. Some of those directly impacted would have been those workers whose jobs were dependent on the campus presence of students and staff (e.g., custodians and food service workers). As Figure 3 shows, these service/maintenance staff were increasing in size in the two years prior to the pandemic's onset and then experienced large decreases in size in the two years after its onset. The last two years after the end of the pandemic have seen an increase in size again for these workers as people have returned to campus.

Technical/paraprofessional workers have experienced similar fluctuations in size across the time span depicted, with their most sizeable increase occurring right before the onset of the pandemic. Technical and paraprofessional workers are also the only area that experienced an increase in size in the year after the onset of the pandemic.

Other reasons for the shrinking non-exempt workforce could include budget cuts and the outsourcing of certain functions, which could have impacted various employee areas. For

¹⁰ See the [online version](#) of this report to experience the interactive graphic. Labels in the x-axis reflect the year of the effective date of data collected. For example, "2023" reflects percentage change from November 1, 2022, to November 1, 2023.

example, office/clerical workers have experienced size decreases in every year since 2017 with the exception of the most recent year depicted, where they experienced a modest (1.6%) increase. In addition, skilled craft staff have largely experienced only decreases in size in the years depicted with the exception of the most current year, where they experienced a 0.9% increase.

All staff areas have experienced a small increase in size in the most recent year depicted, reversing the downward trend experienced in the years prior. However, as highlighted in the opening paragraph of this section, higher education has 9% fewer non-exempt employees in 2023 than it did in 2017.

Fewer Non-Exempt Staff Are Approaching Retirement Age

We explored the age makeup of non-exempt staff positions in each area: office/clerical, technical/paraprofessional, skilled craft, and service/maintenance. The median age for non-exempt staff has decreased from 49 in 2016-17 to 48 in 2023-24, indicating that – overall – these employees are slightly younger.¹¹ However, a better way of assessing concerns about the pipeline for certain positions is to look at the percentage of employees who are age 55+ and nearing retirement. Figure 4 shows these percentages for each staff area since 2016-17.

In the academic year 2019-20, the year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 34% of staff overall were 55+. In the following year, after the pandemic began, that percentage declined to 32% and has been declining ever since, to 31% in 2023-24. This decline is seen in all four staff categories. However, the steepest decline is noted for skilled craft staff. Pre-pandemic (2019-20), 43% of skilled craft staff (most of whom require a considerable amount of on-the-job training) were 55+. At that time, we reported concerns about the pipeline for skilled craft staff, noting that large numbers of these staff were at or near retirement.¹² In 2023-24, this percentage has dropped to 37%. Given that the size of skilled craft staff has been declining in all but the most recent year depicted (Figure 3), it could simply be the case that these decreases were due to retirements without replacement. At any rate, the concern about an adequate pipeline for skilled craft staff appears to be attenuated.¹³

Office/clerical and service/maintenance staff mirror declines in 55+ staff overall, with the greatest decline occurring the year after the pandemic started (2020-21). The decline in 55+ staff is flatter for technical/paraprofessional staff, and decreases are much lower than for

¹¹ CUPA-HR (2024). [Staff in Higher Education Survey, 2016-17 to 2023-24](#) [Data set].

¹² Fuesting, M., & Schmidt, A. (2021). [The Higher Ed Skilled Craft Workforce: Pay, Aging, Diversity, and Equity](#). CUPA-HR.

¹³ It is important to note that these statistics alone do not mean that there is an adequate pipeline for these staff positions, as other factors such as geographic location, budgets, and demand for these jobs can vary greatly across institutions.

the other groups in each year examined, as these positions tend to employ younger employees overall. Overall, it appears that large numbers of higher ed non-exempt staff who were at or near the age of retirement did not return to the workforce post-pandemic.

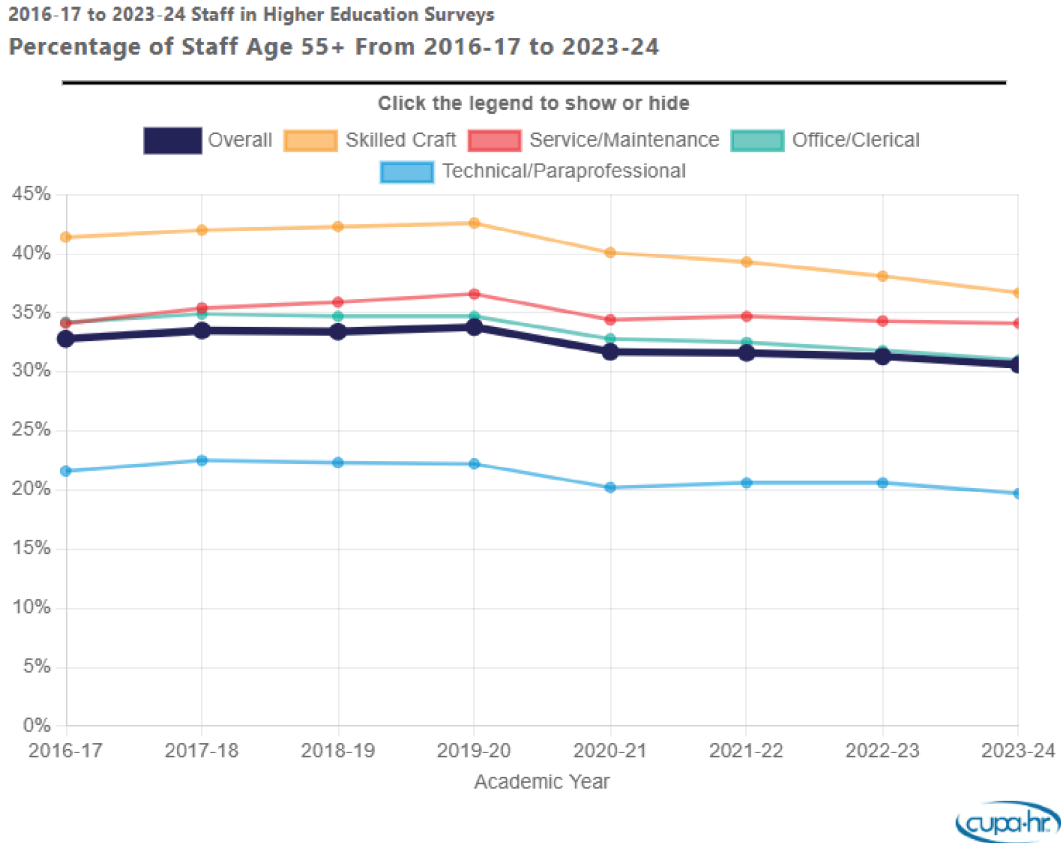


Figure 4. Percentage of Staff Age 55+ From 2017 to 2024¹⁴

There are, however, individual positions that currently have a high number of staff who are 55+. Each position listed in Figure 5 has at least 45% of employees who are at or near the age of retirement.¹⁵ Some of these positions have specialized skills that require years of training or experience. It may be worthwhile to note which positions in your geographic recruitment area have a large number of employees that are at or near retirement to assess the risk of future employment shortages.¹⁶

¹⁴ See the [online version](#) of this report to experience the interactive graphic.

¹⁵ Only positions with $n \geq 99$ were included in the analysis.

¹⁶ To examine age data for any position and your custom regional comparison group, subscribe to [DataOnDemand](#).

Positions With the Greatest Number of Staff Age 55+

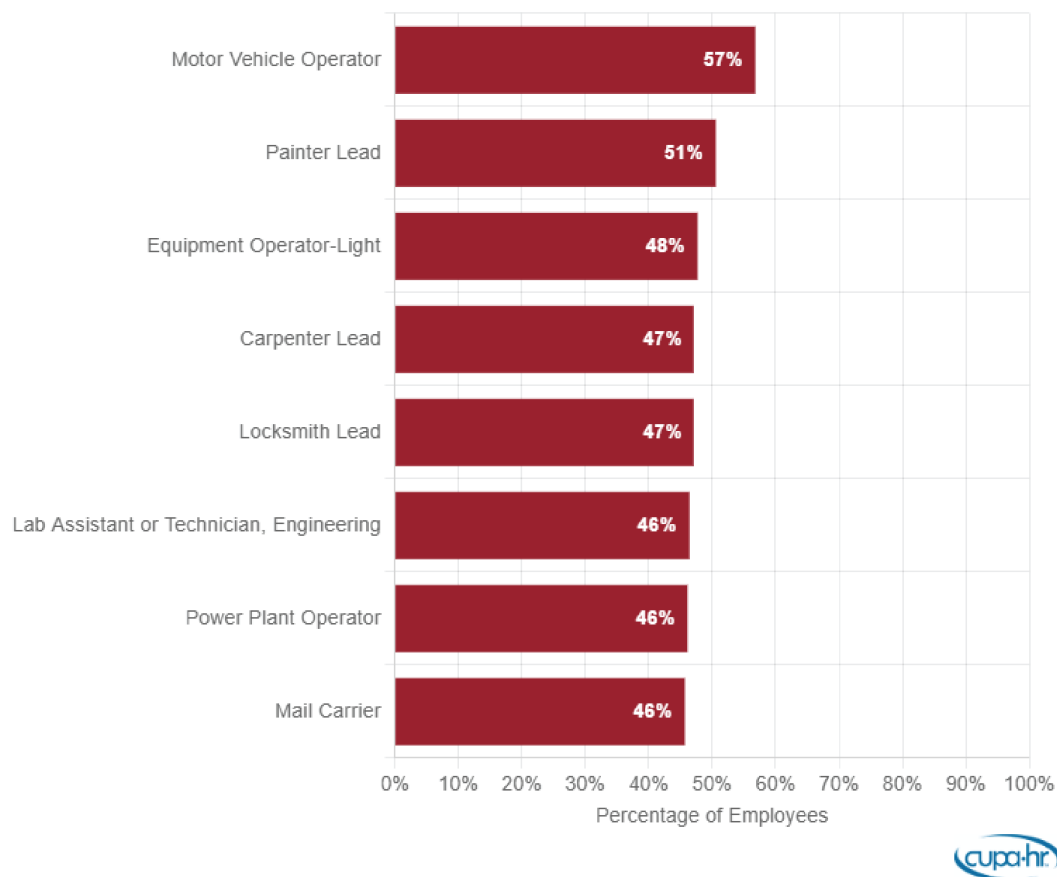


Figure 5. Positions With the Greatest Number of Staff Age 55+

The Gender and Racial/Ethnic Makeup of Higher Ed Non-Exempt Staff

Overall, women make up more than half (59%) of the higher education non-exempt staff workforce (Figure 6).¹⁷ That percentage is lower than the 62% of women we see represented in the higher ed professional workforce and higher than the 55% of women

¹⁷ Data were collected in CUPA-HR's [Staff in Higher Education Survey](#) with an effective date of November 1 of each academic year. (For these charts, the academic year is denoted with the last part of the year, e.g., 2024 is academic year 2023-24). Analyses include only non-profit institutions of higher education; each year of all-staff data includes data from at least 640 colleges and universities and at least 133,103 staff.

we see represented among higher ed administrators.¹⁸ For the non-exempt workforce, women are best represented among office and clerical staff (86%) and least represented in skilled craft staff (4%).¹⁹ There has been no remarkable shift in the representation of women in higher ed non-exempt staff in any job category since 2016-17.

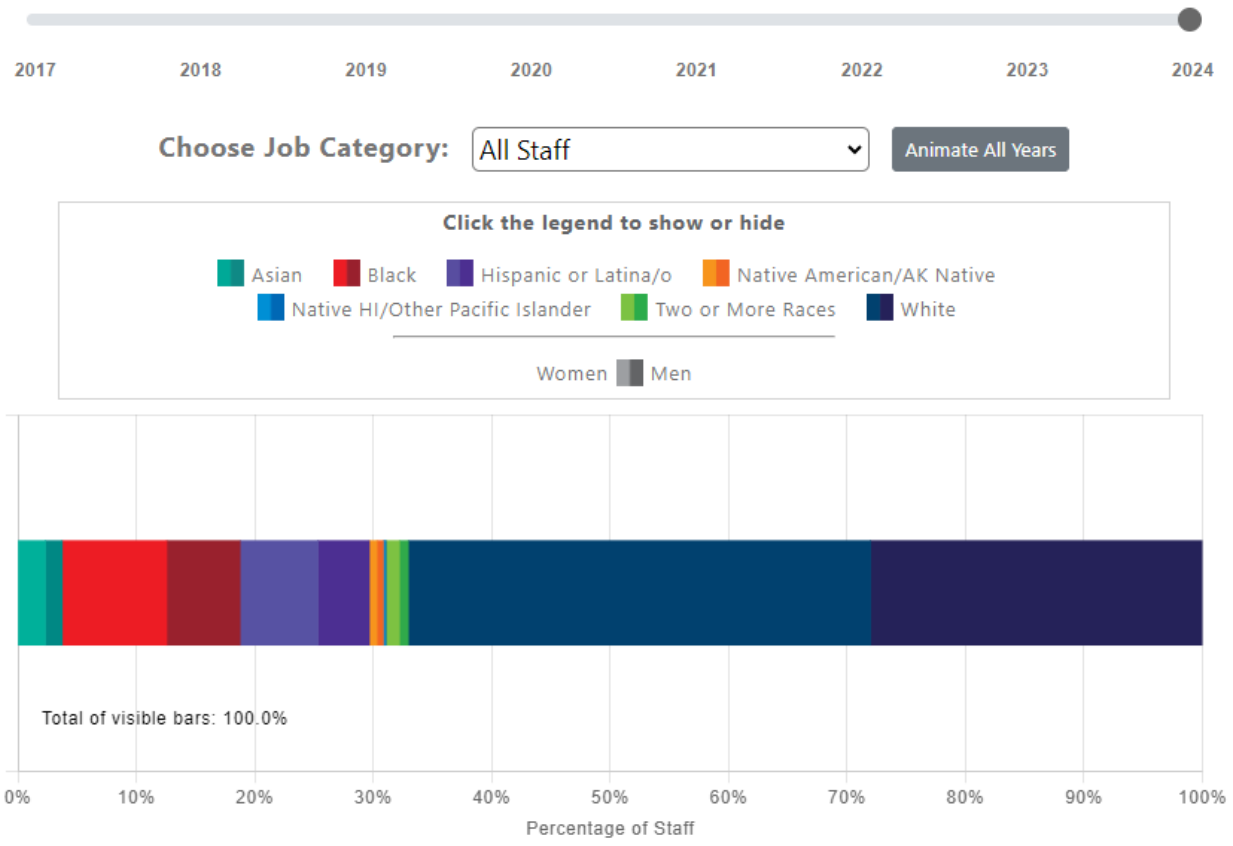
People of color make up one-third (33%) of the higher ed non-exempt staff workforce (Figure 6).²⁰ This is much higher than their representation among professionals (26%) and administrators (20%). People of color are best represented in service/maintenance staff (44%) and least represented in skilled craft staff (18%). The representation of people of color has increased slightly in every staff job category (office/clerical; service/maintenance; skilled craft; and technical/paraprofessional) since 2016-17.

¹⁸ To view the composition of the rest of the higher ed workforce, see CUPA-HR's annual workforce data, [Workforce Composition and Pay Equity](#).

¹⁹ The [online version](#) of this report has interactive graphics that allow the selection of various parameters to see the data in greater detail.

²⁰ The term "people of color" is used in this report to refer to those designated as any race/ethnicity other than exclusively White, including people of two or more races.

2016-17 to 2023-24 Staff in Higher Education Surveys
Composition of Staff by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



Note: Total of all visible bars may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 6. Composition of Staff by Gender and Race/Ethnicity²¹

Pay Equity in Higher Ed Non-Exempt Staff

In higher education non-exempt staff positions overall, women are paid \$0.96 for every dollar White men are paid (Figure 7).²² Although women of all races/ethnicities are paid less

²¹ See the [online version](#) of this report to experience the interactive graphic.

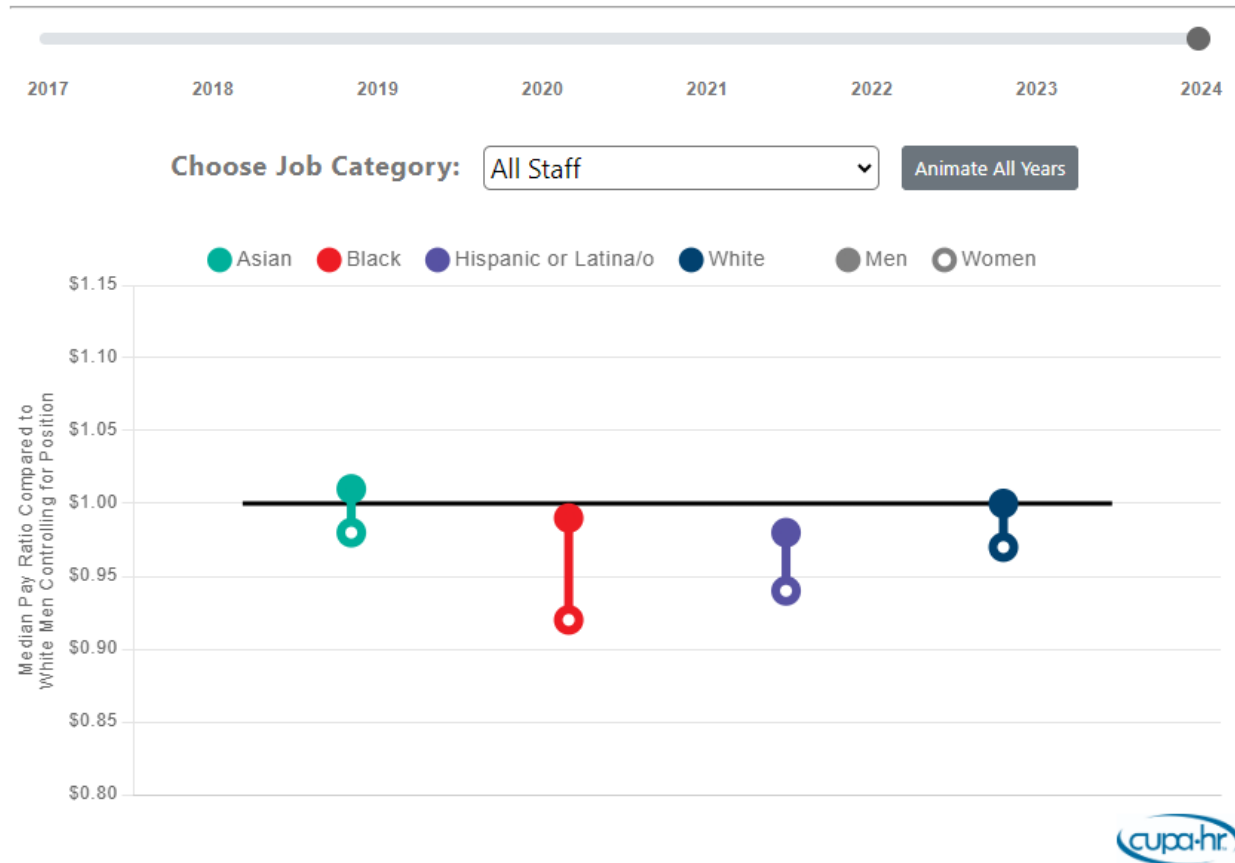
²² Median pay ratios control for position. Median salaries by race/ethnicity and sex for each staff position were obtained; then the median of those medians was calculated by race/ethnicity and sex. Finally, each group's median salary was divided by the median salary of White men to calculate the pay ratio. This controls for the fact that women and people of color may be represented differently in specific positions that pay higher or lower salaries, and it means that the wage gaps present are not explained by the fact that women or people of color may have greater representation in lower-paying positions.

than their male counterparts, pay equity is lowest for Black (\$0.92) and Hispanic (\$0.94) women. Men of all races/ethnicities are paid at or near equity.

Pay is most equitable in office and clerical positions, where women of every race/ethnicity are generally paid more than their male counterparts. The pay gap is greatest for Black women in service/maintenance positions (\$0.90) and Hispanic men in skilled craft positions (\$0.89).²³

2016-17 to 2023-24 Staff in Higher Education Surveys

Median Pay Ratios for Staff



Note: Because pay ratio data is sensitive, we take extra care to avoid generalizing from small sample sizes. Those intersectional groups that are deemed too small are not included in the results displayed.

Figure 7. Median Pay Ratios for Staff²⁴

²³ There are not enough women in skilled craft positions to depict meaningful pay ratio data.

²⁴ See the [online version](#) of this report to experience the interactive graphic.

The Interactions Between Representation, Pay, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity Are Multilayered

Multiple levels of pay inequity exist for Black, Hispanic or Latina/o, and female employees. As related above, pay gaps persist in certain positions, particularly for women. However, other forms of pay inequity also exist.

First, Black and Hispanic or Latina/o employees are better represented in non-exempt staff positions than in any other higher ed workforce contingent (i.e., administrators, faculty, or professionals). Therefore, they are best represented in the positions that pay the least in higher ed (Figure 8).²⁵

²⁵ To explore representation and pay equity in higher education in more detail, see CUPA-HR's [Workforce Composition and Pay Equity graphics](#).

Representation of Black and Hispanic or Latina/o Employees in the Higher Ed Workforce

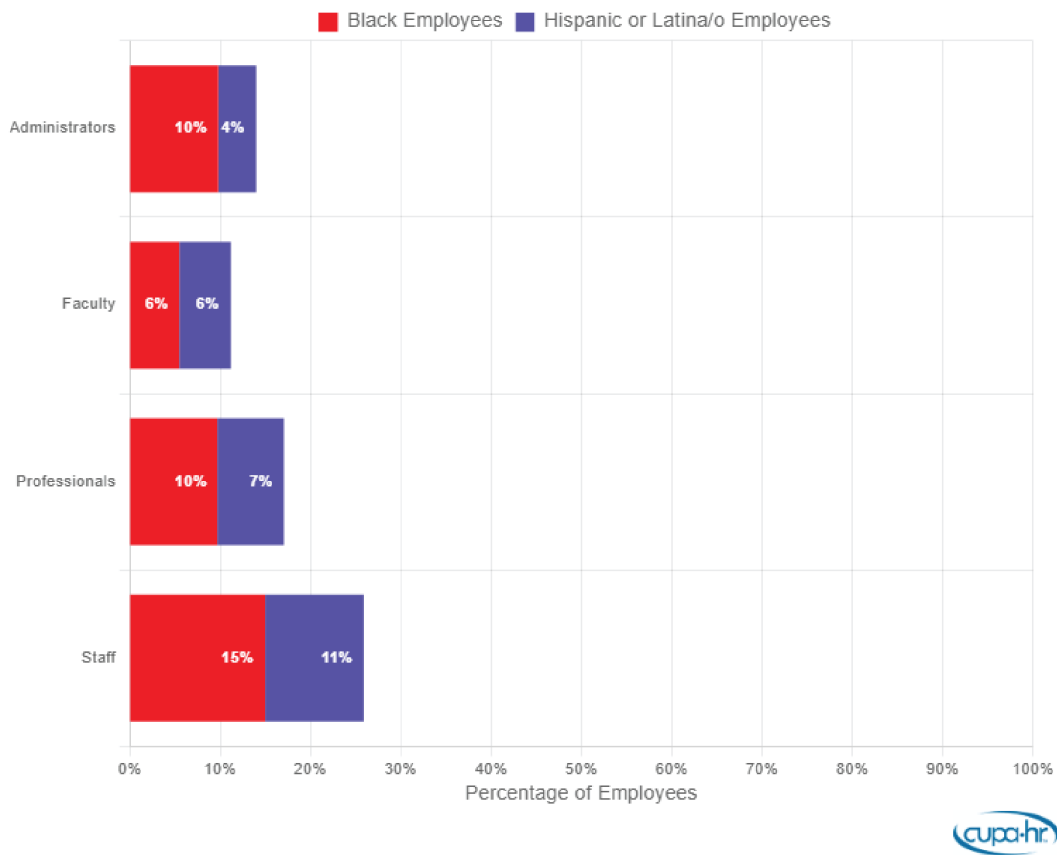


Figure 8. Representation of Black and Hispanic or Latina/o Employees in the Higher Ed Workforce

Second, women and Black staff are best represented in the lowest paying positions. The five highest-paying and five lowest-paying non-exempt staff positions (based on annual median pay) are listed in Figure 9.²⁶ Women represent 59% of all non-exempt staff positions. However, they are represented at 3% or less in four of the five highest-paying non-exempt staff positions, which are all skilled craft positions. They do, though, represent 86% of the fifth highest-paid position of paralegal. On the other hand, women are employed in nearly all (96%) preschool teaching assistant positions — one of the lowest-paying positions in higher ed.

²⁶ CUPA-HR. (2024). *Staff in Higher Education Survey, 2023-24* [Data set]. Each position listed contains pay data for at least 100 employees. Sample sizes range from 102 to 30,817. Median pay is based on annualized wages for employees that are half-time or greater.

Black employees represent 15% of all non-exempt staff. Figure 9 shows their representation to be much lower in the highest-paying positions, with nearly no representation in the highest-paid skilled craft positions. Their representation is much higher in the lowest-paid positions. For example, Black employees represent more than one-fourth (28%) of custodians/housekeepers.

2023-24 Staff in Higher Education Survey
Representation of Black and Female Staff in Non-Exempt Positions With Highest and Lowest Median Pay

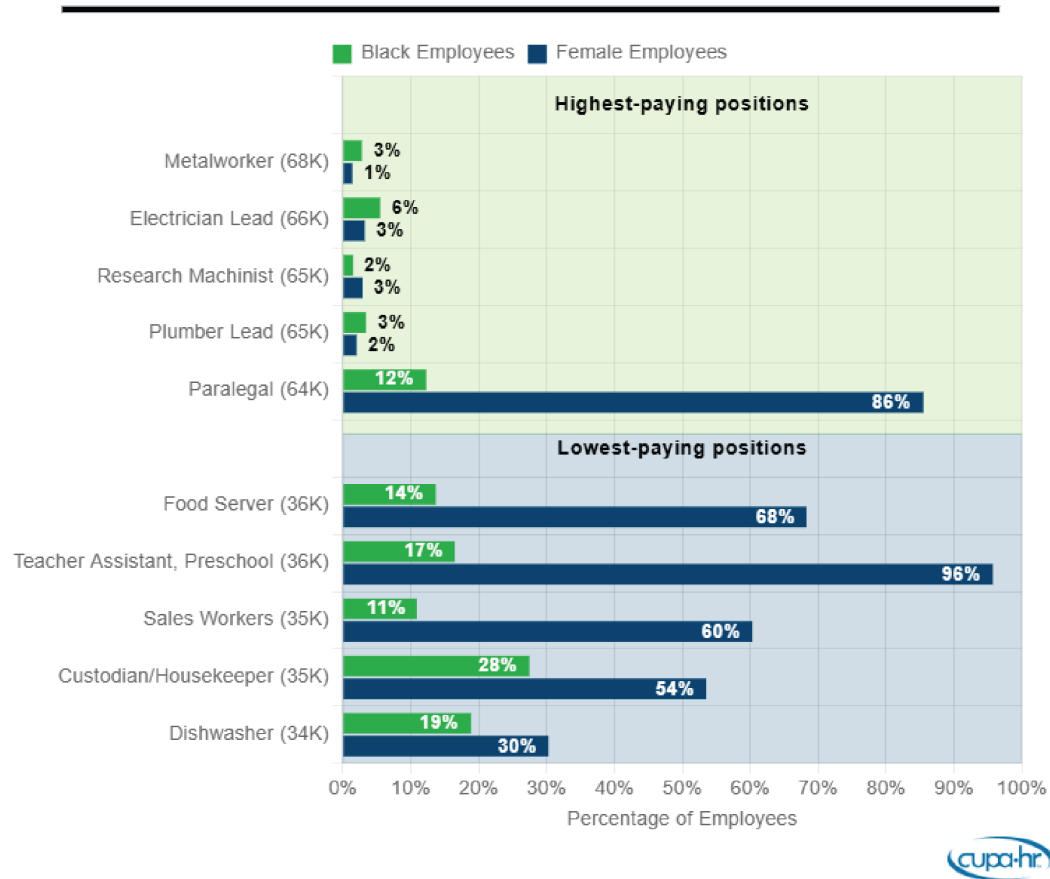


Figure 9. Representation of Black and Female Staff in Non-Exempt Positions With Highest and Lowest Median Pay

We explored whether Black, Hispanic or Latina/o, or female employees have less representation in non-exempt leadership positions. Figure 10 displays 14 positions in the *CUPA-HR Staff in Higher Education Survey* that have corresponding “lead” positions (e.g., electrician, electrician lead; administrative assistant, administrative lead).²⁷

In 10 out of 14 positions, Black staff were represented less in the corresponding lead position. Some of these leadership gaps are small, but some are notable, such as that of sales/retail positions, in which Black employees make up 11% of non-lead positions and only 1% of lead positions.

In comparison, Hispanic or Latina/o employees are less represented in only 6 of the 14 lead positions, with the largest gap occurring in the position of custodian/housekeeper (Figure 10). In the other 8 positions, Hispanic or Latina/o employees represent more lead than non-lead positions. This is most notable in the position of HVAC mechanic, where Hispanic staff represent 8% of non-lead HVAC positions and 16% of lead HVAC positions.

Women have lower representation in 9 of the 14 lead staff positions (Figure 10). The largest leadership gap for women occurs in the area of accounting assistants/clerks, where women make up 86% of non-lead positions but only 31% of lead positions. There are multiple positions in which women represent more of the lead than the non-lead positions, including many of the highly paid skilled craft positions, where they have overall low representation.

²⁷ Only positions with $n = 100$ or greater in both the non-lead and lead positions were included in the analysis. See the [Staff Survey Participation and Information Template](#) for descriptions of all positions.

Representation of Black, Hispanic or Latina/o, and Female Staff in Lead Positions

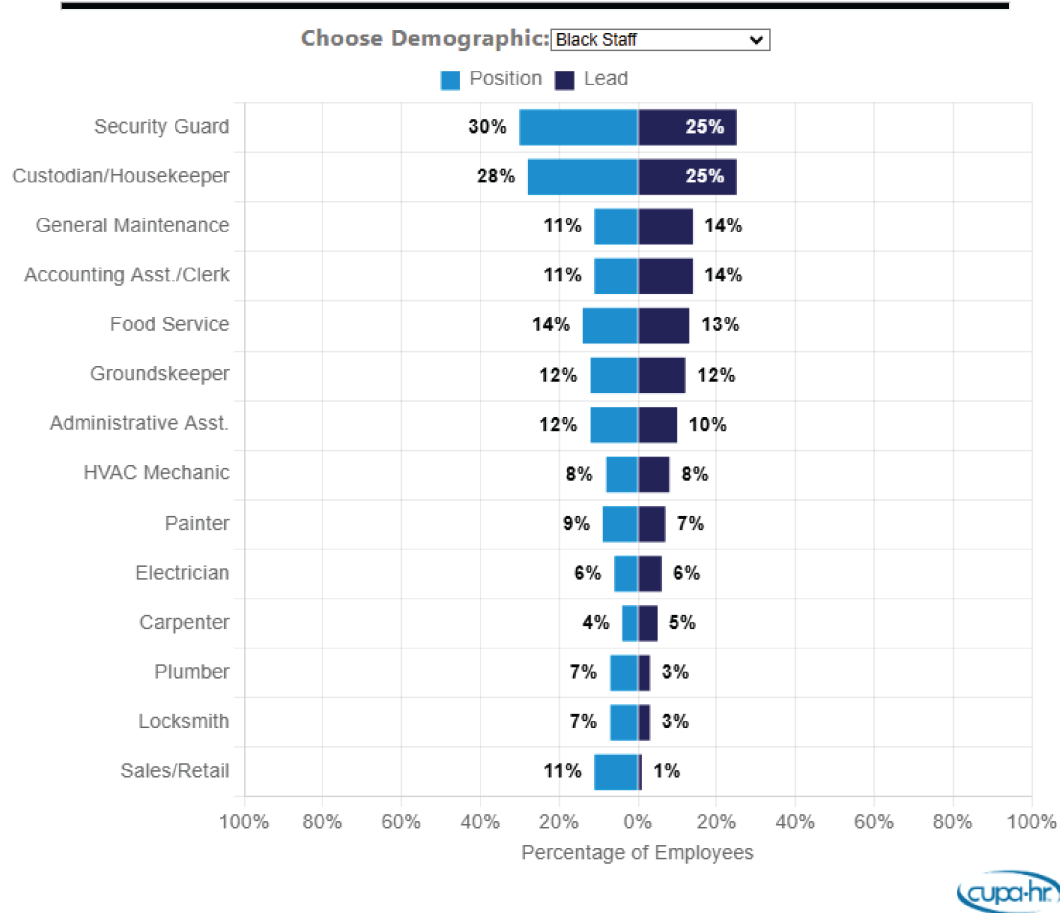


Figure 10. Representation of Black, Hispanic or Latina/o, and Female Staff in Lead Positions²⁸

Conclusions

The higher education non-exempt staff workforce has shrunk since 2016-17. There has been a 9% decrease in full-time non-exempt employees and a nearly 8% decrease in part-time non-exempt employees. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought declines in both full-time and part-time non-exempt staff, reversing growth seen in the year immediately prior to the pandemic. After the onset of the pandemic, the size of the non-exempt staff workforce continued to decline each year with one exception: full-time non-exempt staff grew in the most recent year studied, 2023-24.

²⁸ See the [online version](#) of this report to experience the interactive graphic.

Fewer non-exempt staff are age 55+. Non-exempt staff are slightly younger than they were pre-pandemic, and the proportion that is age 55+ has steadily declined from a high of 34% in 2019-20 to 31% in 2023-24. The most notable decline is seen in skilled craft staff, 43% of whom were 55+ in 2019-20. That percentage shrank to 37% in 2023-24. Combined with the fact that the non-exempt staff workforce has shrunk over time, it could be the case that many of those at or near retirement at the time of the pandemic did not return to the workforce post-pandemic and that they were by and large not replaced.

Women make up 59% of the non-exempt workforce. They are best represented among office and clerical staff. Women in non-exempt positions are paid \$.96 for every dollar White men are paid. Pay equity is lowest for Black (\$.92) and Hispanic (\$.94) women.

People of color make up 33% of the non-exempt workforce. This representation is much higher than in any other segment of the workforce, including administrators, faculty, and professionals. This representation among non-exempt staff has been steadily increasing since 2016-17. Black and Hispanic or Latina/o employees are better represented among non-exempt employees than in any other workforce contingent, meaning they are represented most in the higher ed positions that pay the least.

Women and Black staff experience multiple layers of inequity among non-exempt staff. They are better represented in the lowest-paying positions (e.g., dishwasher, custodian) than among the highest-paying positions (e.g., metalworker, electrician lead). They also have lower representation in lead positions than in non-lead positions.

Recommendations

Understand what drives your institution's non-exempt staffing trends. Determine whether the number of non-exempt roles at your institution is declining, stable, or growing over time. Try to get to the bottom of why these trends are occurring. For instance, declines may be due to a combination of factors such as a lack of supply of key skills or hiring freezes due to budgetary constraints. Understanding your institution's trends and the why behind them will help you continue to ensure that your institution's needs are met.

Avoid the trap of expecting retained non-exempt employees to do the work of multiple employees. This trap is all too common — the *2023 CUPA-HR Employee Retention Survey* found that 56% of non-supervisory employees absorbed additional responsibilities of other staff who had left (and for supervisors, the proportion was 71%).²⁹ Expecting employees to do the work of multiple people can negatively impact job satisfaction and in effect punish the loyal employees who stay. As the number of higher ed non-exempt positions continues to decline, work with supervisors to evaluate job duties and

²⁹ Bichsel, J., Fuesting, M., Tubbs, D., and Schneider, J. (2023). [The CUPA-HR 2023 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey](#). CUPA-HR.

expectations of employees. What work might be discontinued or altered to adjust to less availability of staff? What work might be outsourced to help close the gap between staff availability and required work? Campus leaders are often forced to make unfortunate budget decisions that impact staffing levels. Reductions in staffing should always be reviewed to determine what ongoing work is feasible and what work must be changed or eliminated.

Identify skill gaps at your institution and how to close them. Fewer non-exempt staff are approaching retirement age (age 55+), but the actual number of employees has decreased. It is likely that some employees with more specific technical or procedural experience and knowledge of the institution have departed. Work with managers and supervisors to identify gaps between the skills, certifications, and competencies your institution needs and those your employees possess. Managers and supervisors may also help you determine how to most effectively close skill gaps. Often, upskilling current employees is a great way to meet institution needs, but some gaps may be more efficiently filled from the outside. Closing skills gaps may require becoming very familiar with your local talent market and rethinking how to recruit new talent to your institution.

Invest in developing non-exempt employees. Many employees who begin in entry-level or lower-paying positions aspire to grow their careers and desire opportunities to learn and contribute in different ways. As the competition to attract and retain committed, engaged employees continues, it is important now, more than ever, to give current employees the opportunity for learning, development, and promotion. Do not neglect non-exempt employees in succession planning, and ensure your institution looks internally when positions become available.

Prioritize pay equity. Women of all races/ethnicities continue to be paid less than White men who hold the same non-exempt staff positions. Continue periodic pay equity reviews and work toward pay equity for all employees.

About the Authors:

Jacqueline Bichsel, Ph.D., is associate vice president of research at CUPA-HR.

Melissa Fuesting, Ph.D., is associate director of research at CUPA-HR.

Graphics were created by Kate Roesch, data visualization developer at CUPA-HR.

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