Turnover in the Higher Education Workforce

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Introduction

The Great Resignation marks a period following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic where turnover rates reached record highs.[1] From 2021 to 2022, millions of U.S. employees left their jobs due to low pay, lack of advancement opportunities, not enough flexibility, and overwork.[2] Historic events, like the global pandemic, often serve as catalysts for broad social restructuring. For many employees, the pandemic spurred a reevaluation of their relationship with work, in part due to the expansion in flexible work arrangements and subsequent reprioritization of work-life balance.[3] After peaking in 2022, turnover rates have fallen substantially as both employees and employers contend with an unstable labor market in the context of tariffs, AI advancements, and low hire rates.[4] Despite a decline in rates of voluntary separations in recent years, turnover threats loom as half of U.S. employees indicate they are looking for new job opportunities.[5] These findings underscore broad job dissatisfaction and lack of organizational commitment across the U.S. workforce.

Higher education is not immune to these shifting labor dynamics. Retention remains a critical concern for colleges and universities, with one in four higher ed employees indicating they may look for new job opportunities within the next year.[6] Although there have been improvements in turnover trends in the higher ed workforce since the pandemic, many higher ed employees indicate dissatisfaction with pay, promotion opportunities, workload, and work arrangements.[7]

> **"One of the primary retention challenges currently impacting our institution is morale related to pay, change, and remote work limitations." – HR leader at a large, public, doctoral institution**

Some institutions may be looking to cut costs through reductions in their workforces to address budgetary pressures from decreases in federal funding, changes in student loan

[1] Gittleman, M. (2022, July). *The "Great Resignation" in Perspective.* U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
[2] Parker, K., & Horowitz, J. M. (2022, March). *Majority of Workers Who Quit a Job in 2021 Cite Low Pay, No Opportunities for Advancement, Feeling Disrespected*. Pew Research Center.
[3] Tessema, M. T., Tesfom, G., Faircloth, M. A., Tesfagiorgis, M., & Teckle, P. (2022). The "Great Resignation:" Causes, Consequences, and Creative HR Management Strategies. *Journal of Human Resource and Sustainability Studies, 10,* 161-178. doi: 10.4236/jhrss.2022.101011
[4] Lahart, J. (2026, February). This Is Why It's So Hard to Find a Job Right Now. *The Wall Street Journal*.
[5] Tatel, C., & Wigert, B. (2026, February). *42% of Employee Turnover Is Preventable but Often Ignored.* Gallup.
[6] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[7] Ibid.

policies and endowment taxes, and declining enrollment rates.[8] However, turnover has significant costs to organizational productivity and financial health, primarily through the loss of institutional knowledge when experienced employees leave.[9] Employees need time to acquire knowledge about an organization to effectively perform their job, and turnover can result in information and productivity loss that cannot be quickly or cheaply restored.[10] As such, most higher ed institutions should champion employee retention and avoid elevated rates of turnover.

> **"One of our most significant concerns related to turnover over the next several years is the erosion of organizational knowledge." – HR leader at a large, public, doctoral institution**

To minimize the negative effects of turnover, institutions need a nuanced understanding of retention. This report provides an overview of the status of turnover and tenure in the higher ed workforce. The current findings offer a snapshot of current turnover and how these rates have changed over time. This report details how turnover rates vary across institutions depending on factors such as size and classification. Furthermore, we highlight various positions to describe tenure trends and retention challenges for specific areas of the higher ed workforce.

Data and Analyses

This report draws on two primary data sources. First, data are included from CUPA-HR's higher education workforce surveys, which provide data on turnover rates and years in position.[11] These surveys are administered annually and collect incumbent-level salary and demographic data from more than 1,000 institutions. This report includes data on full-time exempt and non-exempt staff as well as tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty.[12]

Participating institutions provide data on staff and faculty headcounts. For staff, headcounts are reported for full-time and part-time staff by exempt status. Faculty headcounts are reported for tenure-track, non-tenure-track, and adjunct (i.e., part-time) faculty. For each employee type, institutions also report the number of separations within

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[8] Levine, P. (2026, January 20). Can College Finances Handle Another Year of Trump? *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*
[9] Park, T. Y., & Shaw, J. D. (2013). Turnover Rates and Organizational Performance: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *98*(2), 268-309. doi: 10.1037/a0030723
[10] Galan, N. (2023). Knowledge Loss Induced by Organizational Member Turnover: A Review of Empirical Literature, Synthesis and Future Research Directions. *The Learning Organization*, *30*(2), 137-161. doi: 10.1108/TLO-09-2022-0107
[11] CUPA-HR. (2026). *Higher Education Workforce Surveys, 2016-17 to 2025-26* [Data set].
[12] CUPA-HR also collects data for part-time staff. We focus on full-time employees for this report, and references to staff throughout this report reflect findings for full-time employees only unless otherwise specified.

the past year, including voluntary separations, involuntary separations, and retirements.[13] CUPA-HR uses these headcounts and separation data to calculate institutional turnover rates. The current report focuses on voluntary turnover in higher ed, as this metric is one way to operationalize workforce challenges with retention and employee morale, and voluntary turnover can be costly to organizations. Voluntary turnover, also referred to as voluntary separations, occurs when employees choose to leave their jobs. For the remainder of this report, references to turnover reflect voluntary turnover (not due to retirements) unless otherwise specified.

Data on median years in position are included in this report for a subset of staff positions in facilities, academic affairs, and student affairs. In all CUPA-HR higher education workforce surveys, institutions report the year an employee entered their current position, which offers the ability to assess employee tenure in position. This data serves as a proxy for retention by position, as it represents the number of years an incumbent has been in their position at their current institution. In this report, employee tenure refers to length of time in position (unless in the context of tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty).

The second data source was a brief survey conducted in the spring of 2026 to assess higher ed HR leaders' views on voluntary turnover and retention challenges at their institutions.[14] Thirty-eight HR leaders from colleges and universities across the country responded to this survey, sharing insights on which workforce areas are of most concern for retention and what factors are contributing to voluntary turnover at their institutions.[15] Throughout this report, we will spotlight qualitative and quantitative responses from this survey to share HR experts' firsthand perspectives on retention challenges in the higher ed workforce.

In the first section of this report, we provide a global overview of voluntary turnover trends over time across all higher ed institutions and highlight factors impacting employee turnover broadly. Next, we examine how turnover varies across institutions based on institution-level salary increases, control (public versus private), size, total expenses, and classification.[16] Finally, we highlight several sectors of the higher ed workforce that have

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[13] Institutions participating in CUPA-HR surveys are required to provide headcount data for staff and faculty, but it is optional to report turnover data. In 2025-26, 1,078 institutions participated in CUPA-HR surveys; of those institutions, 542 provided data on employee separations (i.e., turnover).
[14] The survey period started on March 25, 2026, and concluded on April 10, 2026.
[15] Of the 38 total participants, 34 shared which institution they were affiliated with: 53% public, 47% private; 15% associate's, 12% baccalaureate, 9% master's, 65% doctoral; 35% small, 32% medium, 32% large.
[16] Institutional control is defined by [IPEDS] and refers to how an institution is governed. Private, for-profit institutions are not included in this report. Classification refers to highest degree awarded based on [2025 Carnegie institutional classifications].

been identified as areas of concern for retention. In this section, we examine the median years in position over time for various higher ed positions.

Overall Trends in Voluntary Turnover

There are consistent patterns in voluntary turnover rates based on employee type. Tenure-track faculty have the lowest turnover rates followed by non-tenure-track faculty, exempt staff, and non-exempt staff (see Figure 1). Past research finds higher job commitment and lower turnover intentions among tenure-track faculty compared to non-tenure-track faculty, which contributes to differences in turnover rates for these groups.[17] In staff positions, advancement opportunities may be more limited for employees in non-exempt roles, which may in part explain differences in turnover rates between the exempt and non-exempt workforces.[18] As shown in Figure 1 below, these patterns persist over time.

Voluntary Turnover Rates Have Largely Returned to Pre-Pandemic Levels

Figure 1 depicts median voluntary turnover rates from 2017 to 2025 for full-time exempt and non-exempt staff as well as tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty.[19] In the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, there was little year-to-year variability in turnover. Immediately following the onset of the pandemic (the year 2020 in Figure 1), all employee groups experienced a dip in turnover rates.[20] In response to major disruptive events like the pandemic, employees tend to exhibit risk avoidance by staying in their current jobs. Once the threat of a destabilizing event is perceived as diminishing, employees may feel empowered to accept more risk and reevaluate their career goals and expectations. This shift in perspectives can result in a period of heightened collective turnover.[21]

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[17] Bland, C. J., Center, B. A., Finstad, D. A., Risbey, K. R., & Staples, J. (2006). The Impact of Appointment Type on the Productivity and Commitment of Full-Time Faculty in Research and Doctoral Institutions. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *77*(1), 89-123. doi: 10.1353/jhe.2006.0002
[18] Bhaskaran, S., & Davis, A. (2022, July 21). *Bridging the Advancement Gap: What Frontline Employees Want – and What Employers Think They Want*. McKinsey & Company.
[19] Voluntary turnover rates are calculated within each institution. Annual voluntary turnover is calculated by taking the number of voluntary separations (not due to retirement) divided by the average number of employees reported for the current and previous year. This is multiplied by 100 to get a percentage voluntary turnover rate. The year calculated runs from November 1 to November 1, corresponding to the effective dates of data collection.
[20] Many of the figures in this report are interactive; it is recommended to read the online version of this report to fully experience these data visualizations.
[21] Flynn, P. J., Call, M. L., Bliese, P. D., & Nyberg, A. J. (2025). How Context Shapes Collective Turnover Over Time: The Relative Impact of Internal Versus External Factors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *110*(2), 220-237. doi: 10.1037/apl0001230

This pattern is reflected in the figure below.[22] From 2021 to 2022, voluntary turnover rose for all full-time staff and faculty in higher ed, peaking in 2022 for most employee groups. Often referred to as the Great Resignation, this period of upheaval extended beyond higher ed as employees across the U.S. workforce left their jobs en masse.[23] In the years following 2022, higher ed turnover largely declined to resemble pre-pandemic rates. There was a small increase in turnover for non-tenure-track faculty in 2024; however, this group's turnover rate fell to pre-pandemic levels in 2025, consistent with the trend for tenure-track faculty and exempt staff. Despite a decline in turnover since post-pandemic peaks, non-exempt staff have a higher turnover rate in 2025 compared to 2019, the year directly preceding the pandemic onset.

> **"We saw a spike in turnover last year, but otherwise turnover has been pretty stable and may be even less this year due to the uncertainty of the economy." – HR leader at a small, private, master's institution**

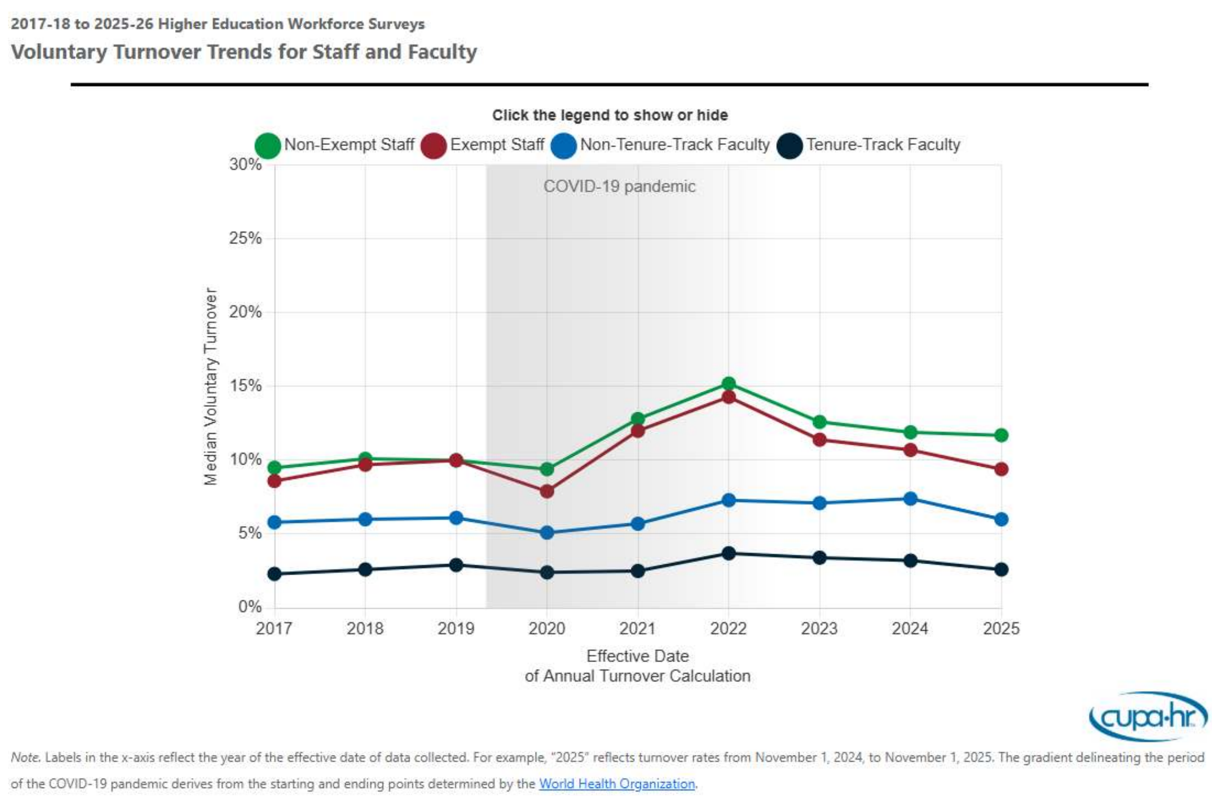

Figure 1. Voluntary Turnover Trends for Staff and Faculty

[22] For a more detailed version of this figure that includes data on part-time staff as well as findings for involuntary turnover and retirements, see our annual workforce data graphic on higher ed workforce turnover.

[23] Gittleman, M. (2022, July). *The "Great Resignation" in Perspective.* U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Findings from the *CUPA-HR Employee Retention Survey* (ERS) mirror actual rates of voluntary turnover depicted in Figure 1 surrounding this post-pandemic period.[24] The ERS shows a decline in employees' intentions to seek new employment from 2023 to 2025. In 2023, one third of ERS respondents indicated they were likely or very likely to seek other employment opportunities within the next year. This proportion dropped significantly in 2025 to one in four respondents indicating intentions to seek other employment in the near future. As such, lower turnover intentions reported by employees track with actual declines in voluntary turnover reported by institutions.

> **"Our turnover rates are finally back to about the same levels as pre-pandemic." – HR leader at a large, public, doctoral institution**

Retention Remains a Key Concern for Higher Ed

Despite the apparent return to normalcy in voluntary turnover rates, there is reason for colleges and universities to remain concerned about retention. In addition to economic strains experienced across industries (e.g., high inflation), higher ed is facing unique fiscal pressures caused by declining student enrollment and tuition revenue,[25] federal funding cuts in research grants and other programs,[26] and within-sector competition that triggers vast marketing and student offerings investments.[27] These financial conditions portend turnover concerns in the future, as desire for higher pay is cited as the top reason higher ed employees are considering other job opportunities.[28] Past research has shown that pay in higher ed often lags behind pay rates offered for similar positions in other industries.[29] In the survey conducted for this report, issues related to pay and development/advancement opportunities were by far the most cited contributor to retention concerns identified by HR leaders, underscoring the universality and severity of dissatisfaction with compensation across the higher ed workforce. Altogether, economic conditions impacting higher ed will likely constrain pay and salary increases, which may contribute to greater turnover in the coming years.

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[24] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[25] Fischer, K. (2022, August 12). The Shrinking of Higher Ed. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
[26] Schalop, A. (2026, February 6). *Americans Want Scientific Research. The Government Cut It Anyway.* National Education Association.
[27] Marcus, J. (2021, October 3). From Google Ads to NFL Sponsorships: Colleges Throw Billions at Marketing Themselves to Attract Students. *The Washington Post*.
[28] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[29] Bruno, R., Wilson, A., & Manzo, F. (2023, September 19). *Lower Pay in Higher Ed: Exploring the Pay Gap Between Public University Workers and State Employees in Illinois*. Illinois Economic Policy Institute.

"I am very concerned about competitive wages being a leading driver in turnover. Even with the best working conditions, the pressures of inflation are creating some challenging situations for our workforce." – HR leader at a small, private, master's institution

Another cause for voluntary turnover concerns is diminishing employee satisfaction and well-being. In our survey of HR leaders, issues related to employee satisfaction with their work environment (e.g., flexibility, demands) were the second most commonly identified contributor to retention challenges. Overwork is a well-known and ongoing issue across the higher ed workforce. Over half of respondents in the 2025 ERS indicated that work expectations had increased over the past year, they have additional duties outside their original job descriptions, and increasing demands in the workplace had caused them to feel anxious or stressed.[30] Even more concerning, nearly three-fourths (72%) of supervisors in the 2025 ERS reported regularly working extra hours beyond full-time expectations.

Many HR leaders in our survey highlight overwork and issues backfilling vacancies as critical contributors to current and future voluntary turnover challenges. An HR leader at a large, public university acknowledged that although current turnover rates at their institution look similar to pre-pandemic trends, remaining employees are dealing with the effects of turnover from previous years due to a lack of backfilling open positions. Indeed, more than half (53%) of ERS respondents indicated they had taken on additional responsibilities to cover for vacancies after colleagues leave, and overwork was a strong, negative predictor of retention.[31] Past research demonstrates that job overload strongly predicts turnover intentions, and employees who are overworked are more likely to leave their organizations.[32] As such, the general decline in turnover rates since post-pandemic peaks may be clouding a serious retention concern, and rising levels of overwork may reverse this trend in future years.

"Everyone is covering more than they should, and the fatigue is showing. It feels like the institution never fully recovered from COVID cutbacks." – HR leader at a small, private, master's institution

Another facet of the employee experience that may impact voluntary turnover is the lack of flexible work arrangements in higher ed relative to other industries.[33] Findings from CUPA-HR's 2025-26 *Benefits, Employee Experience, and Structure (BEES) Survey* show that most

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[30] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Podsakoff, N. P., LePine, J. A., & LePine, M. A. (2007). Differential Challenge Stressor–Hindrance Stressor Relationships With Job Attitudes, Turnover Intentions, Turnover, and Withdrawal Behavior: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 92*(2), 448-454. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.92.2.438
[33] Gallup. (2026). *Global Indicator: Hybrid Work*.

institutions offer hybrid (90%) and/or remote (77%) work arrangements to at least some employees, but institutions have a median of 85% of their employees working fully on-site.[34] Critically, a gap persists between employees' preferences and actual experiences with work arrangements. A majority (72%) of 2025 ERS respondents work completely or mostly on-site, yet only 39% of these employees prefer this work arrangement.[35] Despite most institutions having policies in place to offer flexible work arrangements, opportunities for remote and hybrid work in higher ed remain limited. Some restrictions in flexible work arrangements are likely related to state and federal-level return-to-office pushes or mandates, particularly for public institutions.[36]

> **"We no longer offer the ability to work hybrid during the summer and winter breaks. Employees are leaving for fully remote positions." – HR leader at a small, private, baccalaureate institution**

Leadership changes may also be contributing to retention challenges for higher ed. There is an extensive history of research on the critical role leaders play in organizational performance and employee turnover.[37] Leadership concerns (e.g., confidence in leadership, responsible and ethical responses to crises, addressing employee needs) were the third most commonly identified contributor to current retention challenges by HR leaders in our survey. Aligned with this assessment from HR leaders, confidence in leadership ethics and values was the second strongest predictor of retention among participants in the 2025 ERS.[38] Given the importance of trust in leadership for retention, it is concerning that the median tenure for key higher ed administrators is relatively short. The median tenure is four years for presidents, three years for chief HR officers, and just two years for provosts/chief academic officers.[39] These leaders are critical in shaping and enacting strategies and priorities across the institution. Turnover in these positions can be disruptive and destabilizing for employees as well as the institution.

> **"We are experiencing leadership transitions that will likely reshape some cultural norms. During periods of change, clear communication and intentional attention to employee engagement are especially important to**

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[34] CUPA-HR. (2025). *Benefits, Employee Experience, and Structure Survey, 2025-26* [Data set].
[35] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[36] Salhotra, P. (2025, March 5). Following Trump's lead, Gov. Abbott pushes state agencies to end telework. *The Texas Tribune*.
[37] Lord, R. G., Day, D. V., Zaccaro, S. J., Avolio, B. J., & Eagly, A. H. (2017). Leadership in Applied Psychology: Three Waves of Theory and Research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *102*(3), 434-451. doi: 10.1037/apl0000089
[38] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[39] CUPA-HR. (2026). *Administrators Median Years in Position*. [Annual Workforce Data graphic].

maintaining trust and retaining talent." – HR leader at a small, private, doctoral institution

In the next section of this report, we examine how voluntary turnover rates vary across institutions. First, we assess whether salary increases predict turnover. Then, we show how turnover rates vary based on control (public versus private), institution size, total expenses, and classification.

Differences in Voluntary Turnover Across Institutions

Greater Percentage Increases in Salary Predict Lower Voluntary Turnover Among Exempt Staff

Given the previously noted importance of pay in employee turnover intentions, we expected salary changes would be related to institutions' actual voluntary turnover rates. We calculated percentage change in salary for exempt staff, non-exempt staff, tenure-track faculty, and non-tenure-track faculty.[40] Voluntary turnover rates for each employee group were calculated using the same method described for the analysis depicted in Figure 1.

We conducted linear regression analyses for each employee type to examine whether percentage changes in salary from November 2024 to November 2025 predict voluntary turnover rates in 2025. Figure 2 shows that as an institution's average percentage change in salary increases, voluntary turnover decreases. Although this negative relationship between salary change and turnover exists for all employee groups, the analysis was only significant for exempt staff. Specifically, for every one percentage point increase in exempt staff salary at an institution from November 2024 to November 2025, the turnover rate for this group in 2025 decreased by 0.38%.[41]

Figure 2 depicts the regression analyses for each employee type. Despite a significant relationship between salary change and voluntary turnover for exempt staff, we find that year-over-year salary changes predict only a small amount of variance in turnover for this group (approximately 3.3% of exempt staff turnover can be explained by salary changes).

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[40] For this analysis, we calculated average salaries for each position at each institution for 2024-25 and 2025-26. Data were only included if the institution provided data for a particular position in both years. We calculated the average institutional salary for each year and then created a variable for percentage change in average salary for each institution. Positions included in the Administrators Survey are presumed to be exempt, whereas positions in the Staff Survey are presumed to be non-exempt. CUPA-HR's *Professionals in Higher Education Survey* includes a variable to indicate whether an employee is exempt or non-exempt. Exempt staff in this analysis included any employees reported in the Administrators Survey and exempt staff reported in the Professionals Survey. Non-exempt staff included any employees reported in the Staff Survey and non-exempt staff reported in the Professionals Survey.

[41] $F(1, 453) = 15.57$, $p < .001$, $b = -.38$, $SE = .10$, $\beta = -.18$, $R^2 = .033$

The lack of a significant relationship between percentage changes in salary and turnover for faculty and non-exempt staff suggests salary increases alone are insufficient for incentivizing retention for these groups and other factors (e.g., institutional leadership, employee satisfaction, base pay, benefits) may be more influential in predicting turnover. Faculty in particular may place greater value on other job characteristics like flexibility, autonomy, and opportunities for innovation.[42] Although the current finding shows a small or null effect of salary change predicting turnover, HR leaders surveyed for this report and employees who participated in the 2025 ERS cite pay as the number one contributor to retention challenges and turnover intentions. As such, base pay (but not necessarily year-to-year salary changes) may still be an important factor in turnover despite modest findings in the current analysis.

> **"Pay and the ability to raise salaries as needed are our biggest concerns related to retention over the next several years." – HR leader at a small, private, baccalaureate institution**

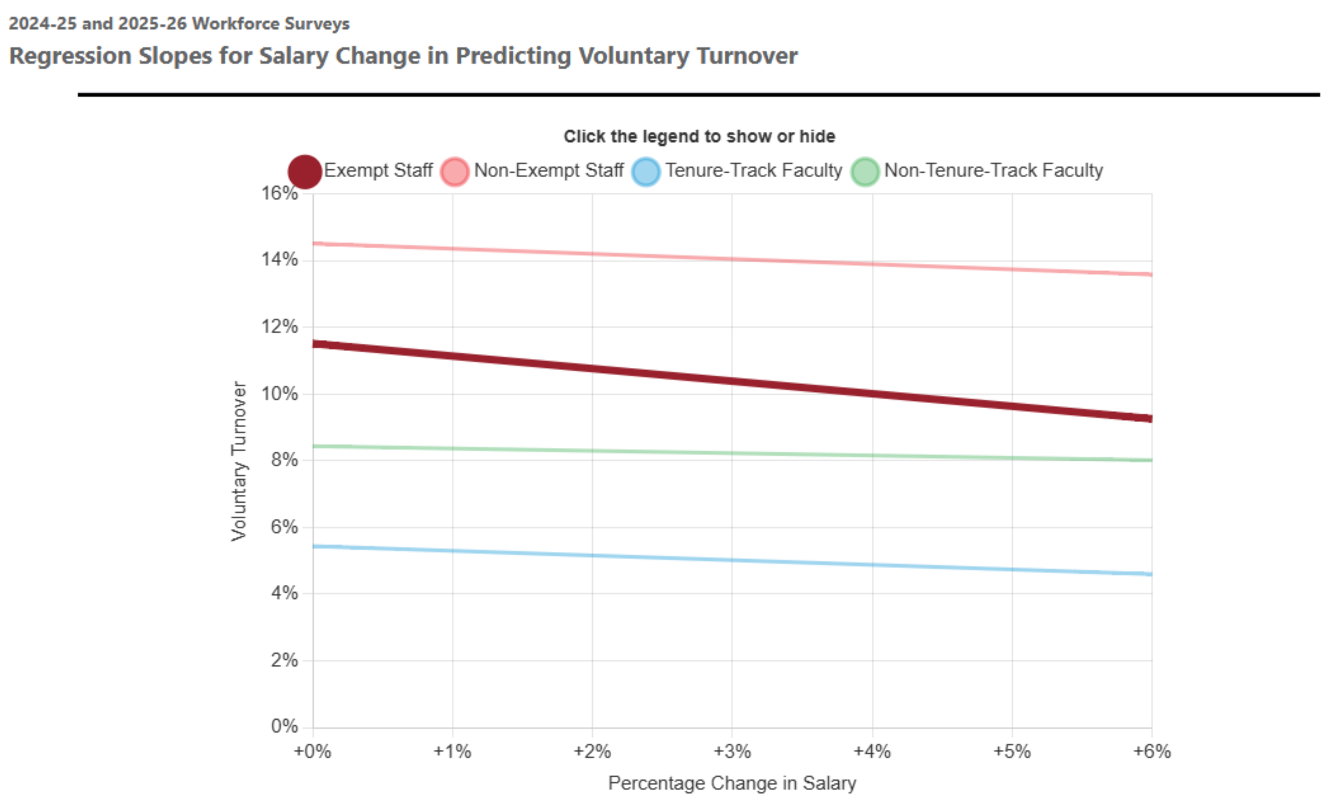

Figure 2. Regression Slopes for Salary Change in Predicting Voluntary Turnover

[42] McCandless, S., McDonald, B., & Rinfret, S. (2023, August 21). Walking Faculty Back from the Cliff. *Inside Higher Ed*.

Private Institutions Have Higher Voluntary Turnover Rates Than Public Institutions

Across all employee types, private institutions have higher rates of voluntary turnover compared to public institutions (Figure 3).[43] Private institutions may face unique challenges in competing for talent in the broader labor market. Unlike many public institutions that benefit from the relative stability of state-backed compensation structures, private institutions are often more sensitive to immediate budgetary fluctuations, in part due to their greater reliance on tuition-based revenue.[44] Due to declining enrollment of traditional age students, colleges and universities are competing for their share of an ever-shrinking pool of students. Although this demographic change broadly impacts higher ed, private institutions are seeing greater declines in student enrollment rates, particularly those without large endowments and those that are less widely known.[45] Consequently, many private institutions may struggle to keep pace with the competitive wages offered by employers outside of higher ed, driving higher attrition.

> **"One of our biggest concerns related to retention over the next several years is the ability to offer competitive salaries due to budget constraints driven by low enrollment." – HR leader at a small, private, doctoral institution**

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[43] Independent samples t-tests indicated private institutions had significantly higher voluntary turnover than public institutions for exempt staff, $t(503) = 3.56$, $p < .001$; non-exempt staff, $t(494) = 4.21$, $p < .001$; and non-tenure-track faculty, $t(435) = 3.19$, $p < .001$.
[44] Wood, S. (2026, March 2). The Cost of Private vs. Public Colleges. *U.S. News & World Report*.
[45] Zeppos, N. S. (2026, May 12). How Bad Is Higher Ed's Budget Crunch? *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

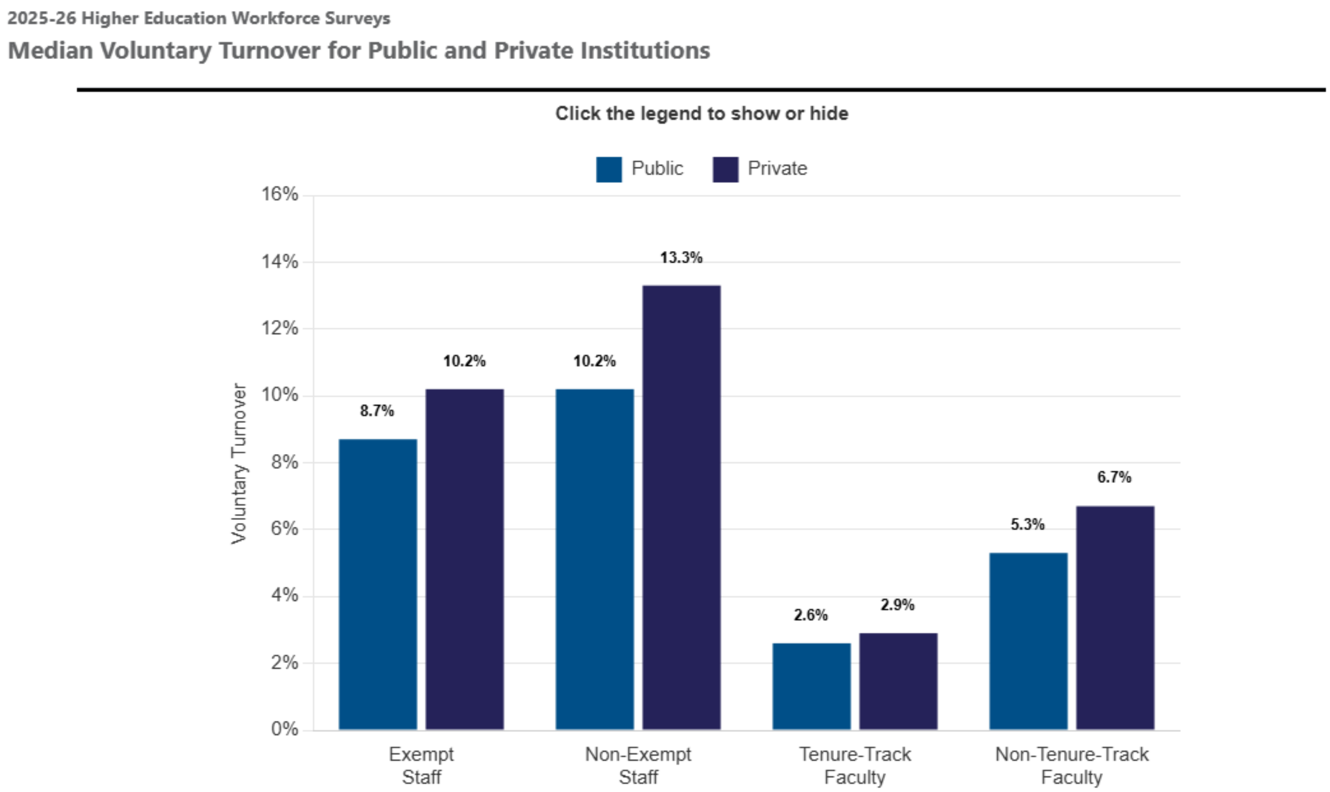

Figure 3. Median Voluntary Turnover for Public and Private Institutions

Institutions With the Most Students Have the Lowest Voluntary Turnover Rates

Figure 4 illustrates median voluntary turnover rates based on institution size.[46] Small institutions report the highest rates of employee turnover, followed by medium-sized institutions and then large institutions. Most notably, the median turnover rate among non-exempt staff is four percentage points higher at small institutions compared to large institutions.[47]

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[46] Institution size in this figure refers to Carnegie classifications based on student size/headcounts. Large and very large institutions are grouped together as well as small and very small institutions. Those combined categories are labeled as “small” and “large” in this report. Small institutions are those with 4,000 students total or fewer, medium institutions have between 4,000 and 20,000 students, and large institutions have 20,000 or more students.

[47] Results of one-way ANOVAs showed small institutions had significantly higher rates of voluntary turnover compared to medium and large institutions for exempt staff, $F(2, 502) = 7.37$, $p < .001$; non-exempt staff, $F(2, 493) = 12.71$, $p < .001$; and non-tenure-track faculty, $F(2, 434) = 7.61$, $p < .001$. Tenure-track faculty at small institutions had significantly higher rates of voluntary turnover compared to medium institutions (but not large) for tenure-track faculty, $F(2, 413) = 5.03$, $p = .007$.

As alluded to in the previous section, declining enrollment rates are disproportionately hurting institutions that tend to serve fewer students.[48] These smaller institutions are losing students at faster rates compared to larger institutions, impacting the bottom line for institutions that heavily depend on tuition-based revenue. When institutions experience budget challenges, employees are impacted in direct and indirect ways through lower base pay, smaller raises, fewer resources to support professional development, and burnout from overwork and personal financial strain.[49] This financial instability likely contributes to the greater turnover rates seen at small institutions compared to larger institutions.

> **"Uncertainty and stability are the primary turnover challenges impacting our institution. Smaller schools are struggling, leading to cuts and reorganizations." – HR leader at a small, private, master's institution**

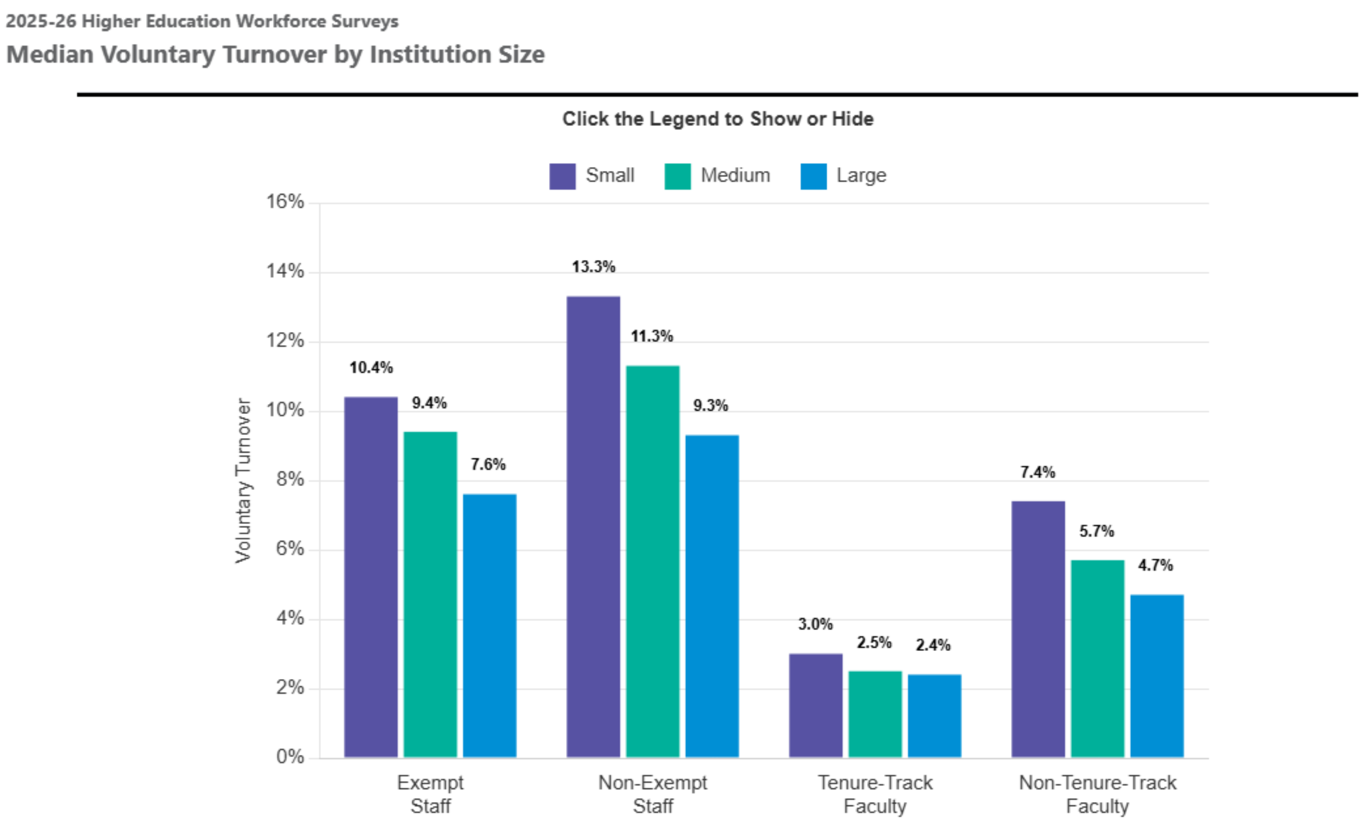

Figure 4. Median Voluntary Turnover by Institution Size

[48] Marcus, J. (2026, April 13). More Than a Quarter of Private Colleges Are at Risk of Closing, New Projection Shows. *The Hechinger Report.*
[49] Custer, S. (2025, June 23). How Budget Cuts and a Loss of Trust Threaten Higher Ed's Workforce. *Inside Higher Ed*.

Institutions With the Largest Total Expenses Have the Lowest Voluntary Turnover Rates

Total expenses refer to all costs incurred by an institution, which include core and noncore expenses.[50] Figure 5 shows median voluntary turnover rates by total expense quartile, where the first quartile reflects institutions with the smallest total expenses and the fourth quartile reflects those with the largest expenses.[51] As shown in this figure, patterns in turnover rates vary across expense quartiles. In general, voluntary turnover is highest at institutions with smaller total expenses and lowest at those with larger expenses.[52] For faculty, there is little difference in turnover rates based on total expense quartiles. However, among exempt and non-exempt staff, the gap between the smallest and largest quartiles is notably larger. For non-exempt staff, the median turnover rate for institutions in the first and second quartiles is three percentage points higher compared to those in the third and fourth quartiles.

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[50] National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *Postsecondary Institution Expenses*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

[51] Total expense quartiles are based on all institutions participating in CUPA-HR annual surveys in 2025-26. The first quartile, also referred to as the 25th percentile, is the value at which 25% of institutions in the dataset fall below that value. CUPA-HR's sample (1,078 institutions) is representative of all higher ed institutions.

[52] One-way ANOVAs showed institutions with total expenses in the first quartile had significantly higher voluntary turnover compared to turnover rates at institutions in the third and fourth quartiles for exempt staff, $F(3, 501) = 6.50$, $p < .001$, and non-exempt staff, $F(3, 492) = 11.25$, $p < .001$. For non-exempt staff, institutions in the second quartile also had significantly higher turnover than institutions in the third and fourth quartiles. For tenure-track faculty, institutions in the first quartile had significantly higher turnover compared to institutions in all other quartiles, $F(3, 412) = 12.04$, $p < .001$.

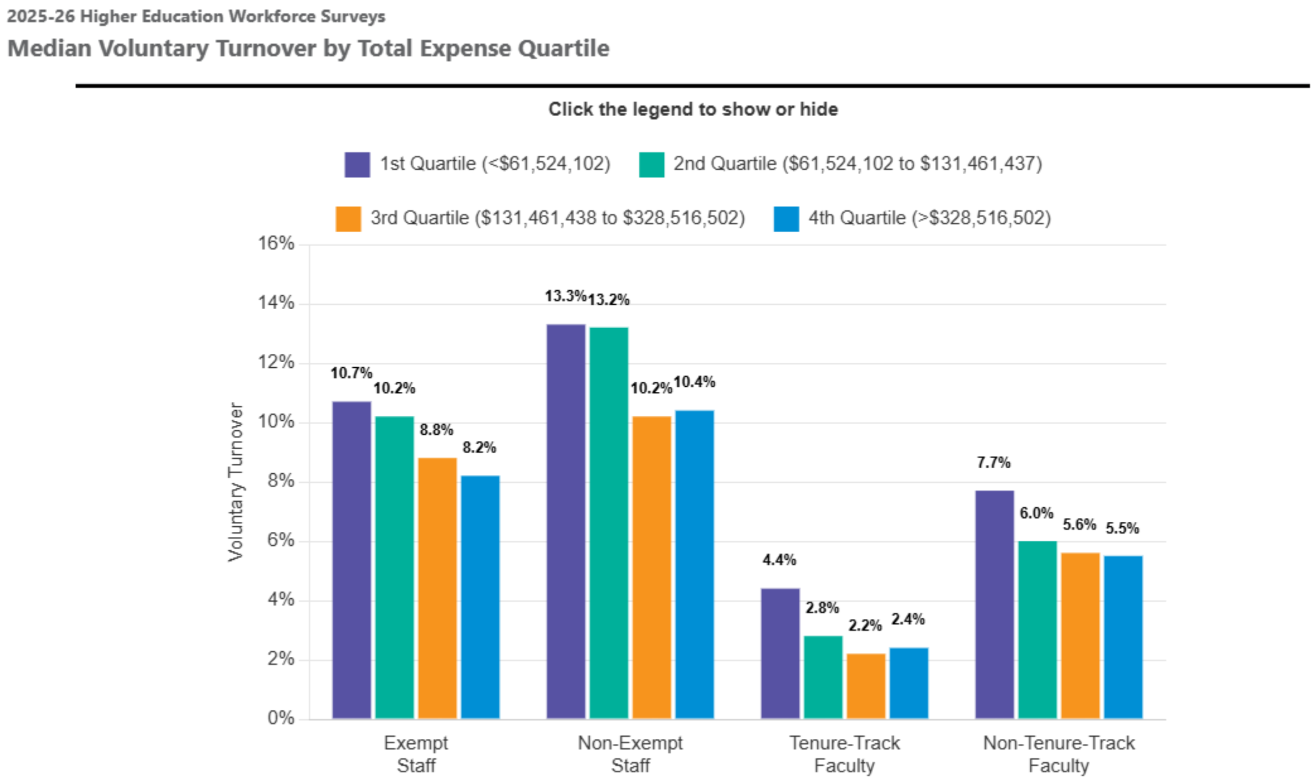

Figure 5. Median Voluntary Turnover by Total Expense Quartile

Voluntary Turnover for Most Employees is Lowest at Associate's Institutions

Looking at voluntary turnover rates by institution classification offers additional nuance to understanding retention challenges in higher ed.[53] Across classifications, associate's institutions have the lowest turnover rates for exempt staff, non-exempt staff, and tenure-track faculty (Figure 6).[54] For non-tenure-track faculty, turnover is lowest at doctoral institutions. Turnover for exempt staff and non-tenure-track faculty is highest at baccalaureate institutions. Turnover for non-exempt staff is highest at doctoral institutions. Differences in turnover rates by institution

[53] Carnegie classifications refer to highest degree awarded using 2025 Carnegie classifications.

[54] One-way ANOVAs showed exempt staff at associate's institutions had significantly lower voluntary turnover than those at baccalaureate and master's institutions, and exempt staff at baccalaureate institutions had significantly higher turnover than those at doctoral institutions, $F(3, 460) = 7.89$, $p < .001$. Additionally, non-tenure-track faculty at baccalaureate institutions had significantly higher voluntary turnover rates than all other institution classifications, $F(3, 393) = 9.88$, $p < .001$.

classification among tenure-track faculty are small, but master's institutions have the highest median turnover rate for this employee group.

The findings regarding turnover based on institution classification suggest that turnover is not a simple correlation with institutional size. The previous section of this report shows that turnover is inversely related to institution size (i.e., large institutions have less turnover). Although the median student FTE and total expenses at doctoral institutions are by far larger than other classifications, non-exempt staff turnover is highest at these institutions. In addition, although we have shown that turnover is inversely related to total expenses, associate's institutions (which have the smallest median total expenses relative to other classifications) report some of the lowest turnover rates.

Although doctoral institutions tend to be the largest in terms of number of students and total expenses, the current findings highlight retention vulnerabilities for these institutions, especially among non-exempt staff. Several HR leaders from large, doctoral universities surveyed for this report attributed turnover at their institutions to competition with the private sector, lack of advancement opportunities, overwork, and limited remote work offerings. These insights underscore systemic problems and highlight how retention challenges persist across higher ed, not just at institutions with smaller student bodies or declining student enrollments.

> **"Budget constraints don't allow us to hire the best candidates. Good employees move from one college to another within the university for higher pay and career growth, as that's the only way to get an increase. Merit increases, if any, are below the inflation rate." – HR leader at a large, public, doctoral institution**

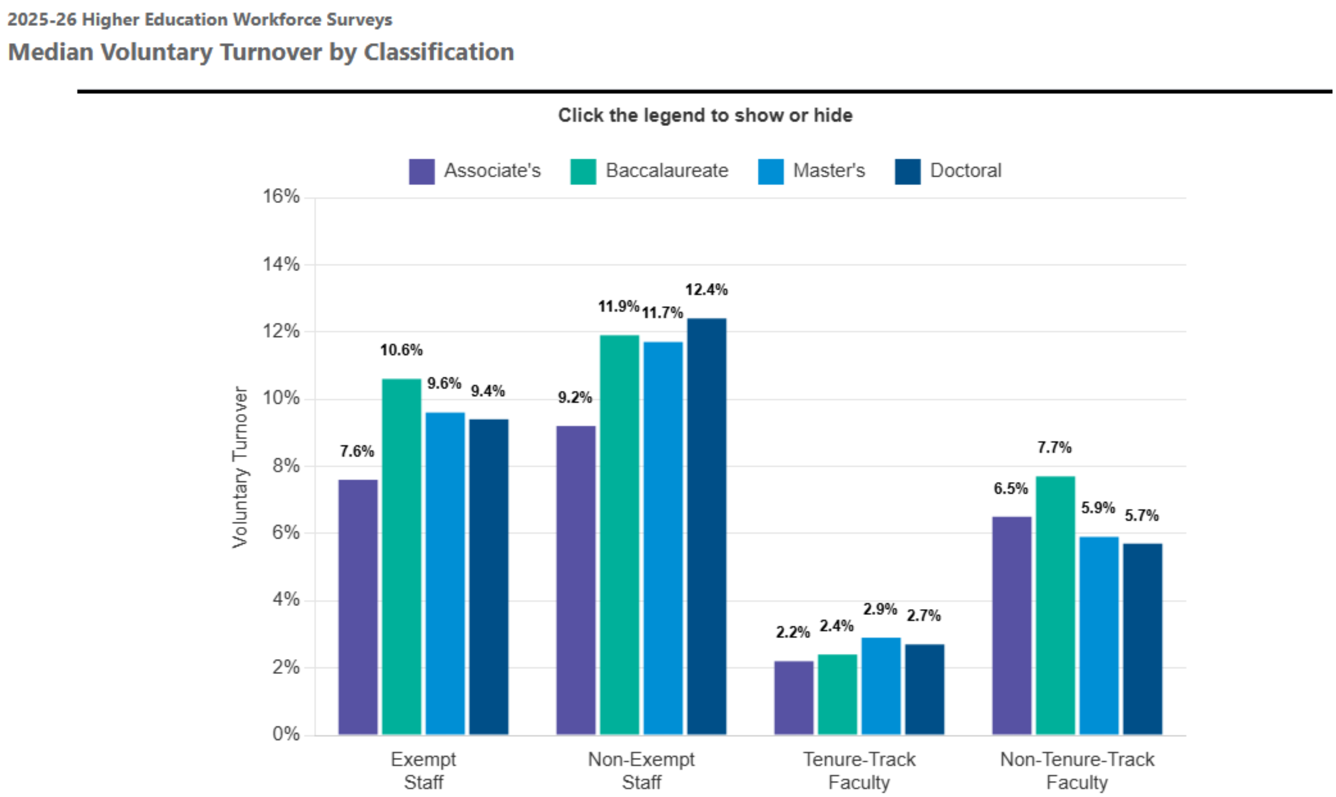

Figure 6. Median Voluntary Turnover by Classification

When considered collectively, the data offer a comprehensive review of the state of turnover trends across different types of institutions. Based on our findings, large, public institutions in the third and fourth quartiles of total expenses are likely experiencing less staff and faculty turnover than others. These findings are aligned with other research that paints a rosier picture for the future of large state schools compared to smaller, private institutions.[55] Institutions with large total expenses typically have major research programs and hospitals or medical centers that financially buttress the institution. They also tend to attract more students nationally and internationally. Although higher ed is broadly experiencing financial pressures, institutions with strong and diverse revenue streams that can attract students from across the country and globe are likely able to offer employees more competitive pay and better keep pace with inflation increases. This hypothesis is supported by our analysis showing that, among exempt staff, changes in salary in part predict employee turnover. Although pay is not the sole determinant of voluntary turnover, differences in financial strain across institutions may influence employee retention

[55] Kang, J. C. (2026, May 19). The Enrollment Cliff Is Here. Which Schools Will Survive It? *The New Yorker.*

given the importance of pay in turnover intentions and downstream effects of stressed budgets (e.g., overwork stemming from insufficient staffing).

> **"We have seen budget reductions over the past few years. Pay continues to be an issue for both recruiting and retention for us." – HR leader at a small, private, baccalaureate institution**

Although institution-level patterns help identify where turnover pressures are most pronounced, examining length of time in position provides a more granular view of position-level retention challenges. The following section shifts from broad institutional characteristics to specific positions and functional areas in the higher ed workforce.

Median Years in Position for Specific Higher Ed Positions

The final section of this report examines median tenure — defined as years in current position — across selected departments. These departments were chosen based on two primary criteria: concerns highlighted by HR leaders surveyed for this report and data from the CUPA-HR 2025 Employee Retention Survey identifying specific areas at high risk for attrition. Many of the positions included in this section are typically non-exempt or occupied by entry-level professionals. In our survey of higher ed HR leaders, nearly half of respondents reported elevated turnover rates at their institution for non-exempt staff; more than half of HR leaders indicated higher than usual turnover rates among entry-level professionals.

Although not a direct measure of turnover, median years in position serves as a proxy for retention by showing the approximate duration employees have been in their current position.[56] Although positions with low median years in position may indicate high churn (i.e., employees do not stay in the job for long), this metric should be interpreted as such with caution. Low median time in position does not necessarily equate to high turnover, and it may also result from changes such as the creation of new positions at an institution or a period of rapid hiring of employees in that role, which will naturally lower the median time in position. Figure 7 displays the median years in position from 2016-17 to 2025-26 for select positions in the higher ed workforce, grouped by functional area.[57] This section provides median years in

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[56] Median years in position reflects tenure in an employee's current role only and does not account for prior experience in similar capacities or overall tenure working at the institution.

[57] This figure includes data for 45 positions. Across all positions and survey years included, the minimum number of incumbents was 156 and the maximum was 32,231. The minimum number of institutions reporting data for a single data point was 79, and the maximum was 811. This and many other graphics in this report are interactive; it is recommended to read the online version of this report to fully experience these data visualizations.

position for employees from the following three areas: Facilities, Operations, and Public Safety; Academic Affairs; and Student Affairs. An analysis is provided for each area below the graphic.

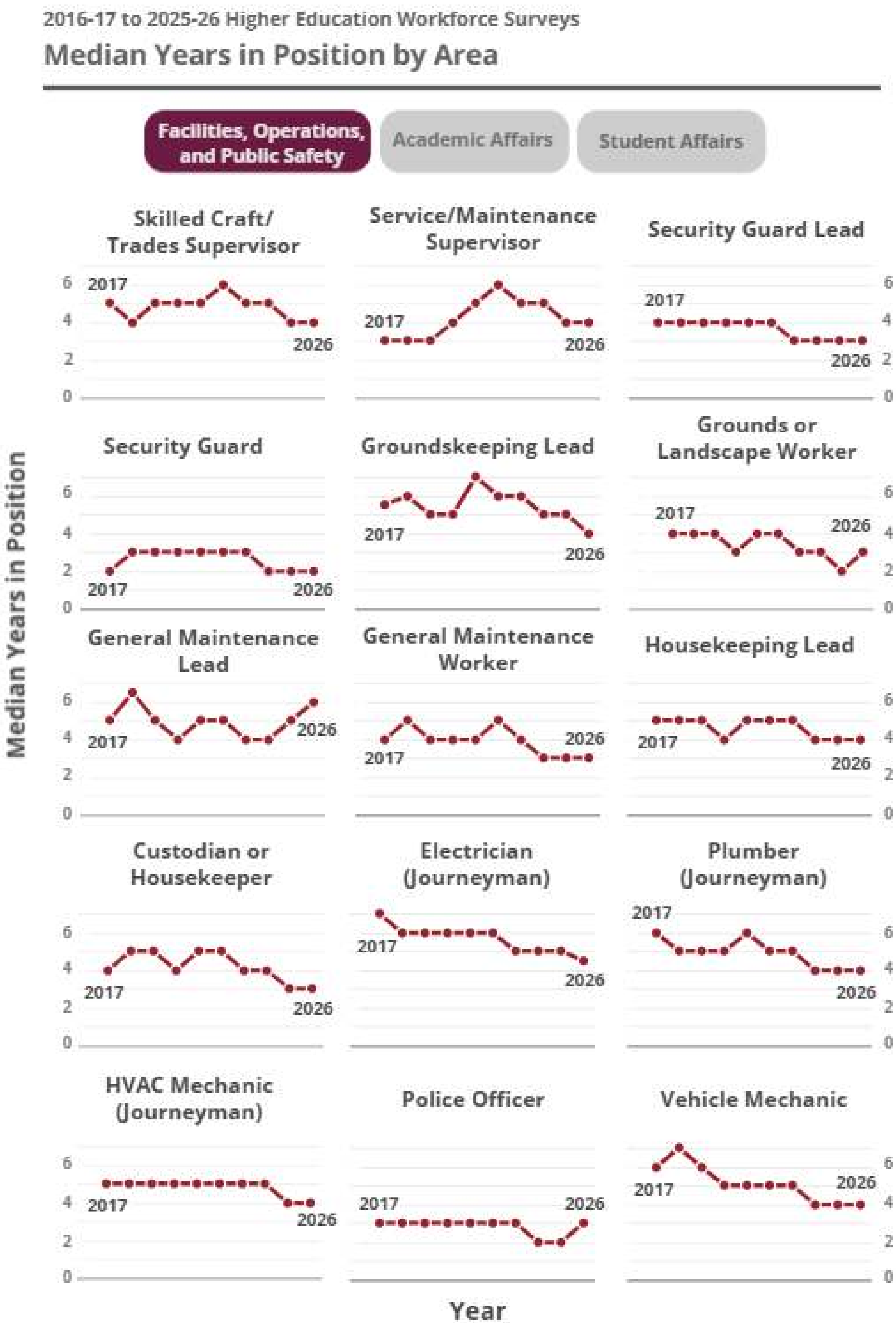

Figure 7. Median Years in Position by Area

Facilities, Operations, and Public Safety

Facilities employees are often overlooked in reviews of the higher ed workforce despite their critical role in maintaining the physical spaces needed for learning and ensuring a safe and healthy environment. In the survey conducted for this report, most HR leaders reported experiencing retention challenges in the past several years for employees in facilities, operations, and public safety. This sector of the higher ed workforce has been severely underfunded, and many institutions have deferred maintenance and facility upkeep projects due to rising costs and strained finances.[58] Many employees in these areas leave for better paying jobs outside of higher ed. It is typically difficult for colleges and universities to match pay for similar positions in the private sector.

> **"Exponential growth in the external labor market locally has created retention challenges for skilled trades jobs." – HR leader at a large, public, doctoral institution**

As shown in Figure 7, many facilities and operations positions have relatively low tenure. Security Guard Lead, Security Guard, Grounds or Landscape Worker, General Maintenance Worker, Custodian or Housekeeper, and Police Officer all have a median of 3 years in position or less in 2025-26. Although some positions in this area have relatively high tenure, 11 of the 15 positions included in this review have seen a decline in median years in position since 2016-17. This trend is particularly concerning for this group of positions, as past research has highlighted many of these positions as lacking pipelines to replace an aging workforce.[59] Declining tenure in combination with a relatively high median age for employees in these positions may signal that higher ed is unprepared to fill these roles when incumbents retire.[60]

> **"Specific roles remain very difficult to recruit and retain. These tend to be lower-paid service jobs as well as trades positions. We have enhanced recruitment capabilities and pay but see a very tight labor force being the primary challenge." – HR leader at a large, public, doctoral institution**

Academic and Student Affairs

Academic affairs professionals oversee functions related to academic instruction, which may include admissions, enrollment, curriculum development, and student support. Student affairs professionals support students outside the classroom

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[58] Moody, J. (2024, August 14). Hastings College Receives Donation to Fix Leaky Pipes and Busted Boilers. *Inside Higher Ed*.
[59] Fuesting, M., & Schmidt, A. (2021, February). *The Higher Ed Skilled Craft Workforce*. CUPA-HR.
[60] Ibid.

through career advising, housing, activities, and health and wellness. Professionals in both areas are responsible for supporting students' emotional and learning needs, which often requires long hours and can be psychologically taxing,[61] particularly during tumultuous times.[62] Among HR leaders surveyed for this report, most indicated that their institutions have faced significant turnover challenges within academic affairs in recent years, and over half identified similar retention concerns with employees in student affairs. According to the CUPA-HR 2025 Employee Retention Survey, 27% of academic affairs and 26% of student affairs participants reported being likely or very likely to seek other employment within the next year, and the majority of these respondents perceived that their pay was unfair.[63] Beyond pay dissatisfaction, a lack of flexible work arrangements appears to be a secondary driver of discontent for employees in both areas.[64]

> **"The rate of pay along with the discontinuation of remote work are the main reasons for turnover at our institution." – HR leader at a medium, public, associate's institution**

Figure 7 underscores potential challenges with retention for academic and student affairs professionals. The median tenure for most of these positions is less than 4 years. Many academic and student affairs positions have notably low tenure at just 2 median years in position in 2025-26. Some of these positions may be structured to anticipate higher levels of turnover, particularly those that are entry-level. However, high turnover in these positions could have a strong negative impact on colleges and universities, as these professionals are key in shaping students' experiences inside and outside the classroom. Academic affairs professionals support students through registration and enrollment processes, course and program advising, and maintaining and optimizing learning environments. Student affairs professionals are critical in supporting mental health, engaging students outside the classroom, and providing resources to facilitate long-term success.[65] Colleges and universities are much more than just classrooms; they require a wide swath of professionals working together to help students and maintain operations. As such, high turnover of

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[61] Marshall, S. M., Gardner, M. M., Hughes, C., & Lowery, U. (2016). Attrition From Student Affairs: Perspectives From Those Who Exited the Profession. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *53*(2), 146-159. doi: 10.1080/19496591.2016.1147359
[62] Jackson Preston, P., Peterson, H., Sanchez, D., Corral Carlos, A., & Reed, A. (2021). Serving Students Takes a Toll: Self-Care, Health, and Professional Quality of Life. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *58*(2), 163-178. doi: 10.1080/19496591.2020.1853558
[63] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.
[64] Ibid.
[65] NASPA. (2026). *About Student Affairs*.

professionals in academic and student affairs is likely to negatively impact students' well-being and academic success.

> **"One of our biggest concerns related to retention over the next several years is that the loss of institutional knowledge will create a shifting culture for the organization that will impact the student experience." – HR leader at a small, private, baccalaureate institution**

Conclusions

This report outlines the state of voluntary turnover in the higher ed workforce and identifies which institutions and employee groups may be experiencing the greatest retention challenges. CUPA-HR data and insights from higher ed HR leaders offer a nuanced understanding of employee turnover across colleges and universities, highlighting a need for continued focus on retention efforts. Below, we summarize key findings and offer recommendations to promote employee retention.

Voluntary turnover has declined in recent years, but retention remains a top concern in higher ed. Nationally, voluntary turnover rates have stabilized to pre-pandemic levels. Despite improvements in voluntary separations, many higher ed employees are dissatisfied with their pay and report concerns with overwork, flexibility, and leadership support. In CUPA-HR's latest Employee Retention Survey (ERS), one-fourth of respondents indicated intentions to seek other employment opportunities within the next year.

Salary increases impact exempt staff turnover. Regression analyses indicate an inverse relationship between salary increases and turnover rates for exempt staff, where every one percentage point increase in salary is associated with a 0.38% decrease in turnover. Notably, this trend does not hold for non-exempt staff or faculty, suggesting that the primary drivers of retention for those groups are more complex and extend beyond compensation. Additionally, given the very small proportion of variance in exempt staff turnover explained by changes in salary, institutions should consider other contributing variables that influence turnover when exploring retention strategies.

Turnover rates vary across institutions. Public institutions have lower turnover rates compared to private institutions. Additionally, larger institutions (those with the greatest total expenses and most students) generally have lower turnover. Smaller, private institutions appear to be experiencing heightened retention challenges. Many of these institutions may be financially strained due to declining enrollments, likely impacting pay, salary increases, confidence in leadership, and other employee experiences (e.g., overwork, role ambiguity, benefits offerings).

Certain positions have particularly low tenure or declining tenure over time. HR leaders surveyed for this report identified several departments that have experienced retention challenges in the past several years. Facilities and operations, academic affairs, and student affairs were some of the most common areas selected by this group of HR leaders. These findings are corroborated by responses from CUPA-HR's Employee Retention Survey, where employees in academic and student affairs were some of the most likely to indicate intentions to seek other employment opportunities. Many positions across these three areas have consistently low or declining rates for median tenure, providing further support for potential retention concerns.

Recommendations

Employee retention continues to be a central focus for higher ed leaders. A variety of strategic tools and frameworks are available to assist colleges and universities in developing effective retention efforts.

Use data to support strategic workforce decisions and advocate for market-aligned compensation. Higher education is experiencing multiple simultaneous pressures that have further strained already tight budgets. These pressures make it even more important to make data-driven decisions that responsibly optimize limited resources.[66] Ensuring salaries and other benefits are comparable to similar colleges and universities can support retention efforts by offering competitive and market-aligned compensation. Institutions can also use data to address other workforce issues beyond compensation that impact turnover; for example, data can be used for rightsizing an institution's workforce to lessen the likelihood of overwork.[67]

Cultivate an "employer of choice" culture through assessment. To effectively retain talent, institutions should shift from reactive turnover management and proactively strive to become employers of choice. A data-driven approach to this process begins by benchmarking performance to identify institutional strengths and critical gaps in policies and practices that impact retention.[68] In addition, gathering

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[66] DataOnDemand is one resource available to higher ed HR professionals and other campus leaders to help make data-informed strategic decisions. Visit the CUPA-HR website to learn more about DataOnDemand.

[67] For a review of use cases for DataOnDemand beyond setting pay for individual positions, see our article, *Beyond Base Pay: How DataOnDemand Informs Strategic Decisions at Colleges and Universities*. To obtain more data to guide strategic decision-making at your institution, subscribe to DataOnDemand.

[68] CUPA-HR's Employer of Choice Maturity Index is an assessment tool higher ed leaders can use to determine whether their institution is an employer of choice.

direct employee feedback can be critical in refining retention efforts to address concerns that are specific to your institution.[69] By moving beyond annual snapshots of turnover rates in favor of ongoing engagement with employees and review of policies and practices, institutional leaders can better identify opportunities for improvement. Institutions should communicate these findings to employees, translate them into priority actions, and track progress over time.

Prioritize the core drivers of retention beyond pay. Institutional retention efforts are most effective when they address not just pay but other factors such as job satisfaction and well-being.[70] Organizations that foster a sense of belonging through recognition and career growth opportunities often see greater workforce stability. Similarly, embracing workplace flexibility, such as reevaluating remote or hybrid work options where roles permit, demonstrates a commitment to employees' preferences. Additionally, building trust in leadership and promoting clear, consistent communication regarding institutional decisions are vital components that contribute to employee retention. Prioritizing these drivers can support retention efforts by centering employee needs, expectations, and values.

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[69] CUPA-HR's Employee Retention Survey (ERS) collects data from employees to understand retention trends and the factors that impact retention within and across higher ed institutions. The next ERS will be conducted in April 2027. Institutions that achieve sufficient response rates will be eligible to purchase custom benchmarking reports specific to their institutions.
[70] Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). *The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*. CUPA-HR.