

New survey effort seeks to uncover real reasons why faculty members leave their jobs

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Why They Stay and Why They Go

Losing a faculty member always hurts, but many administrators believe they have little control over whether professors move on. A new effort seeks to provide meaningful data.

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By

[Colleen Flaherty](#)

Whether the separation is voluntary or not, losing a tenure-line or otherwise full-time faculty member is always a costly to an institution. The departing professor will take any external research grants with him or her, not to mention the sunk costs of hiring and training. Then there are additional costs that are harder to quantify, such as those to morale, mentorship, service and leadership in a department.

Could institutions cut such costs going forward if they knew more about why faculty members leave? That's the premise behind a major faculty exit survey initiative from the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at Harvard University and the University of California's Office of the President. Distinct from COACHE's annual Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, the new project will target faculty members who resigned or were successfully retained last year at six University of California System campuses. After the pilot phase closes in June, COACHE will open the program to other interested institutions.

The idea is overcome the small sample problem posed by institution-level faculty exit surveys, to build a robust data set that helps campus leaders better understand the causes, costs and effects of faculty departures on their campuses and in relation to peer institutions.

Kiernan Mathews, director and principal investigator at COACHE, said in an interview that literature on faculty departures suggests that institutional leaders tend to "explain away their own culpability in why a faculty member left, speaking in terms of 'heaven' or 'hell.'" If the departing faculty member went to a more prestigious institution for better pay, provosts, deans and others tend to think the departure couldn't have been stopped, he said. If the professor went to a less prestigious institution, meanwhile, administrators believe the faculty member simply couldn't hack it on their campus.

In reality, Mathews said, both explanations are “useless.” But more helpful diagnoses can only come from better data. Currently, he said, many institutions use COACHE’s faculty satisfaction instrument, but those and others like it can only serve to identify the “dissatisfiers” that signal a faculty member’s intent to leave -- such as failure to accommodate a spouse, chilly climate or compensation -- not those that cause an actual decision to leave. And while many institutions offer faculty exit surveys, COACHE found that no two universities were asking the same questions or pooling their responses to derive meaningful data.

Enter the University of California’s Susan Carlson, vice provost for academic personnel and programs. A longtime acquaintance of Mathews’s, she offered the university system up to COACHE as test case for an instrument that would help her better understand just who was leaving, who was being retained and why.

Carlson said in a statement that her support came down to return on investment in the project, and matters of equity.

“If even a single professor’s departure is, instead, a retention, then our efforts with COACHE will have paid off,” she said. To the latter point, she added, “Do some groups leave for reasons that are different from those of other groups?” Might knowing the answer “help us address the concerns of those not in the majority?”

Institutions typically do their best to retain faculty members at risk of leaving. Rebecca Blank, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, for example, [recently spent nearly \\$9 million](#) to retain 40 professors, keeping their combined \$18 million in research grants on campus. But 25 percent of professors across higher education could have been retained and aren’t, according to a rough estimate based on COACHE’s work with provosts, and the impact of their departures is real. A conservative, decade-old calculation from COACHE’s provosts’ advisory board on the cost of replacing a faculty member was \$96,000. A 2012 report in [Science](#) estimated that start-up costs alone for a faculty member in science or engineering range from \$110,000 to \$1.5 million, and take up to 10 years to recoup.

These departing professors also may disproportionately represent important faculty populations, such as underrepresented minorities or women in the sciences, hurting faculty diversity efforts. Indeed, a [popular criticism](#) of such efforts is that they focus too much on recruitment efforts and too little on fostering a positive climate for those recruits, once hired.

KerryAnn O’Meara, professor of higher education at the University of Maryland at College Park, studies faculty departures and [co-coined](#) the heaven-and-hell concept. She also consulted COACHE on its new instrument, which asks questions about how long professors considered leaving their institutions, how contact was initiated between them and any new employer, whether any new offer included a start-up package, whether a counteroffer was made in how long a period of time, motivation for leaving, and partner employment status, among many others.

O’Meara said via email that the survey matters because colleges and universities make such big investments in their new faculty members, in start-up and search costs, and the time other faculty members lose in search efforts. (Mathews said this is a common complaint from administrators, including one provost who lamented that the time faculty members spend on ultimately unsuccessfully search committees could have been spent on research or improving their pedagogies.) Students lose advisers and faculty members lose those they’d hoped would be the future leaders of their departments, O’Meara added.

Additionally, she said, “Because faculty want to continue to have good professional relationships with their colleagues after their departure, they often leave much unsaid about the reasons they are leaving.”

Sometimes the answers are simple, and faculty members leave for reasons of family and geography, or higher-ranked institutions and higher salaries. However, O’Meara said, “my experience is that more often faculty leave for reasons of work environment. Even in cases where the reason is more salary and higher-ranked institution, faculty often would not have even looked or allowed themselves to be courted if there had been as many opportunities for mentoring, research collaborations and support as they had expected.”

Offering faculty members exit surveys that provide confidential accounts of all the reasons they left “can help institutions assess aspects of their work environment that could be improved and target resources there,” she said. “Institutions cannot change geography but they can attend to issues of support for academic parents, diversity climate and transparency.”

Carlson underscored this point, saying research suggests that faculty members’ reasons for leaving are much more varied than salary alone and, in many cases, “very much preventable.”

COACHE plans a roundtable discussion of its pilot California results (Mathews guessed that the pilot will yield several hundred responses, up to as many as 1,000) after which it will open up its new survey to other institutions willing to fund it. As patterns begin to emerge, deans, provosts and others can use the data to establish areas for improvement, inform the public and maintain “home field advantage” in retention efforts, Mathews said.

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