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FREE REPORT

Hiring for Success

Competing in a candidates' market

ASK ALMOST ANY hiring manager what their experience has been in filling positions during recent years, and they'll tell stories of dwindling applicant pools, underwhelming résumés, and a fast-paced "candidates' market" where they're forced to vie with private-sector employers and their peers for top talent.

Nearly 80 percent of college leaders, hiring managers, and administrators who responded to a survey *The Chronicle* conducted with the support of the Huron Consulting Group in June 2022 said their campus has more open positions this year than last, and 84 percent said that hiring for administrative and staff jobs has been more difficult in the last year.

Those positions are getting harder to fill, too: 82 percent of leaders agreed that they'd fielded fewer applications from qualified candidates. Said one person who took the survey: "The pools have been shallow and weak."

At the same time, competition has grown fierce. Many leaders and hiring managers report having to recruit qualified professionals away from another institution — or fending off similar efforts from other colleges. That's a position Aaron Basko, the associate vice president for enrollment management at the University of Lynchburg, found himself in. There's been, he says, "almost a complete rollover of our financial-aid staff" in the past two years. As he refills those positions, "if I want to hire people with financial-aid experience, the only place I can get them from is other institutions."

Jeanna M. Mastrodicasa, associate vice president for operations at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, has observed the same thing,

particularly for research-administration jobs. Other universities hired staff members away by allowing them to work fully remotely, eliminating the need to move for a new job or to commute, and offering higher salaries. It's not an offer that Mastrodicasa's team can match.

She doesn't blame the departing employees for accepting the deal. "I'm like, 'Well, you'd be crazy not to take that. Why wouldn't you?' I totally understand," she says. And she tips her cap to the institutions that woo them away. "I commend other universities for getting there first," she says. "That was pretty entrepreneurial."

In larger university systems, talented employees can be lured from inside the house, which can pit campuses against one another. That's happened to Mastrodicasa, too. Other colleges and units can offer higher salaries than her institute, she says, and are often enthusiastic about hiring employees who already have experience in the system.

By MEGAN ZAHNEIS

"If I don't get two headhunter emails a week, it's a slow week."

Even stiffer competition for qualified candidates has come from employers in industry, which in many cases are able to offer significantly higher salaries than academe can. While colleges are bound by state employment laws and taxation policies, and often don't have the bandwidth to employ workers who live in different states, national organizations are built to manage that payroll complexity.

Adding to the sense of competition for high-level jobs is the involvement of

Cover and inside illustrations by Anuj Shrestha for *The Chronicle*

executive search firms. Jeffrey A. Djerlek, the associate vice president for finance and controller at the University of West Florida, has an email folder with more than 380 messages trying to recruit him.

"If I don't get two headhunter emails a week," he says, "it's a slow week." Djerlek has gotten such messages in the past, but not at the pace he does now. And from conversations with colleagues, he knows he's not alone.

A scarcity of candidates is also affecting some searches for entry-level positions. In some fields, there isn't a ready pipeline of new graduates set to enter the work force, says Beth M. Laux, a veteran international-education administrator. "A lot of organizations either had people furloughed and weren't really filling positions, or a lot of universities had hiring freezes," Laux says. "We didn't necessarily recognize how shallow the pool was going to be until those types of restrictions lifted and we could begin filling positions again."

One scholar who studies the higher-ed work force has cast doubt on the perceived "shallowness" of job pools. The problem is not the candidates but a broken hiring system, writes Kevin R. McClure, an associate professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, in *EdSurge*. "Applicants for higher-education jobs are weighing the low pay, exhaustive list of qualifications, burdensome application requirements, novella-length responsibilities, and protracted search processes — all of which might not result in a job, or even a confirmation email," McClure writes. "And

we wonder why more people aren't applying."

Moving More Quickly

McClure's point isn't a new one to many hiring managers; many of the experts *The Chronicle* spoke to noted the need to re-examine higher ed's typically slow hiring process, which often hems in colleges when they try to land top talent on a deadline. A half-dozen respondents to the *Chronicle/Huron* survey used some form of the word "aggressive" to describe how their approach to hiring had changed in the past year.

The University of Central Florida has enlisted the help of a "talent-acquisition unit" within human resources to speed up the hiring process. That unit, which consists of about 10 people, identifies the most effective places to list a particular job, rather than leaving postings up to the department or unit doing the hiring, says Maureen Binder, associate vice president and chief human-resources officer. The unit also screens applications and presents finalist candidates to the department to make its decision. Relying on a trained hiring team to

coordinate the majority of the process, she says, allows Central Florida to extend offers to candidates much more quickly.

Other campuses are spending money to move searches along. In responses to the *Chronicle/Huron* survey, leaders described hiring extra recruiters, working more with temp agencies, paying for premium placement on job boards, and contracting with search firms for help with hard-to-fill jobs.

As a search-committee chair, Andrea D.



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Domingue, president of the American College Personnel Association and chief strategy officer at Davidson College, has restructured her first-round interviews, asking

candidates to log onto Zoom for 45 minutes instead of a half hour. Her team uses the extra time to ask more in-depth questions that might normally be saved for an in-person interview and uses applicants' answers "to filter who we saw a second time."

While Domingue's team still brings top candidates to campus, some colleagues have whittled down the number of invitees — perhaps hosting only the top two finalists instead of three or four. And some leaders in the *Chronicle*/Huron survey said they'd done away entirely with in-person interviews.

Those streamlining measures match what Domingue knows of hiring processes outside of higher ed. "We're the only ones to take forever and a day to do these long, almost hazing-like processes, all the interviews that were not good for anybody involved," Domingue says. "I am seeing that go away more and more, and I'm seeing a much faster, but also thorough, process to recruit people in ways I didn't see before."

One respondent to the *Chronicle*/Huron survey cited "mirroring corporate best practices" as the reason for a new hiring goal: going from posting a job to onboarding a new hire in no more than 30 days.

Some leaders have worked to circumvent the red tape that often surrounds hiring in academe, to the extent they can. That might mean making an offer to a candidate contingent on the results of a background check or, in a university system, giving individual campuses authority to preapprove higher salaries. Others have found more under-the-radar ways of granting flexibility. One *Chronicle*/Huron survey respondent described "bending the rules and not telling anyone that I did it. For example, extending extra vacation days and other work flexibility that HR would not otherwise approve."

The perceived stakes of hiring someone into a staff job should also be re-examined,



TAKEAWAYS

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Colleges are lowering minimum requirements for professional or educational experience, and using more holistic interview and screening processes to bring in candidates.

says Allison M. Vaillancourt, a vice president and senior consultant at the human-resources consulting firm Segal.

The prevailing wisdom, Vaillancourt explains, is, “Once we hire someone, we can never let them go.” It’s for that reason that managers often take their time in the hiring process to ensure they’ve found the perfect candidate. A hire that doesn’t work out is never ideal, she says, but it might be better than the alternative. “We’re so afraid of being stuck with someone for the rest of our lives that we sort of design unrealistically and take forever to hire,” Vaillancourt says. “I think if we felt a little safer that if things didn’t work out, we could make a different plan, people might be a bit more creative in their hiring choices.”

But there are still risks in moving too quickly, says Staci Sleight-Layman, the associate vice president for human resources at Central Washington University. “I would rather take time to sell people and get the right people that can contribute to who we are as an institution and to the type of student that we bring, rather than just pay top dollar to somebody who isn’t as committed as we might like,” she says. “We’ve thrown a lot of money at people that aren’t committed or leave pretty quickly or are attracted by the next shiny object.”

Tweaking Job Listings

Some campuses are tweaking the way they present and advertise job requirements; 24 percent of campus leaders in the *Chronicle*/Huron survey said they’d changed the content or presentation of their job ads in the past year.

“We don’t do a good job at this,” one survey respondent wrote. “There is no consistent messaging about why someone would want to work here. It is usually a posting with the major job responsibilities and that’s it.” In contrast, another respondent said their institution had begun including



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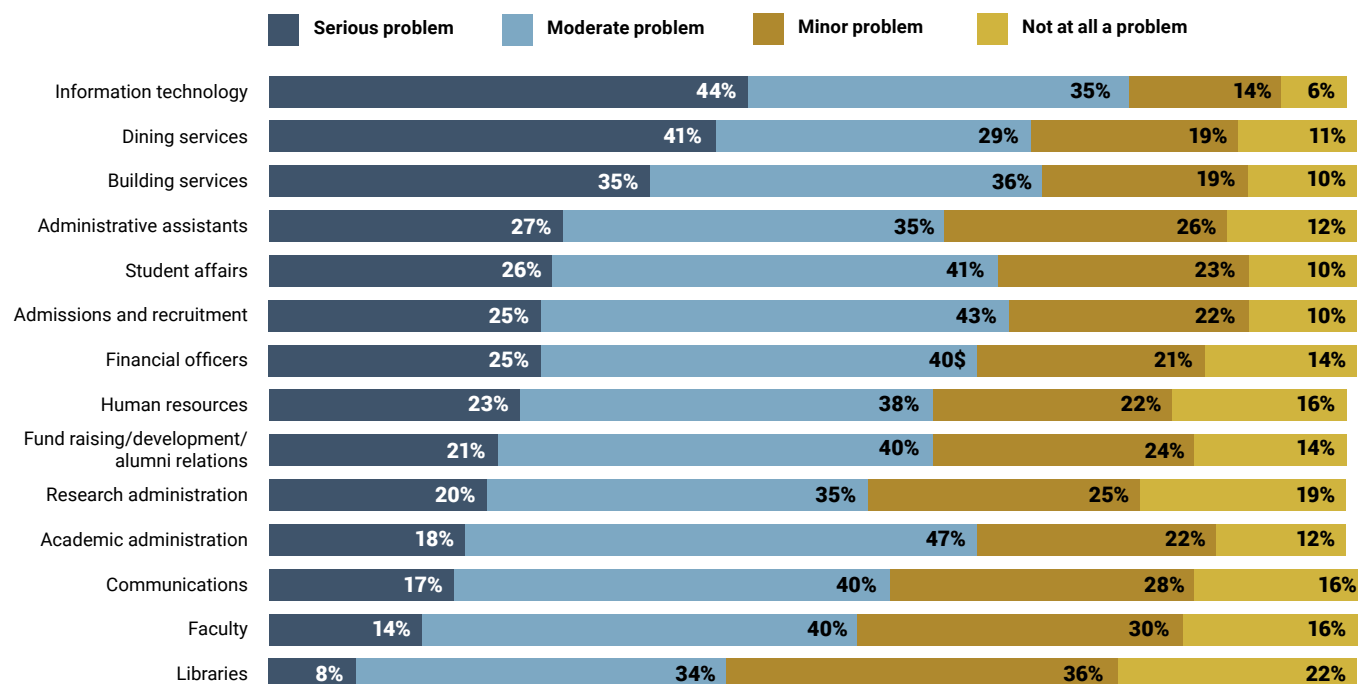
Jeanna M. Mastrodicasa, associate vice president for operations at the U. of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

in job descriptions purpose statements “that are intended to excite potential candidates for the work.”

Rather than rely on boilerplate job-posting language, some employers have tried customizing job descriptions to the department or division they’re for. That’s especially helpful at large institutions like the University of Arizona, which has over 400 units, says Helena Rodrigues, vice president and chief human-resources officer.

“When you are posting a position, how

In the last year, how problematic has it been to hire employees in the following areas?



Note: Percentages may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: *The Chronicle* and Huron Consulting Group

do you speak to the environment that that individual's going to encounter? What's unique about that department, what's something that has raised the profile of that unit that might be attractive to that person?" Rodrigues asks. In particular, she adds, it's helpful to mention any specific diversity and inclusion work that the department is doing.

Some leaders have also written job listings to promote the potential for flexible or remote work, if applicable, because such language draws applicants' attention.

At the University of Florida, Mastrodicasa has taken a hands-on approach to advertising open jobs at the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. She shares postings on her personal LinkedIn page

at least once a week, and when she thinks one needs an extra boost, she'll also share it on Twitter and Facebook. Having been at Florida for 25 years and served as an elected official, she says, her social-media feeds are an "interesting cross section" of the local community, and she hopes that helps expand the listings' reach.

Job fairs are another tried-and-true approach to bring in job candidates, but some institutions, like Washington State University, that are encountering a hiring crunch are hosting them for the first time, says Theresa L. Elliot-Cheslek, vice president and chief human-resource officer. That marks a shift from how the human-resources team used to view campus-community relations: "Not that we disregarded our local communities, but you didn't have

to put a lot of effort in,” Elliot-Cheslek says. “They came to us.”

In higher ed, job fairs or similar events might not yield immediate results, because colleges need to conduct background checks and other due diligence, she says. But job fairs can offer a different kind of visibility. “A lot of people don’t know we’re like a small city — we have accountants, we have custodians, we have maintenance workers,” Elliot-Cheslek says. “They think of professors. They don’t think of all of us that are important to the university.”

A strong message about an institution’s viability can also be a draw. Jaime L. Hunt, a veteran higher-ed marketing executive who began work in the fall 2022 semester as Old Dominion University’s vice president for university communications and chief marketing officer, hopes the long-term prospects of her new institution will help her attract a number of hires. “I’m hoping that people will say, ‘OK, this is a school on the rise. I feel very comfortable taking a position there and not worrying that I’m going to get laid off next year,’” Hunt says.

Considerations like those might be especially crucial for candidates applying, for example, to marketing positions as opposed to a job in the payroll office, Hunt says.

“You need to feel pretty comfortable that the product that you’re selling is a) good, and also b) something that the market wants, and that the thing that you’re ‘selling’ is economically viable,” Hunt says. “I know for me as a marketer, I want to work at an institution that I think is going to be thriving, not only because I can hopefully long-term have a job there, but also because it’s easier to do your job when it’s positioned well in the marketplace.”

Raising Pay

It’s no secret that higher-ed employees want to be paid more. Eighty-three percent

of respondents to the *Chronicle*/Huron survey said job candidates had increased their salary demands in the last year, and one wrote that their institution had “mostly thrown out our old salary minimums.”

The consulting firm Grant Thornton found in a 2022 survey of faculty and staff members that only 37 percent of higher-education employees say their pay allows them to live the lifestyle they choose, and the same percentage feel they’re paid fairly for the contributions they make to the institution’s success.

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University leaders have demonstrated a greater willingness to raise starting salaries than in the past, said experts *The Chronicle* spoke to, and signing bonuses have become a go-to at some campuses — especially where increasing base salaries might be less feasible. Washington State University, for instance, began offering hiring incentives for certain hard-to-fill jobs in June 2022 as part of a yearlong pilot. Those jobs include “location-based positions” in fields such as dining, maintenance, and custodial work, says Elliot-Cheslek, the chief human-resource officer. Jobs like those have proved harder to fill because Washington State’s flagship campus is located in rural Pullman.

Departments that would like to offer a signing bonus for a particular job submit a request to human resources. If approved, that department can offer a new hire up to

15 percent of the base salary — which is a state-mandated maximum — or \$10,000, whichever is lower, to be paid once the employee has worked at Washington State for six months.

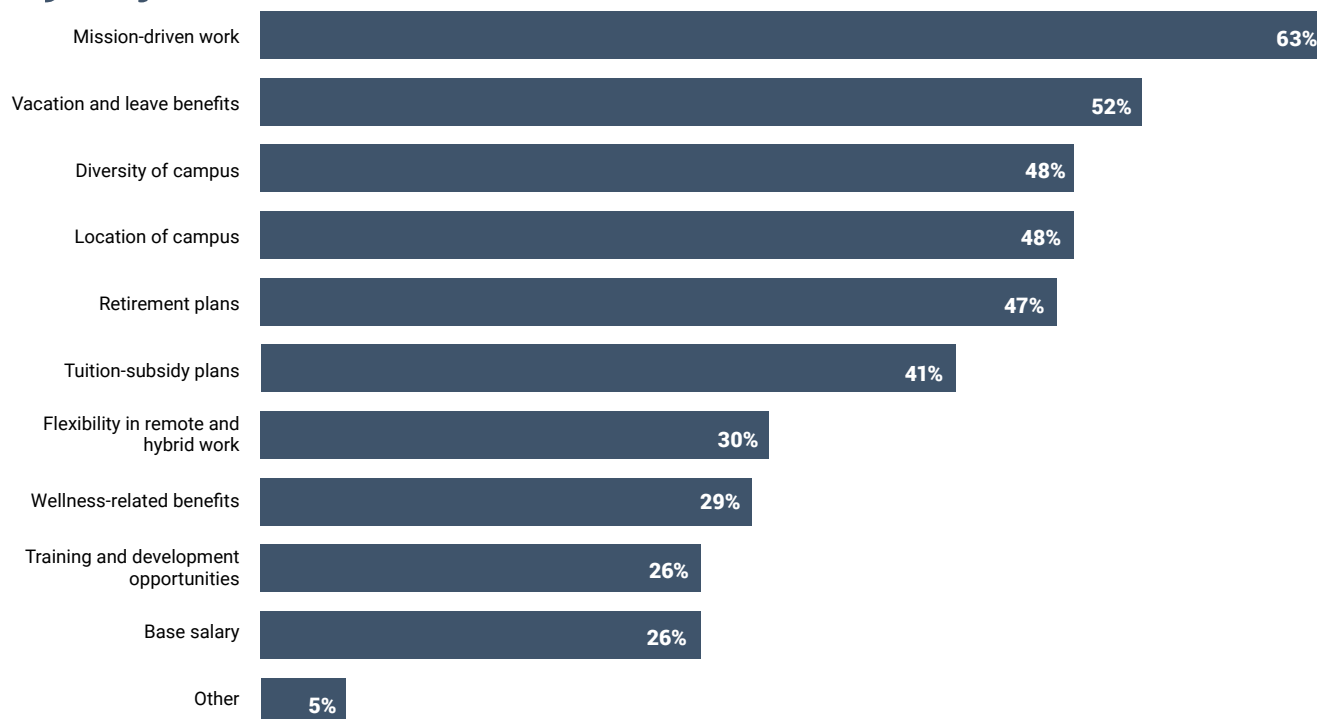
But the signing bonus has to be paid using existing department funds, which Elliot-Cheslek acknowledges comes with trade-offs. She says departments should consider whether they want to use their money to offer a signing bonus to new hires or to increase the salaries of current staff members in a bid to retain them.

In some cases, institutions have tried to turn the tight labor market and unfilled

jobs to their advantage. At Washington State, departments can devote unused payroll to the signing bonus, says Tony Howard, the senior associate vice president for human-resource services. “Whether that’s a long-term fix or not is a matter of some discussion,” he says.

Stetson University has tried a similar approach, says Jeremy DiGorio, the vice president for budget and human resources. Before the pandemic, Stetson averaged about 5 to 7 percent salary savings from “natural vacancies,” DiGorio says. In 2022, that figure doubled to between 12 and 13 percent savings because of the number

Which of the following perks/benefits do you emphasize in your job ads?



Note: Respondents could select all that apply.

Source: *The Chronicle* and Huron Consulting Group



MORGAN GIVENS, U. OF WEST FLORIDA

Jeffrey A. Djerlek (left), associate vice president for finance and controller at the U. of West Florida, speaks with Betsy Bowers, vice president for finance and administration.

of empty positions, which DiGorio says ranged between 70 and 80. “At some level, it does help the budget because we have additional resources that were not being spent,” DiGorio says, “but I don’t think it’s a healthy, long-term solution for our institutions.”

In public university systems, pay bands — the range of salaries established for certain roles — can also pose a problem. Those requirements are “pretty static based on guides at the state level, but they’re out of proportion to the local markets,” Djerlek, at the University of West Florida, says. As a result, employees working in major metropolitan areas with higher costs of living might be paid the same as colleagues in smaller, less expensive environments.

Some institutions have reclassified jobs

to help navigate the limitations of experience-based pay bands. One *Chronicle/Huron* survey respondent wrote that their institution had done so, reclassifying a director position at \$60,000 as an assistant director position at “about \$60,000.”

Increasing salaries for new employees has become a near-necessity for many colleges. But doing so increases the prospect of salary compression and raises equity concerns for existing staff members, says Lee Skallerup Bessette, assistant director for digital learning at Georgetown University. New employees might start at similar, if not higher, salaries than their peers with years of seniority and experience.

No matter what strategies institutions may use to attract new employees, they face another set of challenges: holding on to their new and existing staff members.

Human Resources Takes the Spotlight

ALLISON M. VAILLANCOURT knows the reputation human-resources offices in higher ed often have, especially these days. Hiring is harder than ever — campuses aren't getting sufficient candidate pools in many cases and often lose top applicants to other jobs — and her field is often the scapegoat.

"HR keeps getting blamed for not being good at recruitment, too slow," Vaillancourt, a senior consultant at the human-resources consulting firm Segal, says. For campus HR officers, it's "very frustrating, I think, to work really hard and to be blamed for things that are out of your control."

For one thing, Vaillancourt says, hiring managers often have unrealistic expectations. "They want someone who meets every single amazing criteria they can think of. That's not going to happen," she says. And when it doesn't, human resources is often blamed for bottlenecking the process.

Another strike against human-resources officers: On many campuses, they were tasked with being

the "pandemic police," granting or denying staff members exemptions from on-campus work and meting out discipline for breaking Covid-19 safety policies. Those

decisions often weren't welcome ones, but Vaillancourt says that in some cases, the human-resources officers handing down rulings were as unhappy with them as the staff members on the receiving end. They might have even been enforcing policies they knew weren't practicable. Vaillancourt says she's spoken to people on campuses where "the senior leaders made all the decisions about pandemic-related policy, and then they just handed it to HR to carry out. And then when HR would say, 'We don't think we can manage it the way you designed it,' their response was, 'Well, figure it out.'"

Covid-19 put human-resources officers in the spotlight in positive ways, too. Suddenly, they were being invited to meetings they never were before and being depended upon in a way that made them feel more valued. That increasingly strategic, visible role matches the one human resources departments have in the corporate sector, Vaillancourt says.

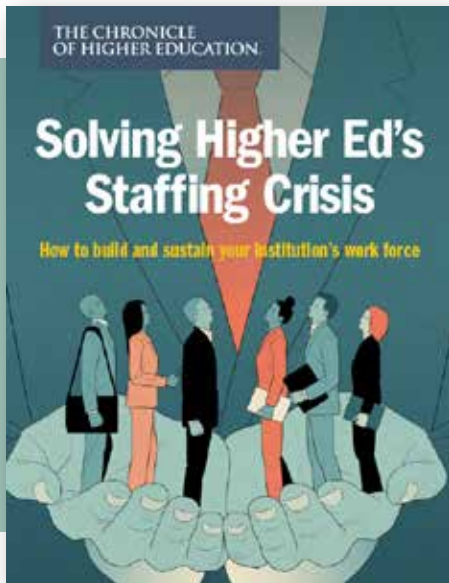
She hopes that HR's important role continues as higher ed moves out of the pandemic. "It's interesting that everybody's suddenly all worried about what it's going to take to get good people" amid a hiring crunch, she says, when "we should have always worried about that."

Indeed, she says, hiring leaders should still worry about landing quality talent, even if it seems like pandemic-era staff shortages have dissipated. Plenty of other forces are pushing against higher-ed hiring — declining birth rates and retiring baby boomers among them. "There are fewer people to do the work. There just are," Vaillancourt says. "That was going to happen, whether the pandemic happened or not, and nobody talks about that."



ECHO STARMAKER

Allison M. Vaillancourt, a senior consultant at the human-resources consulting firm Segal



“We’re the only ones to take forever and a day to do these long, almost hazing-like processes, all the interviews that were not good for anybody involved.”

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