

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



THE ACADEMIC WORKPLACE

By *Lindsay Ellis*

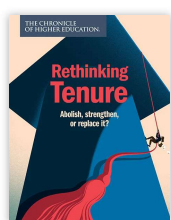
AUGUST 25, 2021

Talk to people who work in higher education right now, and you'll quickly find someone ready for a change.

There's the assistant director for student diversity at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas who is leaving his job this month, feeling unsupported by his supervisors. The career-services coordinator at Oklahoma State University who just wants to not feel guilty about using paid leave for mental-health days. The assistant director of sorority

and fraternity life at a private college in California who wanted to move closer to family in New York — and who promised herself she would resign by the fall even if she didn't have a new job. The associate dean of students at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin, who is pledging to stop checking email in the evenings. The tenured professor and department chair at the University of Northern Colorado who, fed up with the culture of “just gotta do more,” quit because she wanted to focus on being a parent.

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Employees' dedication to higher education's mission has fueled colleges for many years. Even before the pandemic, the work seeped into nights and weekends. Many staff members stayed in their jobs despite the heavy workload, low pay, and rare opportunities for advancement. Some saw their work as intrinsic to their identities. Benefits like health care, perceived stability, and reduced tuition also persuaded many workers to stay.

But the pandemic has caused many people to renegotiate this dynamic. *The Chronicle* interviewed nearly 60 current and former higher-education professionals this summer about how the pandemic and the approaching fall term have affected their attitudes about work. They expressed a desire for long-established dynamics that have governed the relationship between colleges and their employees to change in ways big and small.

Employees want better work-life balance. Others are exploring jobs outside of academe. Members of an aging leadership cohort are retiring. Some professors and staff members say they no longer trust university leaders to have their best interests at

heart, citing on-campus work requirements that feel dangerous with Delta's spike, or pointless after remote work has proved feasible. Some workers are angry at campus policies that, for nearly a year and a half, seemed to treat their health and well-being as secondary to institutional finances.

“People are fed up,” says Winni Paul, a management consultant whose clients have included campuses and higher-education groups. “The graciousness, the compassion, the ‘we do it for the students, we do it for the work’ — that’s gone.”

Many staff members were underpaid before the pandemic, Paul says. Furloughs and layoffs added to the stress for those left behind. Work-life balance, she added, which was already precarious, evaporated.

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Now some are carving out space for themselves. In early 2021, Jenny Connolly, an associate director of the office for professional distinction at the University of Northern Iowa, did what once would have been unthinkable for her — she booked a weeklong summer vacation. It was her first full week off, outside of maternity leave, in 13 years working in higher education. Before the pandemic, she would have worried about missing too much on campus. But then two people she knew well died after contracting Covid-19. “The pandemic has taught everyone — life is really fragile,” says Connolly. She needed to make time for life outside of work.

In July she climbed into a 15-seat van with her husband, her four kids, and her parents, driving away from Northern Iowa. Finally, after hours of I Spy and Brain Quest, they arrived at Tybee Island, on the coast of Georgia.

Connolly watched as her children, for the first time, stepped into the ocean. It was a Monday, and they were more than 1,000 miles from campus, playing in water that touched the whole world.

Many Americans are reappraising their priorities during the pandemic and coming to one conclusion: We work way too much.

Experts across the country have warned for months about a “great resignation.” A survey by Microsoft found that more than 40 percent of employees are considering leaving their current employer this year. Younger workers appear to be especially interested in a change — two-thirds of U.S. employees [surveyed by the Harris Poll and Personal Capital](#), a wealth-management company, said they would be interested in switching jobs now, while 78 percent of millennial employees said they would be.

Ready for a Job Change

Two-thirds of Americans are interested in switching jobs right now, with younger generations the most committed to doing so.

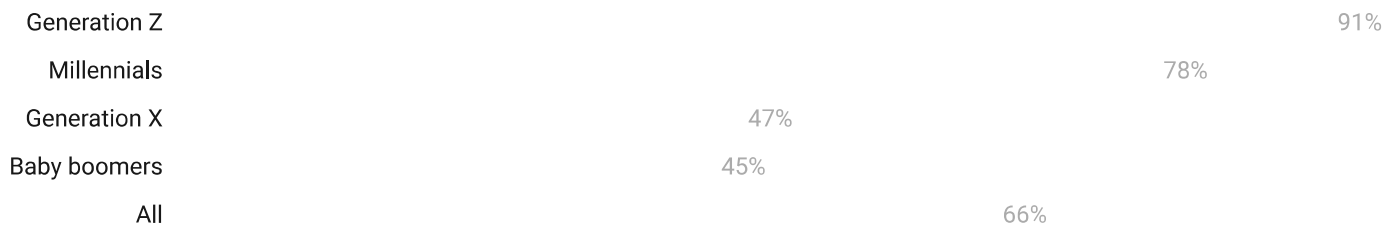


Chart: Audrey Williams June • Source: Personal Capital/the Harris Poll, August 2021 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

School and day-care closures have kept many people, especially women, from working full time. A “significant number” of people have retired, said Jerome M. Powell, the Federal Reserve chair, [in June](#), adding that employees are still concerned about contracting Covid-19 in public-facing jobs. One in three workers [surveyed in March](#) by Prudential and Morning Consult, a market-research company, said they would not want to work for an employer that requires full-time, on-site work.

College employees are similarly re-evaluating how work fits into their lives — a striking development for a field that thinks of itself as a calling and has long been seen

as a stable employer with solid benefits.

Some are [leaving the field](#) or not taking vacant positions. Others, says Kevin McClure, an associate professor of higher education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, are moving between institutions. For supervisors, “that in and of itself is the same problem” as people leaving the field altogether, because it’s still turnover, he says.

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The Registry, a placement company for temporary college leadership, has filled more than 235 positions this year, already breaking an annual record. After widespread layoffs and furloughs, members of the National Association of College & University Food Services are trying to fill positions in a tight labor market, using incentives like signing bonuses and, for students, early move-in.

Many people in non-student-facing administrative roles told *The Chronicle* that the sense of mission that they felt has faded. “There’s a part of me that just wants to pursue money,” says Joel Luther, an associate in research at Duke University’s public-

policy school. “After so many years working at a university, I’m not rich. And there’s a part of me that’s like, I could give the corporate world a shot for a year or two and make some cash. I do feel like what I do has merit and purpose, and has potential to really, truly benefit society as a whole. That said, maybe I’m ready to give up on purpose.”

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Time will tell whether this openness to changing jobs will result in a mass exodus from higher education. Despite fears of a widespread depletion of the elementary- and secondary-school work force, for example, just 6 percent of teachers and principals retired or resigned at the end of the 2020-21 school year — attrition rates that were said to be on par with those from before the pandemic, [according to the RAND Corporation](#).

But some workers who have switched over to the corporate world are glad they left. In 2017, Jaimie Hoffman started working at Noodle, a private company that does online-program management, after 15 years in on-campus roles. She has seen how, during the pandemic, workers in higher education can be treated very differently from those in the private sector. Employees at Noodle, for example, can block off family time on their work calendars, and the company has given employees every other Friday off during the pandemic.

In the spring, Hoffman helped start a [podcast](#) about the transition out of education — and now she hears frequently from people wanting to make that shift. The pandemic has exposed a gap between what employees need from colleges and what campuses provide. For many years, she realized, staff members, especially those in student services, felt they weren’t able to take care of their mental health. When universities

brought them back to campus during the pandemic, it jeopardized their physical health, too.

The reopening of campuses this fall has highlighted the risk of being exposed to the coronavirus for many employees, particularly those in public-facing jobs. It has also frayed faith in their employers.

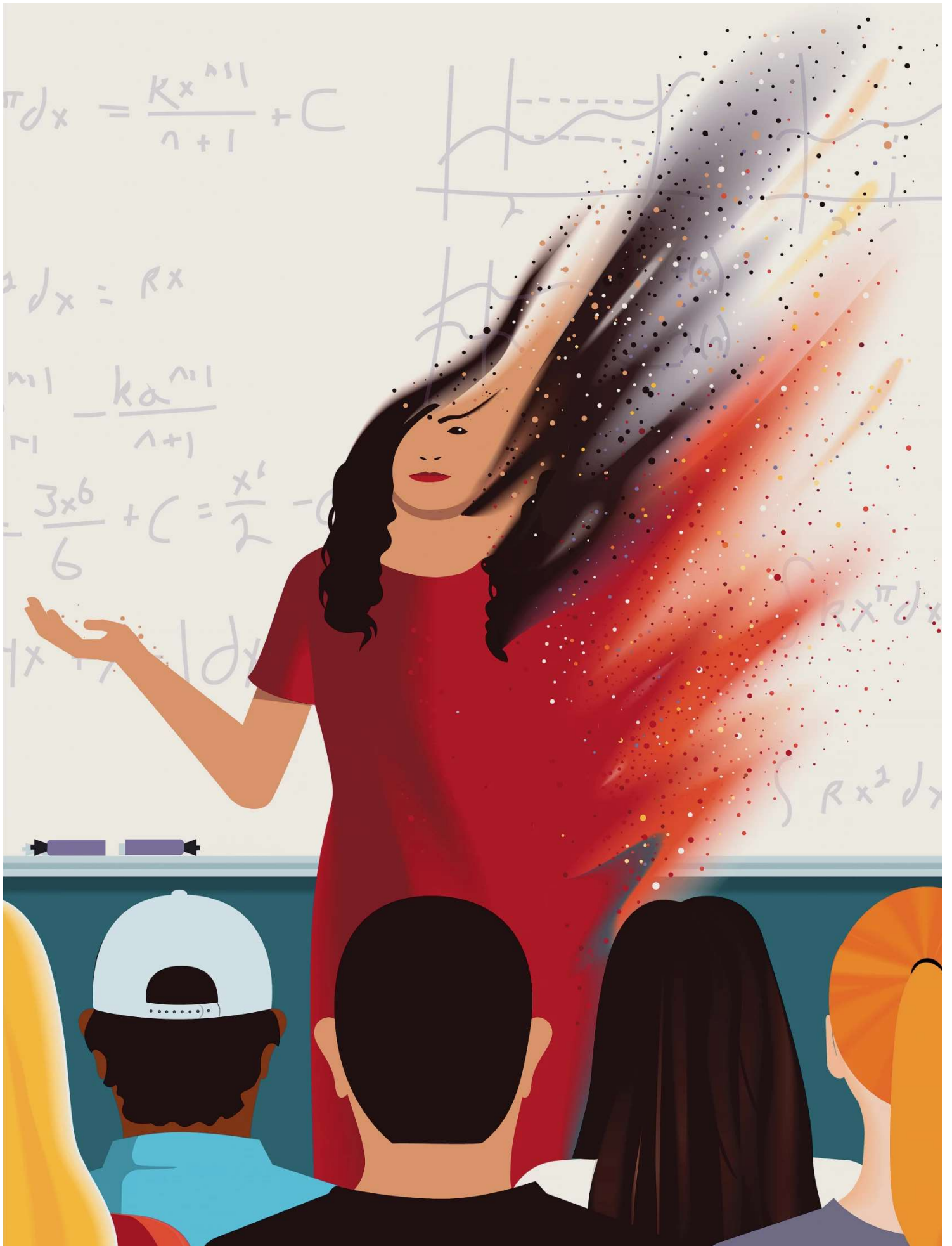
[More than 550 staff](#) members at the University of Southern California wrote a letter to the institution's leadership this month expressing "grave concerns" about a plan for many of the staff to return to on-campus work five days a week. (Administrators, in a [response to signatories](#), said that if safety protocols are followed, "we will be safer on campus than we would be at the grocery store, in the gym, or at any indoor social gathering.") The faculty of Spelman College [decided as one](#) this month to refrain from face-to-face teaching because of safety concerns. Faculty members [have since returned](#) to in-person instruction.

"It's a matter of time before a lot of people come down with this," says Cory Pollard, a custodian at the University of Kentucky. Though his concerns about the virus initially faded after getting vaccinated, the rise of the highly contagious Delta variant worries him.

To be sure, though case counts are very high, the state of the pandemic is different than it was a year ago. Vaccinations are widely available for people over 12 years old, and those who are fully vaccinated are at less risk of severe illness and death. But even at institutions that are taking public-health precautions, workers still feel anxious, especially if they are immunocompromised or live with vulnerable populations or young children.

Edward Green, a resident director at Miami University, in Ohio, felt apprehensive as he prepared to train hundreds of students at an event this summer. Masks would be

required, but would that be enough? It was just the latest health consideration he had to make in his first full-time higher-education job.



Last year, floors in the dorm where he and his partner live reached a “purple” designation, indicating a likely Covid-19 cluster, and he didn’t see his family for long stretches. “We were deeply concerned with bringing Covid back,” he says. Now, he is gearing up to make similar calculations about travel, wondering whether he will need to wall himself off again.

Many colleges are seeking to return to some semblance of normal campus life this fall. This dynamic has put some workers in a bind, especially those with vulnerable family members.

Stephanie Shepherd, an assistant professor of geosciences at Auburn University, has a child with a genetic condition that causes seizures and requires 24/7 care. Her daughter wheezes all the time on a good day.

Last year, Shepherd worked on campus, but with fewer students there. This year, the campus will be more densely populated — and Shepherd doesn’t know whether new students will have gotten the vaccine. She is now teaching three classes in person, and she showed her students a photo of her family as she explained why she asked the class to wear a mask.

Shepherd says she doesn’t have the energy to feel angry that so many people are moving on. “I’m not willing to either quit my job or take a leave of absence in order to fully quarantine my family,” she says. Instead, she is cutting back on attending nonessential functions, like a faculty meet-and-greet.

Colleges are operating with fuller density this semester, but in many places, they cannot employ the mitigation tools they relied on last year. Several states have banned colleges and schools from requiring vaccines or masks.

At [Texas Tech University](#), for example, “concerns about large class capacities and closer social distancing should be addressed by encouraging (but not requiring) wearing face coverings.” The University of Idaho president [wrote to campus](#) that the institution wasn’t allowed to require vaccines or to ask about students’ vaccination status. “Therefore, it is up to us as individuals to do what is right for our fellow Vandals.”

South Carolina’s response to the pandemic was one of the factors that sped up the retirement of Jeri O. Cabot, the former dean of students and associate vice president for student affairs at the College of Charleston. Gov. Henry McMaster signed an [executive order in May](#) that forbade state agencies from requiring so-called “vaccine passports.”

“Being in one of these red states,” Cabot says, “that makes it more difficult. It can be demoralizing, and the uncertainty is exhausting.”

Colleges across the country incentivized early retirement to cut down on costs during the pandemic. Cabot accepted a voluntary-separation agreement at the end of 2020, a few months before her planned retirement. She had determined that, if she didn’t accept the separation agreement, she would have to work longer to match the “respectable amount of money” it offered. She had never seen a deal like that in more than 30 years at Charleston. “It’s a now-or-never kind of proposition,” she says.

Reasons for Calling It Quits

Low pay and high stress are the top reasons for changing careers, according to a recent survey of student-affairs professionals.

What factors do you think contribute to student-affairs professionals leaving the field?

Salaries and/or compensation packages are not competitive for experience and education required	88%
Level of stress and crisis-management responsiveness required for the role lead to burnout	84%
Feel underappreciated/undervalued by the institution	81%
Salaries and/or compensation are not aligned with functions/duties	70%
Amount of hidden responsibilities that are not transparent in job descriptions or communicated up front	68%
Unhappy with long days and weekends	54%
Inadequate institutional support for addressing racism and racial inequities	53%
Conflicts between personal values and values espoused and observed by an institution	51%
The student-affairs field does not meet new professionals' expectations	32%
None of the above	0.4%

Note: Respondents could choose more than one answer.

Table: Audrey Williams June • Source: Naspa: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education data, collected in June 2021 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

For many people, jobs in student affairs have long been unsustainable — but the pandemic highlighted their worst qualities.

Donald D. Gilliam started working in higher education because he loved being a mentor. After he graduated from the University of Missouri in 2012, he counseled high-school students about applying to college and understanding financial aid. Then, he planned a future in student affairs, where he started working full time in 2017 after earning a master's degree in education. He liked focusing on students' whole lives and experiences outside of academics.

His duties included running the Mizzou Black Men's Initiative and serving as a student-support specialist for the university's Black culture center. Soon, though, the

realities of the role became clear. He didn't feel that his pay reflected his expertise. Before the pandemic, one of his students died suddenly. He was devastated and realized he had become extremely emotionally invested in his students.

The workload kept increasing. He helped plan a major conference in 2019, and then, in November 2020, he was named interim coordinator of the multicultural center. And he had no idea where his career would go from there. He felt there was little room for advancement. "I don't use the term glass ceiling," he says. "It's a cinder block."

Churn in student affairs predated the pandemic. Researchers who study employees' experiences in the field point to overwork and few opportunities for advancement as structural challenges that cause staff members to leave. There's a telling phrase in many job descriptions that seems straightforward but often leads to an ever-expanding set of responsibilities: "Other duties as assigned."

Positions in career counseling, residence life, and student activities demand long hours, but, [according to data from CUPA-HR](#), pay only about \$50,000 annually. Accepting a job often means moving to new places, often away from family. The work demands that many staff members soothe students in crisis without training in social work or counseling.

Former staff members told *The Chronicle* that they remember the places they broke down in the months before quitting. For a former academic adviser at a Midwest community college, it was in her car. On a typical day, she met with eight students, some of whom treated her as a therapist. Parked in the driveway at home after work, she would cry before walking in the front door. For the former director of student activities at Curry College, it was a hotel in Sri Lanka, on one of the last nights of her honeymoon. A text message had reminded her of her supervisor, and the stress of returning to work was overwhelming. A former assistant director of student involvement at Berea College found himself shaking after work. Being on campus

through most of the pandemic brought sharp anxiety — about getting sick and meeting his department's expectations.

Burnout exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as the sheer number of other employment options, are pushing student-affairs professionals to consider other jobs, says Kevin Kruger, president of Naspa, the student-affairs administrators' group. Many former campus employees are starting their own businesses or consulting firms, or going to work at education-technology companies, he says. In June, the association found that barely half of new professionals surveyed said they plan to continue working in the student affairs profession for the next five years.

The pandemic made Gilliam realize that he wanted to be closer to his family, in Chicago. After the murder of George Floyd, he supported students but felt his own needs were overlooked. And then, in the spring, his team heard the department was restructuring. Gilliam couldn't figure out what his reimagined role would be, and he learned that he'd have to reapply for his job to stay employed. Over the summer, he decided he didn't want to.

Now, Gilliam is applying mostly for corporate jobs focused on diversity and inclusion, and he compares the experience of finding a workplace with a new culture to going through a painful breakup. "I wouldn't want to separate with my partner and rebound with someone that reminds me very much of the person I was with."

Employees — especially those who are student facing — are becoming disenchanted and burning out [just when they'll be needed most](#).

Isolation was difficult for many students. They were less physically active, slept less, used their phones more, and saw increases in anxiety and depression, especially after the murder of Floyd, according to [research from Dartmouth College](#). Students told researchers from [Pennsylvania State University](#) that their motivation or focus suffered during the pandemic. Students who said they had Covid-19 were more likely to

experience anxiety, depression, and food needs, according to the [Hope Center](#) for College, Community, and Justice.

With Delta's surge, some professors and student-affairs staff have developed both in-person and virtual events for orientations and fall-semester activities, effectively doubling the work required. Because many first-year students were remote last year, rising sophomores and new freshmen will need basic guidance on how their campuses work. At several institutions, both of these classes have [dedicated fall programming](#).

Who will meet that need and execute these plans? Not only are existing higher-education employees exhausted, but campuses also have fewer of them. The campus labor force has lost a net 660,000 workers since the pandemic began, [through layoffs and voluntary departures](#). About one-third of those jobs were recovered through May, according to preliminary seasonally adjusted estimates from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Some people, too, have died.

“We won't know how many people we've lost until we feel it,” says Felecia Commodore, an assistant professor of higher education at Old Dominion University. “It's one thing to see those numbers and be home by yourself. It's another thing to come back into these shared spaces, and realize people are missing.”

Staff on campus are stumbling into the fall semester. A Columbia University librarian sees huge numbers of requests to scan book passages and believes that even hiring four more employees wouldn't make the workload manageable. The director of student rights and responsibilities and Title IX coordinator at Rochester Community and Technical College is exhausted after responding to students' needs in food and housing for more than a year. The school year has started, and the needs are as sharp as they were last year. “I feel like I've been running a marathon,” she said, “and I have asthma.”

But there is a sense of relief for those who have changed jobs, like eeman agrama minert, who spells her name all lowercase. She spent about 20 years in student affairs and residential life, and by the end, she felt unequipped to fully respond to students' needs. This year, she accepted a human-resources job.

Hybrid Work Is Likelier for Some

Higher-ed HR leaders believe that information technology, finance, and procurement departments will see the biggest increases in hybrid remote and workplace arrangements.

Minimal increase

Facilities

Academic advising

Modest increase

HR/legal

Advancement

Significant increase

IT

Finance

Procurement

Note: The 50 survey respondents were from institutions in the United States, Canada, and Britain.

Table: Audrey Williams June • Source: EAB, June 2021 • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

At first, she grappled with the optics — the stigma of leaving the field and of leaving a supervisory position. She had been an associate dean at the University of California at San Diego, and now she would be an associate recruiter.

The benefits, however, soon became clear. She signs off at the end of the day, with no fear of missing an emergency. Her new role has a specific and focused job description, and she can take time talking to prospective hires, getting to know them and their values. Her new department has grown in size in the six months since she joined the team, she said, a contrast to the flat staffing she saw in decades of student affairs.

She got off her blood-pressure medication. Now, she's exploring photography and life coaching as side businesses, and she enjoys talking to her middle-school-age son in the evenings without the distraction of email. "I get to decide," she says, "how busy I want to be."

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

THE WORK FORCE

FACULTY LIFE

STUDENT LIFE

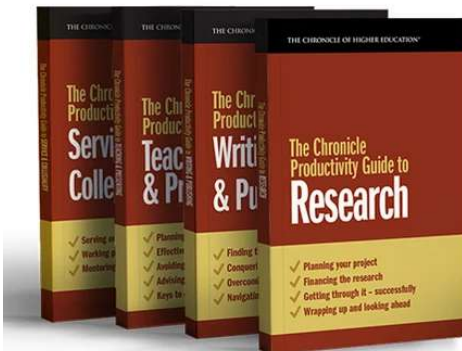
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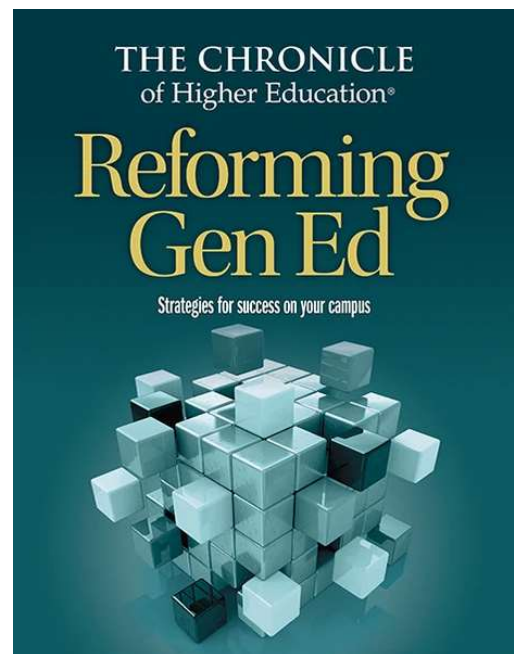
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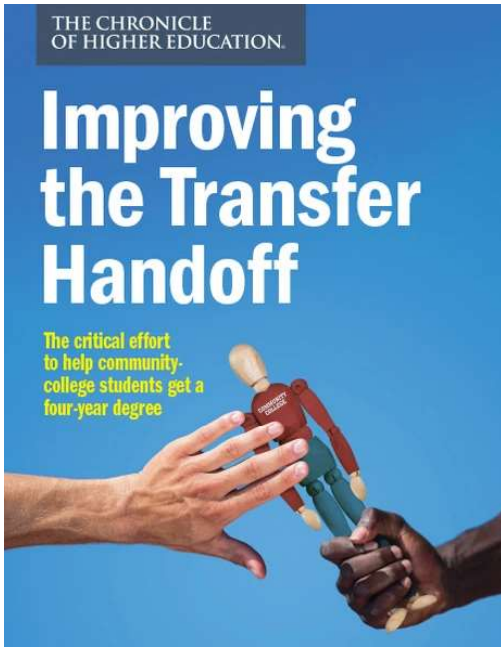
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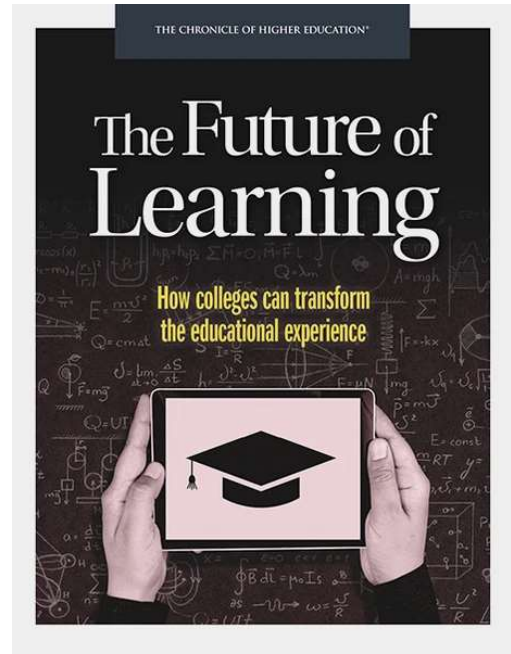
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