



# What do higher ed employees value most in a job?

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## Executive summary

Colleges and universities continue to face labor market difficulties, including employee retention challenges.

- 16% of full-time college and university employees pose a turnover risk (i.e., leaving their current institution) within the next two years. Among staff and professional employees, 19% are at risk of turnover. And 18% of those in administration and executive positions pose a turnover risk.
- 32% of those at risk of turnover think that working for their current institution is worse overall than working for most other colleges and universities, and 37% think it is worse than working for most organizations outside higher ed.

Colleges and universities seeking to reduce turnover require a clear understanding of what employees want and need in exchange for the work they do. This report identifies what higher ed employees value most in a job. More specifically, it examines how they prioritize a range of job features and employee benefits and how priorities vary across segments of the workforce.

There is a general lack of consensus among higher ed employees regarding the job features they value most. They tend to prioritize job features quite differently depending on their role and age. Salary and benefits are most often rated among the three most important features in a job, but only by 44% and 40% of higher ed employees, respectively. A greater share of staff compared to faculty and administration rate salary and benefits among the three job features most important to them. Salary is the most common top-three feature for those under age 40, whereas benefits is the most common for those age 60 and older.

While there is also a lack of consensus among the higher ed workforce regarding which employee benefits they value most, it's not to the same degree as with job features. Higher ed employees again prioritize specific employee benefits differently depending on their role and age. They most often rate a retirement savings plan (58%), health insurance (56%) and paid time off (47%) among the three benefits most important to them in a job. A retirement savings plan is the one benefit that more than 50% of faculty, staff and administration each rate among their top three most important. Health insurance is the most common top-three benefit for those under 40, while a retirement savings plan is the most common for those 60 years of age and older.

Higher ed employees posing a turnover risk within the next two years tend to prioritize job features and benefits differently than their peers who are not at risk. They more often rate salary and culture among their three most important job features—56% versus 42% for salary and 37% versus 24% for culture. They also more often rate health insurance (76% versus 52%), paid time off (61% versus 44%), and a retirement savings plan (67% versus 57%) among their three most important employee benefits. In addition, their dissatisfaction levels with each are higher compared to those not at risk of turnover.

The report also examines the extent to which specific job issues are problematic among higher ed employees. Staffing and resource shortages, stress and burnout, and lack of appreciation and recognition are problem areas among many college and university employees, and particularly for those at risk for turnover.



## Introduction

As with many sectors in the post-pandemic economy, higher ed continues to face a difficult retention environment. Median voluntary employee turnover among U.S. colleges and universities for all non-faculty employees was 13% between 2023 and 2024,<sup>1</sup> which remains above pre-pandemic levels. Beyond the costs of hiring and training new employees, turnover can significantly impact colleges and universities in ways that are difficult to measure, such as the loss of key talent, future leaders, departmental and interdepartmental rapport, and institutional knowledge.

Better understanding, and then responding to, what higher ed employees want and need in exchange for the work they do can make colleges and universities more competitive in the labor market. This report uses the 2024 *Higher Ed Workforce Survey* to provide insights for the higher ed workforce, including across occupation and life-stage segments.<sup>2</sup> The survey includes questions on employee prioritization of a range of job features and employee benefits, as well as questions covering intentions to leave their institution and problematic issues at work. Such knowledge enables colleges and universities to emphasize the tangible and intangible rewards and benefits they offer that align with employee priorities. The findings can also help higher ed leaders identify gaps in their employment offer and experience.



1 CUPA-HR [Workforce Surveys](#) (2018 through 2024).

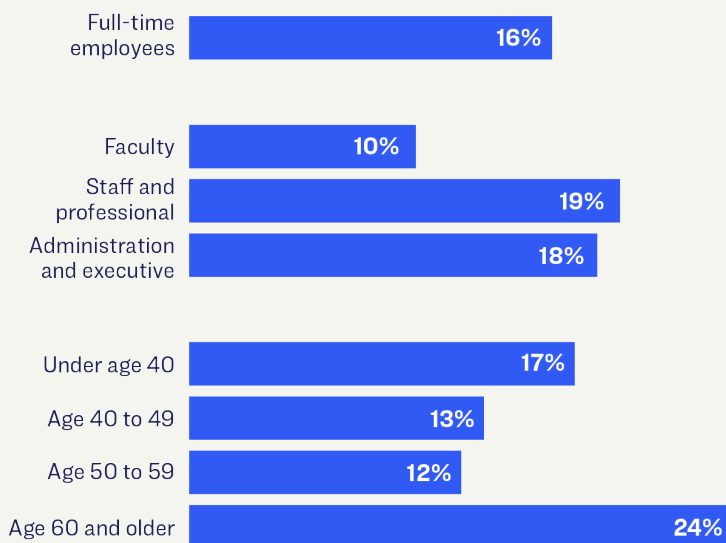
2 The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) and the TIAA Institute surveyed 1,210 individuals employed full time by a public or private nonprofit college or university online between February 16 and March 7, 2024. The sample, acquired through Dynata, an online panel provider, consisted of faculty (603), staff and professional employees (405), and administrators (202). Responses were weighted based on data from *Digest of Education Statistics: 2022* (February 2024), National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

## Turnover risk in higher ed

Sixteen percent of full-time college and university employees pose a turnover risk within the next two years—13% don't want to be working for their current employer two years from now and 11% think they will not be working for their current employer two years from now, with 8% in both groups. Turnover risk is greater among staff and professional employees and administrators compared to faculty (Figure 1). The same holds true for those age 60 and older compared with their younger peers, but this is driven by potential retirements in addition to job changes.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1. TURNOVER RISK AMONG THE HIGHER ED WORKFORCE**

% that pose a turnover risk within the next two years



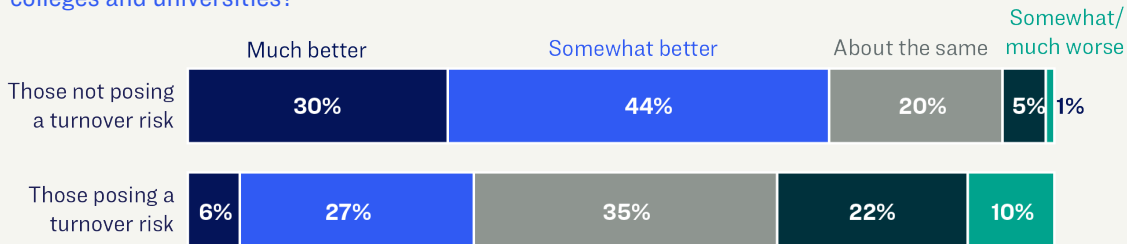
Source: *Higher Education Workforce Survey*, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

Not surprisingly, higher ed employees posing a turnover risk view their current institution less favorably than do their peers not at risk (Figure 2). One-third (32%) of employees at risk of turnover believe working for their current institution is worse than working for most other colleges and universities, and slightly more (37%) think it's worse than working at most organizations outside higher ed. The analogous figures among those not posing a turnover risk are 6% and 5%, respectively.

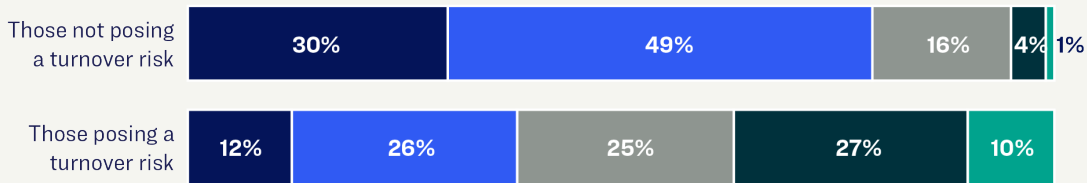
<sup>3</sup> Turnover risk is identical at 11% for those age 60 and older, age 50 to 59, and age 40 to 49 when the 4% of higher ed employees who expect to retire within the next two years are excluded from the calculations.

**FIGURE 2. HOW HIGHER ED EMPLOYMENT COMPARES**

How do you think working for your current employer compares overall with working for most other colleges and universities?



How do you think working for your current employer compares overall with working for most organizations outside of higher ed?



Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

## What employees value in a job

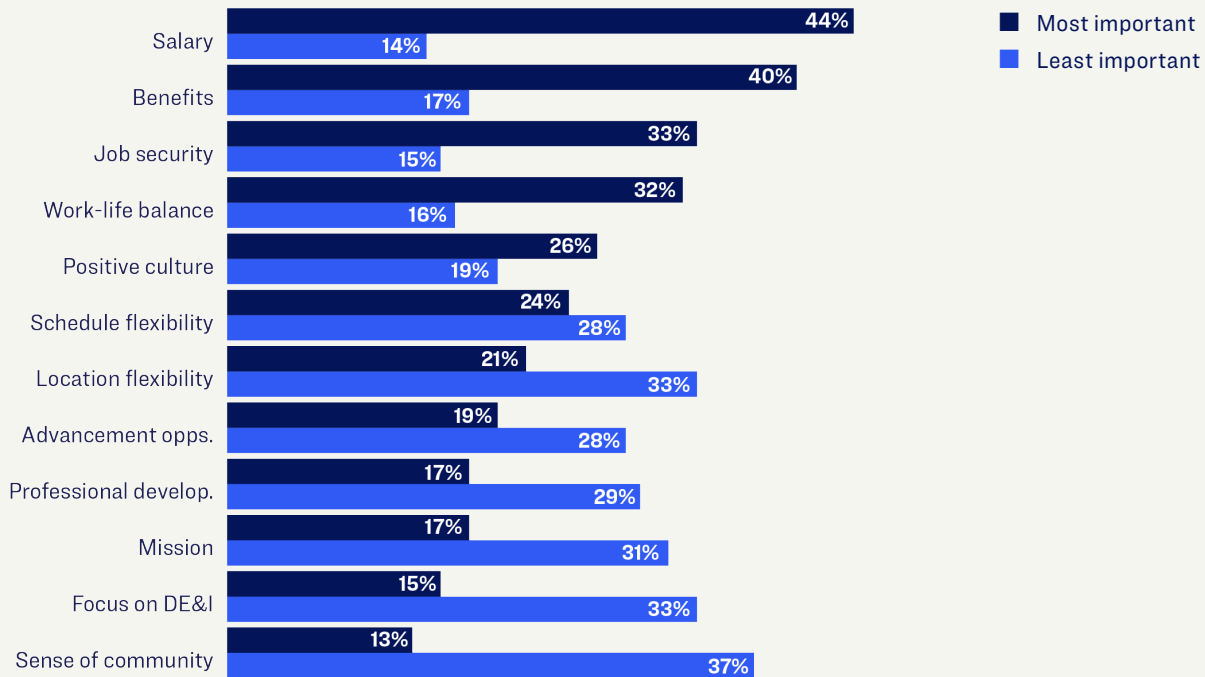
Which job features and employee benefits are most important to college and university employees, and how do these priorities vary across the workforce? Survey respondents were asked to consider 12 job features and identify the three that are most important to them in a job and the three that are least important. Likewise, they were asked to do the same with 11 specific employee benefits.

### Job features

There is limited consensus among higher ed employees regarding which job features they prioritize—no feature is rated among the three most important by a majority of employees (Figure 3). Salary and benefits are most often rated among the top three most important job features, but only by 44% and 40%, respectively. Job security and work-life balance are next in the rank ordering—each is rated among the three most important by one-third of higher ed employees.

**FIGURE 3. JOB FEATURES THAT MATTER MOST/THAT MATTER LEAST FOR HIGHER ED EMPLOYEES**

Which three job features are most important/least important to you in a job?



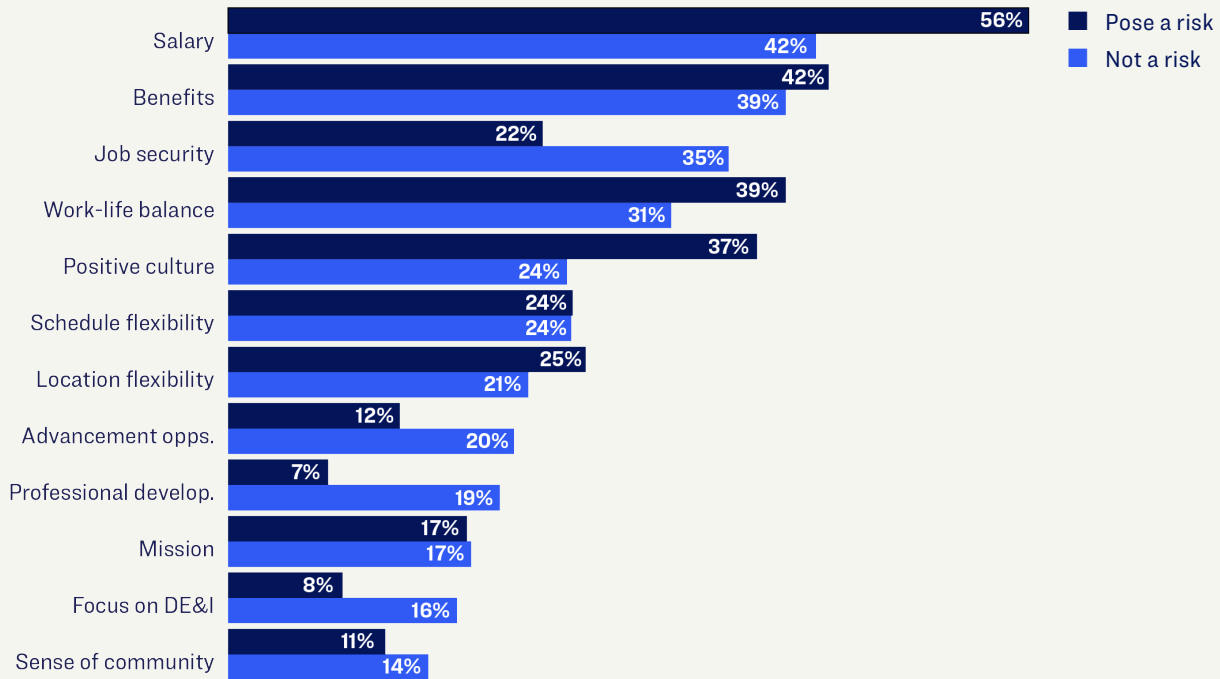
Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

This doesn't mean other features are unimportant to higher ed employees; they just rise to the top-three level less often. Note the analogous lack of consensus in the ratings of job features as the three least important—no feature is rated among the three least important by even 40% of higher ed employees.

There are noteworthy differences between those who pose a turnover risk within the next two years and those who do not (Figure 4). Those at risk of turnover are much more likely to rate salary among their three most important job features—56% versus 42%. The same holds with culture—37% compared with 24%. At the same time, job security is less often a top three most important feature among those posing a turnover risk.

**FIGURE 4. JOB FEATURES THAT MATTER MOST AMONG THOSE POSING/NOT POSING A TURNOVER RISK**

Which three job features are most important to you in a job?

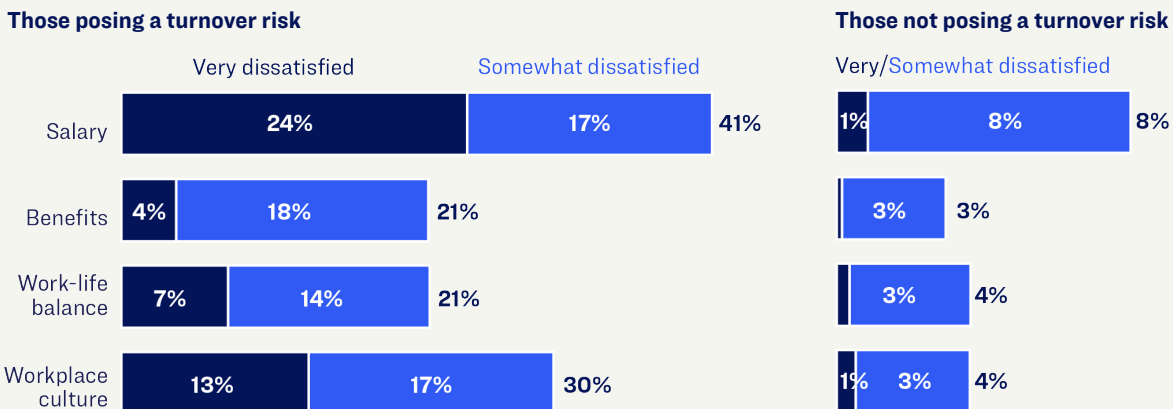


Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

Salary, benefits, work-life balance, and culture are the job features most often cited as one of the three most important by those posing a turnover risk; dissatisfaction levels with each are much higher compared to those not at risk of turnover (Figure 5). For example, 24% of those at risk of turnover are very dissatisfied with their salary compared with 1% of those not at risk.

**FIGURE 5. JOB FEATURE SATISFACTION**

To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with these job features at your current job?



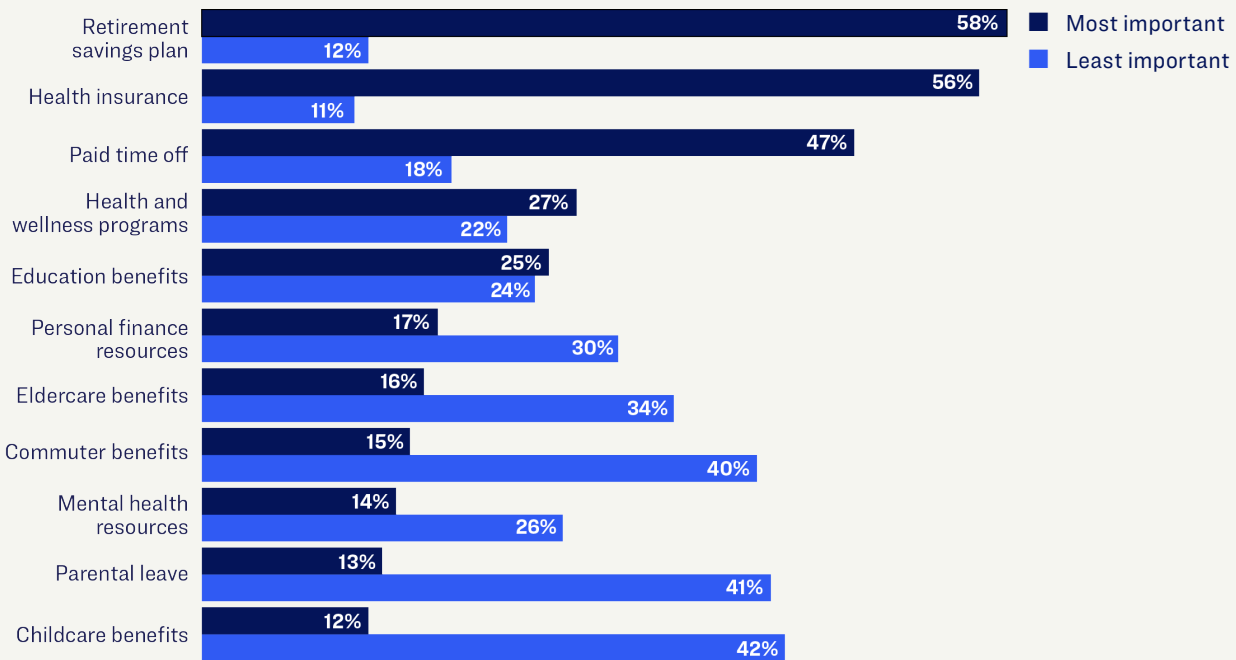
Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

### Employee benefits

While there are differences among the higher ed workforce regarding which employee benefits they value most, there is nonetheless more consensus around benefit priorities than job feature priorities. Higher ed employees most often rate a retirement savings plan (58%), health insurance (56%), and paid time off (PTO) (47%) among their three most important benefits in a job (Figure 6). Next in the rank ordering are health and wellness programs (27%) and education benefits (25%). Keep in mind this doesn't mean that these and other benefits are unimportant to higher ed employees, but rather that they rise to the top-three level less often.

**FIGURE 6. EMPLOYEE BENEFITS THAT MATTER MOST/THAT MATTER LEAST FOR HIGHER ED EMPLOYEES**

Which three employee benefits are most important/least important to you in a job?



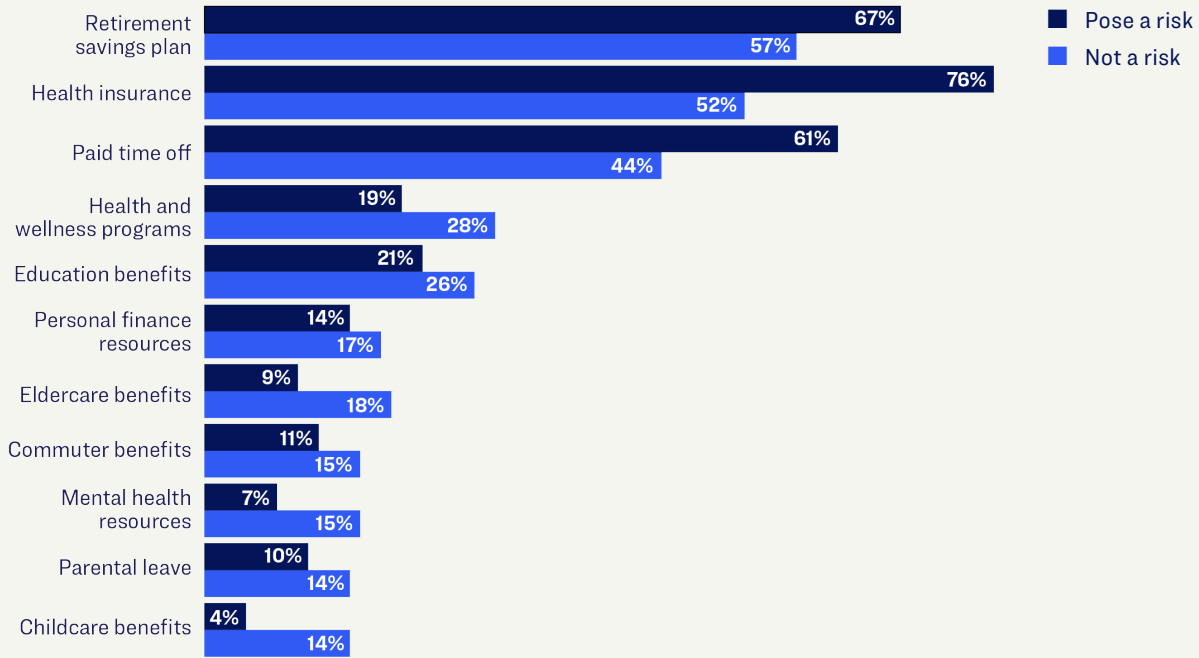
Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

There are again noteworthy differences between those who pose a turnover risk and those who do not (Figure 7). Those at risk of turnover are much more likely to rate health insurance among their three most important employee benefits—76% versus 52%. The same holds with PTO (61% compared with 44%) and a retirement savings plan (67% compared with 57%). The other eight benefits are more typically rated among the three most important by those not posing a turnover risk. In general, employees posing a turnover risk show greater consensus regarding the benefits they prioritize than employees not at risk.



**FIGURE 7. EMPLOYEE BENEFITS THAT MATTER MOST AMONG THOSE POSING/NOT POSING A TURNOVER RISK**

Which three employee benefits are most important to you in a job?

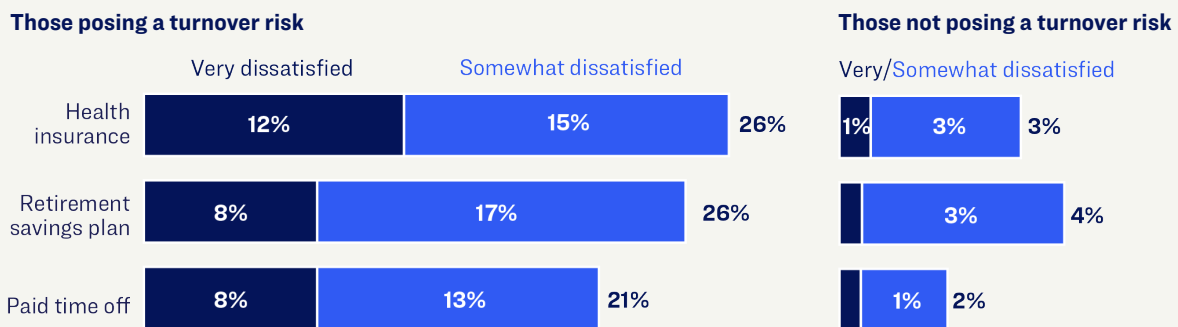


Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

Not only are a retirement savings plan, health insurance, and PTO more often one of the three most important benefits for those posing a turnover risk, but dissatisfaction with each is more common with turnover risk (Figure 8). At least 20% of those at risk of turnover are very or somewhat dissatisfied with these benefits compared to just a couple percent of those who aren't at risk.

**FIGURE 8. EMPLOYEE BENEFIT SATISFACTION**

To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with these employee benefits at your current job?



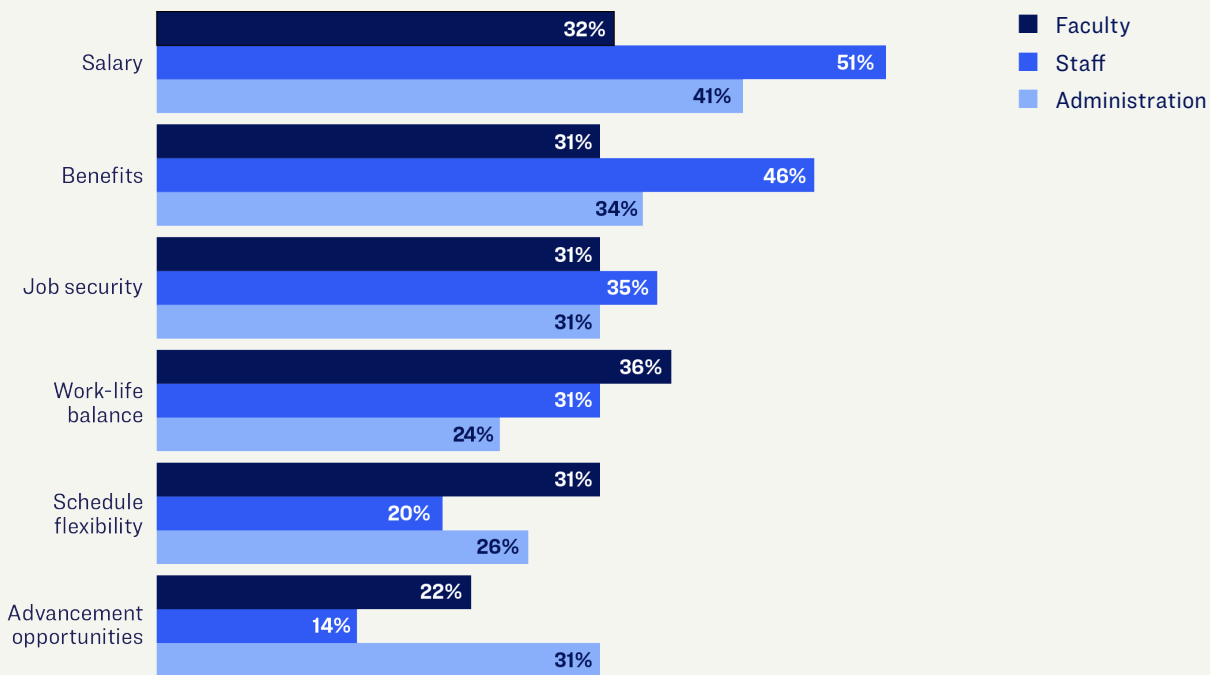
Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

### A look at faculty, staff, and administration

Figure 9 highlights differences in the prioritization of job features across faculty, staff and administration. Salary and benefits are the job features that staff and administration most often rate among their three most important, but staff are more likely to do so (the difference is about 10 percentage points for each). In comparison, there is little consensus among faculty regarding which job features they prioritize—36% rate work-life balance among their three most important while four other features are rated top-three by approximately 30% of faculty each. In contrast, only 24% of administration rate work-life balance in their three most important. More contrasts that are statistically significant—31% of faculty rate schedule flexibility in their three most important compared with 20% of staff, and 31% of administration rate advancement opportunities in their top three compared with 14% of staff. While not shown in Figure 9, mission and a diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) focus are other job features that differ in importance across occupations.

**FIGURE 9. JOB FEATURES THAT MATTER MOST FOR FACULTY, STAFF, AND ADMINISTRATION**

Which three job features are most important to you in a job?

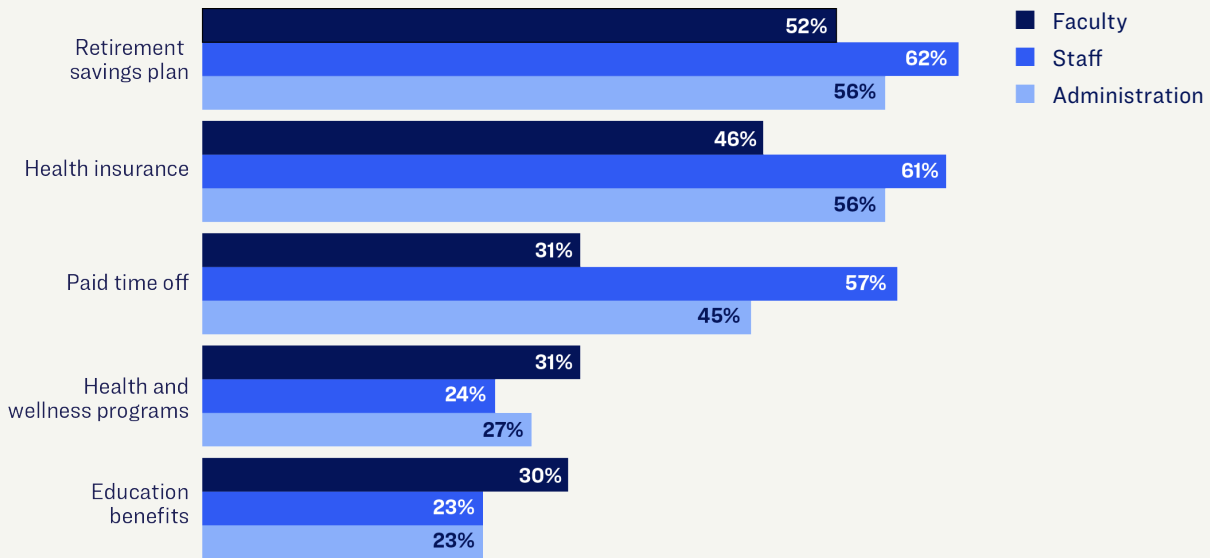


Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

Figure 10 shows how faculty, staff, and administration prioritize the five benefits most often rated among the three most important by higher ed employees. While the rank ordering based on how many rate each in their top three is generally the same, the percentages differ across occupations. The largest difference occurs with PTO—57% of staff compared with 31% of faculty. Staff also more often rate health insurance and a retirement savings plan in their top three. In contrast, faculty more often rate education benefits and health and wellness programs among their three most important compared to their peers. All other employee benefits also have statistically significant differences in relative importance across occupation groups.

**FIGURE 10. EMPLOYEE BENEFITS THAT MATTER MOST FOR FACULTY, STAFF, AND ADMINISTRATION**

Which three employee benefits are most important to you in a job?



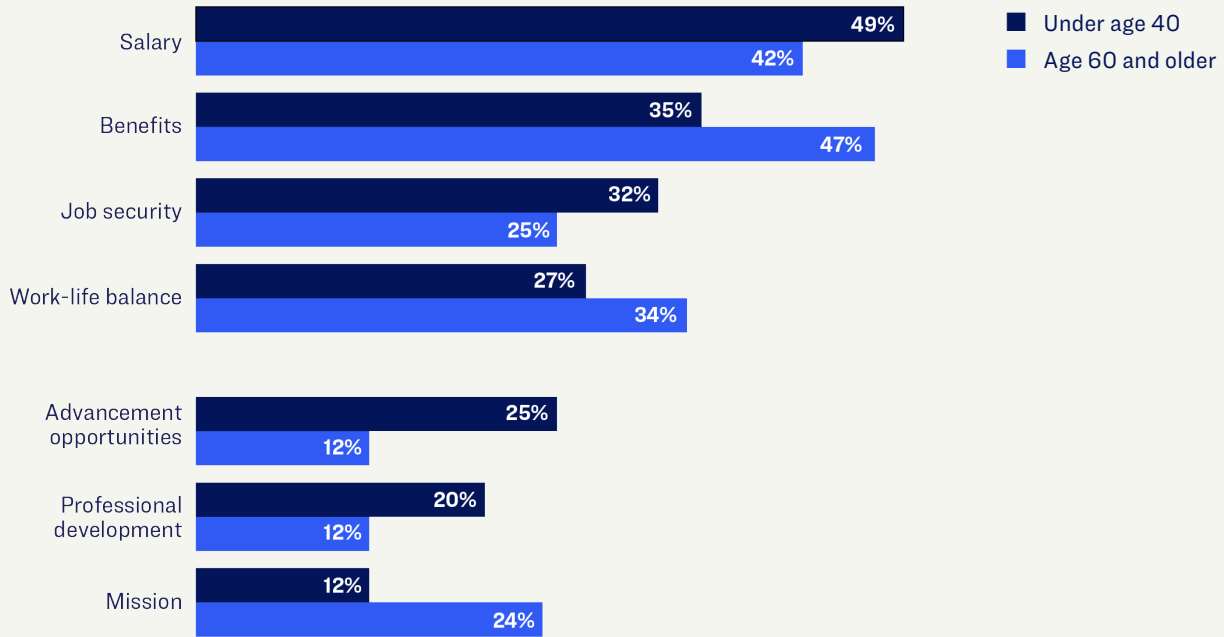
Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

**A look by life stage**

Figure 11 highlights how the prioritization of job features varies across life stages by focusing on employees under age 40 and age 60 and older. Salary and benefits are the job features that both groups most often rate among their top three most important, but there are differences here. Salary is the most common top-three feature for those under 40, while benefits is the most common for those 60-plus. In addition, the percentage rating benefits in their top three most important is significantly greater among those 60 and older. Other significant differences include: 25% of those under 40 rate advancement opportunities in their top three and 20% rate professional development in their top three, while the analogous figures among those 60-plus are both 12%. Those 60 and older are twice as likely to rate mission as one of the three job features most important to them.

**FIGURE 11. JOB FEATURES THAT MATTER MOST BY LIFE STAGE**

Which three job features are most important to you in a job?



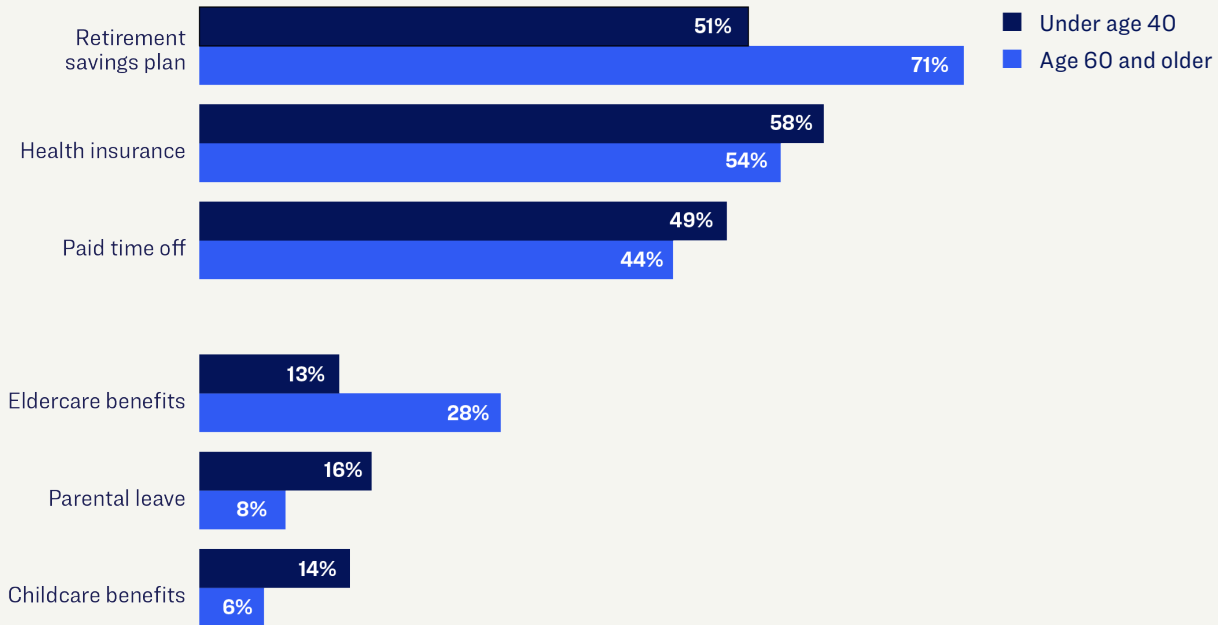
Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

Figure 12 shows how employees under age 40 and those age 60 and older prioritize a retirement savings plan, health insurance, and PTO, i.e., the three benefits most often rated among the three most important by higher ed employees. Health insurance is the most common top-three benefit for those under 40, while a retirement savings plan is the most common for those 60-plus. In addition, the percentage rating a retirement savings plan in their top three is significantly greater among those 60 and older compared to those under 40. Other significant differences—those 60-plus are twice as likely to rate eldercare benefits in their top three, while those under 40 are twice as likely to rate childcare benefits and parental leave as top-three benefits.



**FIGURE 12. EMPLOYEE BENEFITS THAT MATTER MOST BY LIFE STAGE**

Which three employee benefits are most important to you in a job?



Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

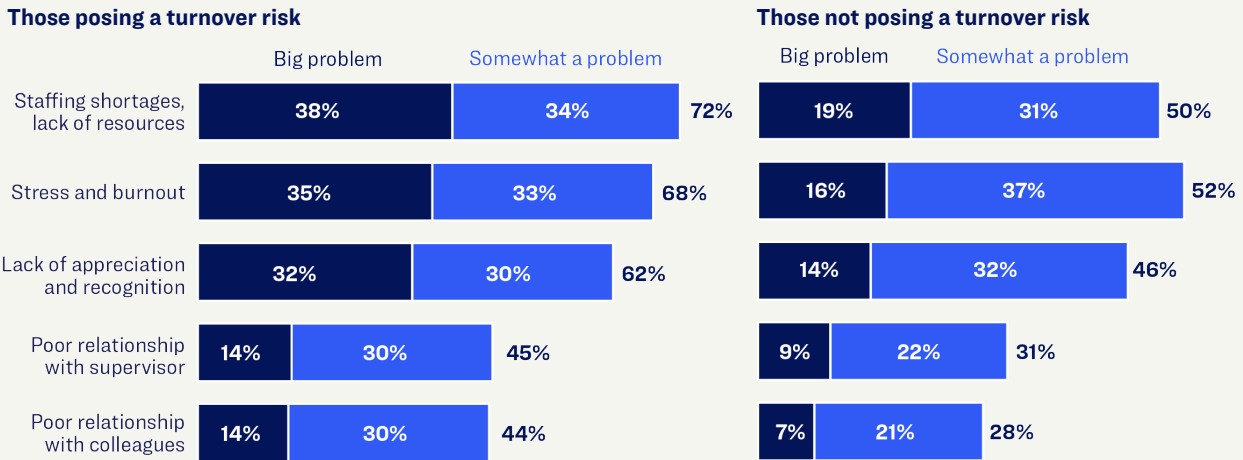
## Turnover triggers

Identifying gaps in the employee experience is valuable for retention efforts. Various job-related issues have ramifications for turnover in higher ed as well as other sectors. The *Higher Ed Workforce Survey* focused on five potential issues, with respondents reporting whether each was a problem for them at their current job (Figure 13).

Staffing and resource shortages, stress and burnout, and lack of appreciation and recognition are problem areas among many college and university employees, but particularly for those who pose a turnover risk within the next two years. Among those at risk, about 60% to 70% rate these issues as problems compared to approximately one-half of those not at risk. At least twice as many rate each as a big problem.

**FIGURE 13. PROBLEM ISSUES AT WORK**

Are any of the following problems for you at your current job?



Source: Higher Education Workforce Survey, CUPA-HR and TIAA Institute (2024).

## Discussion

Focusing on what higher ed employees want, need and expect in exchange for the work they do positions colleges and universities to effectively compete for talent in challenging labor markets. Institutions should clearly convey the mix of tangible and intangible rewards and benefits that make them a particularly attractive place to work.

There is limited consensus among the higher ed workforce regarding which job features they value most. Not surprisingly, salary and benefits are most often rated among the top three most important job features, but only by 44% and 40% of higher ed employees, respectively. The prioritization of employee benefits also lacks consensus, but not to the same degree. Higher ed employees most often rate a retirement savings plan (58%), health insurance (56%) and PTO (47%) among the three benefits most important to them in a job.

It's important to understand how priorities tend to vary across segments of the higher ed workforce—by occupation, by life-stage, and for those posing a turnover risk. An organization can't provide every employee with everything they want, but it can think in terms of providing every employee with things they value.

It's noteworthy that 37% of higher ed employees who pose a turnover risk within the next two years cite workplace culture among the three job features most important to them in a job compared with 24% of those not at risk. Those posing a turnover risk also more often rate salary among their three most important job features (56% versus 42%). Likewise, they more often rate health insurance, PTO, and a retirement savings plan among their top three most important employee benefits.

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Job feature prioritization varies more among faculty compared with staff and administration—36% rate work-life balance among the three features most important to them while four other items are rated top-three by approximately 30% each. In contrast, only 24% of administration rate work-balance among their three most important. One-third of administration rate advancement opportunities in their top three compared with just 14% of staff. Staff more often rate salary (51%) and benefits (46%) among their three most important job features compared to faculty and administration.

Younger employees (under age 40) more often than older employees (age 60 and older) rate advancement opportunities and professional development as one of their top three most important job features. Older employees are twice as likely to rate mission as a top three most important job feature. Older employees more often rate a retirement savings plan among the three employee benefits most important to them (71% versus 51%). Not surprisingly, those 60-plus are twice as likely to rate eldercare benefits as one of their top three most important benefits, while those under 40 are twice as likely to rate parental leave and childcare benefits among their top three.

## About the authors

**Paul Yakoboski** is a senior economist with the TIAA Institute, where his research focuses on lifetime financial security, including issues related to financial literacy, longevity literacy, retirement saving and investing, and asset management during retirement. In addition, he researches workforce issues in the higher education and healthcare sectors. Prior to joining the TIAA Institute, Yakoboski held positions with the American Council of Life Insurers, the Employee Benefit Research Institute, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Yakoboski earned a PhD and MA in economics from the University of Rochester and a BS in economics from Virginia Tech.

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