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# Faculty Departure and Retention at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

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# Faculty Departure and Retention at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

by Patrick D. Reynolds

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Faculty departures can be disruptive to higher education institutions, causing interruptions to teaching and institutional governance. Departures can also have a deleterious effect on departmental morale. At liberal arts colleges, where a single faculty member can have an outsized impact on a small community, personnel changes have the potential to be even more significant. Yet faculty departures from liberal arts colleges are little studied compared to those from larger institutions.

I spoke to chief academic officers (CAOs) of 22 liberal arts colleges about the reasons for faculty departures and the challenges leaders face with regard to faculty turnover. I then asked them about their responses in policy or practice to these challenges.

Seven distinct reasons for faculty departures emerged from these conversations:

1. partner employment
2. career path changes
3. faculty of color retention
4. departmental work environment
5. social environment for single faculty members
6. proximity to extended family
7. superior offers from similar institutions

Partner employment issues dominated conversations with deans and provosts about the causes of faculty departure at liberal arts colleges. Partner employment issues were the most common reason or the only recurring reason for departure at many colleges. Unlike faculty career path changes, which CAOs generally believed they should not

or could not discourage, many academic leaders shared their perennial struggle to find partner employment and other factors as potentially solvable. However, their efforts to discuss “trailing” partner hires with other departments, even to identify grant-funded or temporary positions for partners, met with limited success.

This study’s CAOs were particularly concerned by departures of faculty of color. In their view, many faculty of color depart for similar reasons as white faculty, including career shifts and partner employment needs. But they also recognized that faculty of color also left due to a lack of community. Several CAOs employed strategies, including targeted survey questions and exit interviews conducted by the chief diversity officer, to attempt to more fully understand these departures.

Reasons for faculty departure can be systemic to the college – interviewees mentioned job structure issues, partner employment challenges, or social environment – or infrequent and less predictable. Multivariate reasons for departure require varied responses, and I found those responses fall into three categories: understanding, systemic retention, and individual negotiation.

*Understanding:* CAOs labeled several promising approaches for understanding faculty departures, including climate surveys that explore the degree to which faculty members consider factors associated with departure; the creation of a formal exit transition process, which would include an interview or survey; and longitudinal tracking of exit interviews or surveys.

*Systemic Retention:* Longer-term strategies can minimize issues that often spur faculty to leave,

before those faculty reach the point of no return. Institutions can communicate clearly about teaching expectations and teaching/research balance during the hiring process. They can attempt to coordinate searches with nearby institutions to enable opportunities for dual-career couples. In addition, they can more proactively develop diverse candidate pools, recruit faculty of color, and build community for those faculty once hired.

*Individual Negotiation:* Even when institutions have worked to create the conditions for faculty retention, some faculty members will leave for reasons that have not been accounted for in those efforts. CAOs can most effectively prepare for those situations by discovering faculty departure intentions early, through outreach and conversation; supporting a faculty member's evolving career interests; and addressing departmental conflict before it leads to faculty departures.

## INTRODUCTION

The examination of why faculty members leave their institutions is well represented in the higher education literature, from earlier studies in a contemporary context ranging from Brown (1967) through Weiler (1985), with more recent, multifaceted, work conducted by O’Meara and her colleagues (e.g., O’Meara, 2014; O’Meara et al., 2014, 2016). Interest in this phenomenon stems from the assumed desirability of faculty retention: to realize return on the investment in new faculty members, from faculty searches and start-up research costs (O’Meara et al. 2014), but also to avoid disruption to teaching, service, and governance, and deflation of department or institutional morale. These considerations also operate within the context of a traditional tenure system that constrains faculty mobility, such that any moves are notable and receive scrutiny.

The literature on this topic has focused upon discerning factors which lead to an intent by faculty members to leave their institution (O’Meara et al. 2014; Maher, 2016). Examining the rationale of faculty members who actually take the decision to leave their institution has, for the most part, been undertaken by some institutions themselves



“Over my six years of being in this position, I would say on average we lose between three and five tenure-line faculty each year, and I would say one out of those five is post-tenure.”

in a process of self-analysis. Researchers at The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education have brought several of these institutional studies together to seek pattern and emergent themes. Gallagher (2014) examined how seven large public research universities understood faculty departures at their institutions; Maher (2016) reviewed eight single-campus qualitative faculty exit surveys, also from large public research universities. Maher (2016) further distinguished between reasons for “leaving” versus “going,” or the “push” and “pull” issues referenced by many

authors. At these institutions, common “push”/ “leave” reasons included dissatisfaction with compensation, experiences with discrimination, or anticipated denial of tenure, whereas common “pull”/ “go” reasons included better location or opportunities for family members. Gallagher (2014) noted that despite several decades of scholarship on the issue of faculty mobility and the experiences of individual institutions over that time, a pro-active engagement by institutional policy makers has been slow to develop, and broad recognition and adoption of best practices negligible. Indeed, that the case studies examined were only available from public research universities is itself a reflection on the uneven attention brought to the issue across higher education institutional types.

Several recent studies have focused upon particular issues influencing departure. For example, O’Meara (2014) found retention and commitment were

negatively affected by policies requiring external offers to secure salary increases at the home institution. Benson et al. (2016), reporting on a pilot study of the first multi-institutional survey of faculty departure, within a public university system, found among respondents (both departed and retained) that salary was only one of several compelling factors in the departure /

retention decision. On the other hand, the pressure to diversify the professoriate, from students, faculty, and institutions themselves, has grown steadily, evermore so with increases in minority earned doctorates which has in turn brought renewed attention onto the “pipeline” (Gibbs et al. 2016) and criticism of hiring processes (e.g., Gasman 2016). As a result, faculty-of-color departures receive particular scrutiny both as setbacks to diversification but also as windows into campus climate. This may be naturally heightened at small institutions, especially those located in rural, non-diverse areas that are already at a disadvantage to

recruit faculty of color.

Discerning the issues influencing faculty departures is complicated by the phenomenon of sensemaking, whereby in an effort to understand an issue, individuals rely upon their past experience and signals from their current environment; with incomplete experience or information, plausibility is favored over accurately understanding the situation (O'Meara et al., 2014). In the case of faculty departures, the situation of administrators, faculty, and colleagues within the institution works against fact-finding and achieving a depth of understanding that can influence management and policy. Reasons for “leaving” may be operating among faculty that would never occur to, or dismissed by if so, colleagues and administrators.



“Well, the folks that have left are legendary because it doesn't happen that often; we haven't had anyone depart in three years.”

This effect may be heightened as faculties diversify, the experienced context of the workplace by senior members being increasingly disjunct in gender and race contextual experience from others more recently employed at the same institution.

As noted above, the research on faculty departures to date has focused exclusively upon larger, research-oriented, universities. For one of us, having served as chief academic officer (CAO) at a small, liberal arts college located in a rural setting, the issues of faculty departure – and the complex interaction of the many “reasons” for same – are acutely familiar. Like larger research universities, the impact of departures upon faculty diversification, and the morale-deflating consequences of all departures, are keenly sensed. But small size and tight community make leave-

taking more strongly felt at the small college, and have a larger perceived impact on the make-up of the faculty even if the proportion of faculty departing is similarly low. Notably, those small-community characteristics are what contribute to an idealized environment for undergraduate education and the development of young minds and lives. It is likely that this distinctive institutional environment also influences the reasoning by faculty leading to intent and actual departure, in ways different from those at larger research universities.

This study examined the phenomenon of voluntary departures by faculty members from US liberal arts colleges – as illustrated above, a sector of the US higher educational landscape that has not previously received attention in the literature. The CAOs of a variety of such institutions were interviewed, specifically on the frequency of departure intention, the reasons underlying that desire and action, how information pertaining to departures was collected, and what efforts were made towards retention of faculty members. Our purpose was to assess the degree to which this phenomenon was prevalent, what challenges it presents to small colleges, and whether CAOs considered current practices in managing departures to be satisfactory. More broadly, I was interested in whether recent multi-institutional study by COACHE of faculty retention issues among research universities represented small liberal arts colleges or whether the latter had special circumstances, drivers, or consequences specific to that educational environment. Of particular interest, given the escalating concern around diversification of the professoriate, was whether emergent retention issues can illuminate the lag of faculty diversification behind the increasing diversity of earned doctorates in the US. It was hoped that some indication could be gleaned as to whether the experiences and practices of a variety of small liberal arts institutions would suggest successful approaches to faculty retention that could be applied more broadly. I offer observations and recommendations that emerged from these discussions.

## METHODOLOGY

The twenty-two liberal arts colleges chosen for this study represented ranges across several institutional characteristics, such as faculty size, resources (i.e., endowment), public or private funding and governance, rural or urban location, and national geographic region. An a priori set of questions provided a consistent framework for all interviews, which took place in fall 2016. Within this framework, topics were explored as guided by issues of particular interest to the individual CAO interviewees. While all of these institutions



“I’ve been dealing with several potential poachings of post-promotion faculty; I am constantly in a mode of trying to retain my faculty of color – I’m just starting my fifth year here, but I haven’t had to deal with science faculty potential departure.”

were small liberal arts colleges, the particular suite of characteristics referred to above rendered quite individually distinctive institutional context and culture. Thus, it was important not to limit discussion of faculty departure and retention to our a priori assumptions of relevant issues, but rather give the conversation enough freedom to allow CAOs to fore-front issues that reflected their experiences and those of the institution. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for responses to the framework topics, gleaned overall proportions of qualitative responses to key questions, while individual emphases and opinion brought nuance and insight to all topics, generally. Quotes from CAO interviews, bracket-offset, are for illustrative purposes.

Exploration of issues concerning faculty departures were limited to voluntary departures, i.e., initiated by the faculty member, excluding end-of-career retirement from the institution. While

acknowledging the phenomenon of voluntary departures of pre-tenure faculty who are in effect declining to stand for tenure, our discussions revolved primarily around pre-tenure faculty who were on course for tenure and post-tenure faculty who had the option of remaining at the institution indefinitely.

## RESULTS

### NUMBERS

Voluntary departure from this set of national liberal arts colleges is very low overall. With faculties ranging from ~100–350 members, for most the departure rate averaged below 2% annually. Nevertheless, differences in the frequency of departure were apparent among the liberal arts colleges explored here.

In these conversations, I discerned three categories of institutions as represented by CAO knowledge of departure rates. Those where voluntary departure was unusual, or even rare, comprised about half the colleges contacted; a couple of these CAOs who were within a few years of appointment had not experienced a voluntary faculty departure, or described institutional memory of voluntary departures as almost non-existent. Among the remaining institutions, in about half, the departures were not a steady occurrence but frequent enough that there was considerable thought given to causation and mitigation; in the final quarter of institutions, departure frequencies, including successful retention negotiations, exceeded 2% annually and were an ongoing concern.

### COST OF DEPARTURES

All CAOs acknowledged the costs to the institution of voluntary faculty departures, variously highlighting direct financial costs, indirect costs to continuing personnel and the community, or both.

About half of the CAOs discussed direct costs, and

recognized that the replacement costs of scientists and, to a lesser extent, social scientists, was significant especially as start-up research funding in these disciplines has increased rapidly in recent years. Several made the point that direct costs associated with voluntary departures of non-science faculty were not a significant concern. Science start-up expenditures vary widely, of course, but regularly include highly specialized equipment and sometimes remodeling of laboratories, often totaling in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Replacement of an early career faculty member, two to four years after hiring, often means that the investment in start-up costs must be undertaken again, at least in

large part, for the replacement hire. One CAO noted that the rate of inflation for such costs is such that the immediate replacement hire will cost more for the same expenditures. Given the financial vulnerability of such

heavy long-term investment at such an early – and relatively mobile – stage of a science faculty member’s career, some CAOs employed (or were considering) hedging strategies, such as distributing start-up funding over a number of years; thus, unspent funding upon early departure lessened overall cost of replacement. Some CAOs had fewer concerns about such direct costs, considering it an unavoidable consequence of recruitment. No doubt the degree of concern is likely also influenced by available institutional resources for this purpose.

On the other hand, several CAOs reported that their institutions did not lose scientists at the rate of faculty from other disciplines, while recognizing that if such numbers did increase it would lead to significant financial issues. A couple of CAOs surmised that science faculty at liberal arts colleges are less vulnerable to poaching – or less marketable to research universities – because science conducted at small liberal arts colleges takes

a distinct approach: accessible to undergraduates, slower in pace, narrower in scope; necessarily so given the demands of undergraduate research mentorship and the typical absence of graduate and postdoctoral students from the faculty member’s research program. As a result, according to a couple of CAOs, while some scientists at liberal arts colleges are stars in their field, not as many move from the liberal arts setting to different types of institutions, and fewer depart in general.

Most CAOs were concerned about the indirect costs of voluntary faculty departures to their institution, and for some, these far exceeded the associated direct financial costs. Many CAOs

“Is there some way in which we can dose out this money more than we do? Or do we have to be pretty generous and give it up front? Or is there some way in which we can get a clearer sense of the expense of someone’s interest in the long term of being in a liberal arts college setting?”

commented upon the intensity of the faculty recruitment process; the heavy workload involved in conducting searches and the time involved in the initial orientation of new faculty into the department is considerable,

and weighed proportionally more heavily on smaller departments. At some institutions, such transitions may include reconsideration of tenure line departmental placement, adding another layer of responsibility and stress, if providing an opportunity to shift disciplinary direction. Additional investments in early career faculty by the institution and primarily by the home department, such as additional faculty development funding and professional mentorship, were also noted as being significant indirect costs. Additional burdens of advising, research supervision, or other duties on tenured faculty that normally grow for pre-tenure faculty members through the years preceding the tenure decision, are other logistical consequences of departures.

Several CAOs spoke at length about the general disruption to departments caused by early career departures – rather than time and energy, a cost to morale. The deflation that comes with the



failure of personal investment in recruitment, mentorship, and other development support for a new department member was considered by several CAOs as having a particularly demoralizing effect on some departments; those with more senior members, who have committed their own careers to the department and institution over the long term, enhances the effect. Some CAOs put it more generally as community being built and pulled apart, noting that, in such typically small communities, connections are built quickly and departures result in social costs. A couple of CAOs talked more conceptually about the costs to collegiality, or positivity, of the college faculty community when some faculty members depart (or seek counter offers to remain). They cite a type of professional “social contract” between faculty and institution in which there is an implicit expectation of – and obligation to – long-term careers at such institutions, which is undermined by more-than-seldom early career departures.

### TRACKING AND UNDERSTANDING

Among these institutions, maintaining a longitudinal record of faculty departures and associated issues ranged through several levels of detail and complexity of purpose:

- counting numbers of departures
- recording associated putative reasoning for each departure
- exploring reasons for departure more deeply through an exit survey or interview
- examining reasons that promote departure intent with the entire faculty, such as campus climate surveys or more targeted faculty work-life review.

Because of small institution size and departure numbers (or successful retention negotiations), over half of this group of institutions did not formally track faculty departures. A small number of CAOs kept a running list of departures and associated reasons, typically gleaned from exit interviews. Several suggested that the information is extractable from faculty personnel files, but more indicated that tracking was through institutional

or individual CAO memory. The remainder did track to some degree, with about a quarter overall having a formal process which, in a couple of cases, was newly instituted, sometimes residing within their Human Resources (HR) office. In only a couple of cases was this a proactive approach with a longer-term goal of understanding faculty departures more deeply, at an institutional level. The small numbers involved, and thus the difficulty in discerning patterns upon which to act, were cited as dissuasions to developing formal tracking or follow-on studies.

Exit interviews were conducted, typically by the CAO but occasionally by HR administrators or an associate dean, by the majority of institutions, but once again were collated into a longitudinal record to only varying degrees.

Thus, the vast majority of data collected in this study was reliant upon the institutional memory of the respective, individual, CAOs – the only source of that data for most institutions. In several cases, relatively new CAOs only knew of these institutional issues through their own (limited) experience, and had no institutional information (or knowledge it existed) from prior to their appointment. While this report is mostly based on memory and impression rather than verifiable, systematically collected data, it does represent the current range of practices, and CAO opinions on their value. Thus, it is a comparative basis to assess the phenomenon or consider best practices.

### Discovering departure

In almost all cases, the small size of these institutions and the small number of departures lead most CAOs to think that departure plans for a faculty member become known fairly early in the departure–decision process. In many cases, of course, the reasons for leaving are communicated to the CAO either to seek amelioration of an issue or to negotiate an improvement on an external job offer. At the other extreme, a few CAOs report not uncommon instances in which faculty members reveal their intention after they have made a decision to leave, or in other ways avoid alerting

the institution to their decision process at all. In the rare, worst-case, scenario, departure notification is withheld until the last possible minute, or occurs while the faculty member is on leave. Some congruence of these approaches with the reasons for departure can be inferred below. Given this range of approaches to communicating intentions to leave, formal institutional systems such as submission of a resignation letter can become the default process through which departures are discovered, and certainly communicate the final status of the departure decision (and too late for redress). Other college processes such as curricular planning or college housing leases provide other routes to discerning a faculty member's intention to continue at the institution.

### Exit interviews

Most CAOs indicated a desire or willingness to discuss reasons for departure with the faculty member and, if timing was appropriate, to persuade or negotiate their retention. Three quarters of the CAOs conducted exit interviews with all departing faculty members, several as a matter of policy. In all cases, the CAO conducted the interviews, and sometimes with Human Resources conducting supplementary interviews pertaining to the logistics of separation. In a few cases, others in the CAOs office were involved, either in conducting supplementary interviews, joint interviews, or providing a choice of interviewers; these included chief diversity officers and associate deans/provosts, with the aim of attaining a fuller picture of the rationale for departure. In a few cases, CAOs welcomed exit

interviews but their occurrence seemed hit-or-miss, with a more passive, or less formal, approach; this was especially so when putative reasons for leaving were known from earlier discussions, or the reasons for departure led to some disaffection.

Overall, CAOs seldom found reluctance on the part of departing faculty members to meet, and the vast majority considered their exit interviews to be successful in terms of understanding the faculty member's rationale for leaving. (Some CAOs occasionally had success in persuading faculty members to stay, which is discussed further below.) A few CAOs cautioned that exit interviews were "a mixed bag," in terms of candor, not surprisingly when dissatisfaction with the work environment directly involved colleagues or when personal life issues were at play.

But even amongst those CAOs who held exit interviews with essentially all departing faculty, most reported it as an ad hoc process, variable in terms of scope of the conversation, timing in the departure-decision process, follow-up on the issues raised, or longitudinal analysis of the reasons for departure. As noted above, several CAOs had little knowledge of their predecessor's practice or even of past departures. It seems clear that historically this issue has been approached in a reactive and personalized way; value is placed on the individual, through understanding departure or negotiating retention, with little value placed on the potential institutional benefits from a proactive and systematic approach. This has been driven, I expect, by the idiosyncratic nature of departure rationales; the low frequency of events and, thus, minimal perceived institutional loss; and the relatively frequent turnover of CAOs.

A few CAOs acknowledged that this typically ad hoc, non-cumulative, approach to faculty voluntary departure management results in an anecdotal understanding of the institutionally important issues that underlay voluntary faculty departures, e.g., dual career pressures, career path choices, workplace climate, or interpersonal conflict. Such issues don't affect departing faculty alone,

{ "I don't know what my predecessors have done in that regard. I do know that they looked especially at partner issues in hiring and how that affected our ability to get our top candidates and how to handle that. But in terms of departures, I don't know of any systematic attempt to look at that, and I didn't hear of any reports related to that."

of course. Rather, separation from an institution in a career as notably immobile as academia is an extreme expression of the conflict between these issues and employment, triggered by the employee. Even in low frequency, voluntary departures seem potentially valuable events in understanding workplace environment.

While some institutions have long had a formalized exit interview policy, several CAOs have recently taken significant steps to build longitudinal study of departures. These include standardizing the exit process, developing a standard question template for either live exit interviews or an exit survey, and administering the process to all departing faculty. It is expected that over time such steps will lead to a shift in understanding the issues driving departures, from anecdotal evidence of uncertain provenance to verifiable institutional data comparable over years and CAO appointments.

### DISCERNING RATIONALE AND RETENTION STRATEGY

In discussing reasons for departure with the CAOs, seven distinct categories of departure emerged cumulatively: partner employment, career path choice, faculty of color retention, departmental work environment, social environment for single faculty members, proximity to extended family, and superior offers from other (similar) institutions. Each was identified as important, but discussed variously in terms of the frequency with



“I guess there are two kinds of exit interviews... One is to give us time to respond..., and the other is just basically to inform us of a decision they’ve made that is beyond anything we can do to respond...”

which they are invoked by departing faculty or the perceived significance to the health or other

goals of the institution. They are discussed here as: 1) the reasons at departure frequency extremes, 2) the main drivers of departure, 3) important institutional concerns, and 4) less frequent, yet recurrent, factors.

### Reasons at the extremes

While overall only low percentages of faculty members depart voluntary from these colleges, there is a conceptual bell curve in which a majority of institutions experience occasional to intermittent voluntary departures of faculty members – maybe one or two a year on average – for a variety of reasons. The tails of this distribution consist of a few institutions in which such departures are highly unusual, while at the other extreme there is a low, steady stream of departures that render the work of exit interviews and retention negotiations a more regular decanal agenda item.

The explanation for departures across all institutions ranges through a clearly defined suite of reasons: partner employment, changing career path, unsatisfactory work or social environment, a superior offer from elsewhere, or location-related family needs; these will be discussed in more detail below.

However, mirroring the conceptual departure-frequency bell curve, the reasons given by the CAOs of those few institutions in the very tails of this distribution, where departures were notably greater or less than the typical range, included an additional idiosyncratic set of institutional work-environment characteristics. At the infrequent end of the range, CAOs posited a strong institutional identity as promoting clearer understanding by entering faculty of the institutional mission and sustaining a “family,” mission-driven culture, leading to a deeper commitment to the college. Institutions with greatest frequency of departures additionally reported uniquely challenging physical surroundings or extraordinary academic marketability of the faculty, which were thought to be important drivers for departures.

### Main drivers

Partner employment and career choice are responsible for the majority of departures from the small liberal arts colleges chosen for interview. By virtue of their ubiquitous fore-fronting by CAOs in conversation about reasons for faculty departure, there is clearly a great deal of concern for ameliorating the concerns underlying these departures, and not much success in doing so to date.

### *Partner employment*

Losing faculty members because their partner could not find satisfactory employment in the area was cited by almost all CAOs as one of the most prominent factors causing faculty departures. It is cited as the most common issue, or the only recurring issue, or only pattern to departures, or among the top retention problems at these institutions. CAOs who have surveyed faculty found it the single most important factor in considering departure; others considered partner employment to hinder recruitment efforts generally. While the nature of partner career aspirations varied, most CAOs discussed dual professional couples, and more so focused attention on dual academic couples – seemingly being both the hardest type of partner employment to find and, naturally, reflecting their role in overseeing faculty hiring at their institutions.

Short of the “trailing” partner finding full-time, permanent employment befitting the partner’s qualifications, this issue is expressed in varied and sometimes complex personal ways. For example, if the trailing partner finds sufficiently attractive employment elsewhere, or employment in an area with greater opportunity, the home faculty member may switch to become the trailing partner, taking a perceived “lesser” position elsewhere. It is sometimes cited as a secondary consideration in departure for another job, although that may reflect a reluctance to assert personal issues into a discussion of a professional decision with the CAO. In other cases, a faculty member who lives apart from their partner, employed elsewhere, with

both individuals continuously on the job market seeking an opportunity to rejoin, may long plan departure before that opportunity is found. While most often associated with rural colleges in small towns and few job opportunities, these issues also expressed themselves in large urban areas, where the limits of commuting time equated to that of



“So there’s a serious workload issue involved when someone leaves, because it means the department has to start this very onerous process over again. On the one hand, there’s this excitement in doing so and getting a new colleague, but generally it’s a pain in the neck.”

commuting distance in rural areas. Nevertheless, the pull of urban locations for their absolute greater number of opportunities is strong, particularly for the presence of research universities; in several cases, CAOs cited the ability of larger research institutions elsewhere to offer both partners employment, considering larger institutions as having greater capacity than small colleges to absorb a trailing academic partner.

CAOs also were keenly aware of the compromises dual career couples make on their own campuses. These included living at great commuting distance, either in between partners’ places of employment or where the non-faculty partner has employment (the faculty position having greater time flexibility for commuting). Un- or under-employed partners not being fulfilled in their work, particularly when possessing similar qualifications to the faculty partner, was recognized as causing stress in the family. Such compromises implicitly provide an ongoing motivation to dual career couples to seek employment for both elsewhere, and sometimes changes in family life (e.g., children) change the cost-benefit analysis of compromises to the point of precipitating departure.

With a couple of CAOs, there was some reference to losing more female faculty members to partner employment issues than males, with pressures to accommodate partner employment anecdotally falling unevenly on women more than men. However, one institution which had tracked departures found that they were not losing women at greater rates than men. This would be a question worthy of more study, and may be an example of where strong influence of anecdotal information could be better informed by more formal longitudinal tracking of departures.

Having such a prominent role in faculty retention issues, there was obviously much thought given to ways of lessening the impact of dual-career concerns. In general, there was also much frustration at the inability to adequately address the issue. There was widespread implicit understanding that tenure-track positions could not be systematically created to hire trailing spouses, and in general the colleges themselves were unable to provide the employment that most trailing spouses desire. Several CAOs discussed efforts to engage departments in considering trailing partner candidacies, and the benefits that would accrue to the institution in retaining the couple, which were typically met with “little sympathy.” Others recounted efforts to broker coordination around dual-academic-couple hiring with nearby institutions, citing other institutions in which this was successful; in their experience, however, engagement was mixed and generally not effective, despite occasional successes. A few CAOs expressed expectation that such arrangements should be fruitful, and while giving examples where this was the case for temporary positions, they have been unable to develop policy or normalized arrangements around tenure-track hires.

In most cases, CAOs made considerable efforts at “half” solutions, such as grant-supported “soft-money” positions, adjunct teaching, or time-limited replacement employment. In some cases, it was considered that this worked well, but in many cases, the compromises were unsatisfactory. One institution considered itself far more aggressive

than others in creating permanent positions. For other CAOs, the value of short-term visiting positions is considered to provide a buffer period to find more permanent employment, although this hasn’t proven effective in outcome.

Several CAOs admitted to not knowing of



“One of our key problems in terms of retaining faculty, mostly likely junior faculty members, is the academic two-body problem.”

a solution to the issue, to the point of even recognizing the futility of negotiating retention of faculty who were leaving for these reasons. There is a desire to find creative solutions, perhaps developed by other institutions, that work at the small college scale.

*Career choice*

The other main driver of faculty departures amongst this group of small liberal arts colleges was the decision on the part of faculty members to change career path, typically to more research-intensive institutions, and less commonly into academic administration or to careers outside of academia entirely. Interestingly, while all can be characterized as career path shifts, the CAOs collectively described quite different approaches to retention, pertaining to the nature of the shift being considered. In these conversations, three categories of career change and associated retention strategy surfaced: early career realignment, mid- to late-career academic shifts, and moves into administration. The general impression from all CAOs was that they supported faculty members with aspirations to change course in their careers, both from a sense of their professional obligation to faculty career development, and their desire for

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faculty members to be content in their professional lives.

In general, most CAOs described departures for academic jobs at other institutions as choices for a different kind of career path – not surprisingly, one that had greater research expectations, research support, and graduate students. Most CAOs reported that faculty members rarely left for peer institutions or other small liberal arts colleges, rather, they sought “...fundamentally, a different job.” There is a sense that there is an element of discovery, after a couple of years into the position or shortly after tenure; sometimes this is a realization by the faculty member of the high teaching demands expected at the colleges, or of the desire to devote more time to research in one’s career. These are not cases where pre-tenure faculty members were struggling to meet the expectations of the tenure review; several CAOs made that point explicitly.

Rather, the early career faculty member found their passion or academic goals, which could only be fully pursued at a research university. The other early career group that was cited by a couple of CAOs was the early career move out of academia entirely, typically to industry (e.g., computer scientists to tech companies; economists to financial policy institutions).

Retention efforts were seldom direct; graduate students, less teaching, or the rewards of industry were not on the menu of the CAOs at these small liberal arts colleges. While there was mention in some cases of trying to provide greater start-up support if research ambitions could be met at the college, in general CAOs recognized the desirability of early career faculty members finding a better institutional fit with their ideal teaching/ research career balance.

Instead, many CAOs focused on the understanding by newly hired faculty members of the mission and work-life realities of their institution. Given the low departure rate overall, many CAOs expressed confidence that the vast majority of faculty were well aligned with the institutional vision, and content with the teaching expectations. However, several CAOs described either historical or recent efforts to enhance their communication of the expectations for teaching during their recruitment efforts, before hiring. Through solicitation in cover letters or an intensive interview process, some institutions sought commitment to career development in pedagogy and other relevant aspects of the position. A few CAOs acknowledged how candidate personal experience of a liberal arts college can be helpful (although bringing such experience as an explicit criterion or implicit bias to a search has been criticized as working against faculty diversification).

“So, I’d say that the main reason we lose people is the two-body problem... we just lost someone for example last year who was actually terrific, one of our top, top people. And when she came to see me and said that both she and her husband had received tenured jobs in the UC system in the same UC campus I thought there’s no way we’re going to be able to keep this person.”

Other CAOs sought a better conceptual understanding of the specific characteristics of liberal arts colleges that were attractive to potential faculty members, and how they aligned with more general career aspirations of recent doctorates. In other words, to understand the academic market for liberal arts colleges, and

how such colleges could best position themselves to attract candidates whose career aspirations would be best met in this unique higher education environment.

While covering a wider range of career stages than the early career realignment described above, some examples proffered by the CAOs pertained to established faculty members with successful careers as teacher-scholars in the liberal arts college environment. As such, they are more significant shifts in well established career paths to research or administration. In the former, by virtue of their

scholarly profile or opportunities in their discipline, senior faculty members move to research-intensive institutions or to industry as senior scholars or practitioners. Retention efforts are seldom successful and sometimes not attempted, and described by several CAOs as representing a later-career opportunity to try a different type of institution. Again, retention efforts, when attempted, focus upon enhancing the capacity for the home institution to meet evolving mid-career research interests, either for the individual or to enhance research capacity across the faculty, including internal research funding and modified sabbatical eligibility.

Moves into administration are a more profound change in career path. Often, those faculty members interested in administration make that desire known to their institution well in advance of departure, whether through seeking advice, references, or opportunities to gain experience. Rather than retention efforts, several CAOs made a point of expressing their support for faculty members pursuing administrative positions, and some thought they could play a valuable proactive role in doing so. A few CAOs spoke with pride of the number of faculty who moved on to administrative positions elsewhere.

### Important concerns

While referenced by fewer CAOs – a quarter to a half of interviewees – and responsible for fewer departures over all, departures by faculty members due to work, or more specifically departmental, climate, and departures for any reason by faculty members of color, were issues of particular concern.

### *Faculty of color departures*

While almost half of the CAOs raised retention of faculty of color as a special category of faculty departure, it was recognized that firm conclusions on the issues were difficult to draw as the numbers of faculty of color at their institutions were so small. In some cases, faculty of color left their colleges in greater proportion than white faculty members, giving particular concern about the underlying issues at the institution and its ability to provide an environment in which faculty of color could thrive. In other cases, the institution retained more faculty of color, by percentage, than white faculty, but departure of a faculty member of color was keenly felt because of the overall low numbers, reflecting the institutional priority placed upon faculty diversification.

A number of CAOs made the point that faculty of color departed for the same range of reasons as white faculty – an early career alignment away from such a heavy emphasis on teaching and desire to find more satisfying employment for their partner were two specific examples. But several CAOs also cited a lack of community, due primarily to the low numbers of other faculty of color. A more nuanced conversation with a couple of the CAOs considered not just race/ethnicity demographics, and suggested that despite high diversity in the larger community, there was an absence of professionals of the race/ ethnicity of the departing faculty member.



“So, in the majority of cases, they’re coming to me saying that their spouse needs a job of some kind, and what are we going to do about it... I would say in at least 50 percent of the cases that’s it. And they’re usually not in the same department so then that requires me to go to a different department other than their own. And what I find is that, generally speaking, those other departments aren’t terribly sympathetic.”

Retention strategies ranged from considering better communication during recruitment, to deeper understanding the particular issues facing faculty of color, to taking proactive steps in building community for faculty members of underrepresented groups. In one college, faculty diversification efforts eschewed the open market


approach and rather focused upon targeted recruitment strategies, which sought candidates of color who knew or understood the institution well, and had already expressed desire to work in that particular environment. In addition to exit interviews, discussed above and which most CAOs undertake, a couple of institutions had their chief diversity officer conduct separate interviews with departing faculty of color in the hope of having more frank conversations and gleaning better understanding of the issues at stake. At some institutions, faculty or college-wide campus climate surveys included questions specifically directed at faculty of color, and separate analyses of their responses undertaken. As stated above, given the low numbers, clear patterns have not emerged, but an understanding beyond anecdote certainly has been gained. Finally, some institutions have proactively built mentorship programs and interest groups specifically for faculty of color. In a couple of cases, again given the low numbers of faculty of color on campus, underrepresented professionals groups have been supported, including professionals from local industry, medical fields, etc.

The relatively low number of CAOs that spoke at length about faculty of color departures does not necessarily indicate the issue has less significance than, say, partner employment or career change. Many of the issues that prompt faculty of color to depart from their institutions may also be playing a role in self-selection against candidates of color applying for positions at small liberal arts colleges in the first place. Proportionally, more faculty of color than white faculty may consider leaving an institution, and data addressing that would be valuable to institutions. Greater insight

into the perceptions of recent doctorates of color as to the types of institutions or communities that they would consider for career placement is needed, in addition to focusing on recruitment and retention, to begin a comprehensive approach to understanding the difficulties of diversifying the faculty at small liberal arts colleges.

### *Work environment*

The other issue which emerged in a minority of CAO conversations but yet loomed large in those cases was departmental dynamics or climate. In a few cases, CAOs indicated that when this issue arises, it can have magnified affects, i.e., more than one departure over a few years, sometimes from the same tenure line. Naturally, departmental dynamics can take many forms, but can range from interpersonal conflict to early career faculty feeling that their professional contributions are not valued.



“We certainly have faculty who make the decision after a few years here that they want to devote more time to research, so they’re making a decision about the type of institution that they want to be at... we’ve lost probably closing in on a half-dozen folks who have simply decided that being at a small liberal arts college is not what they wanted to do and they’ve been hired off by research universities.”

No CAOs discussed strategies for retaining faculty members under these circumstances, but several CAOs did express their sense that departing faculty members were not completely forthcoming about the departmental issues they encountered, even in the exit interview. Reasons for this reticence may be out of respect for colleagues, or concerns that their complaints would disseminate through a small disciplinary field, or that they were angry and uncommunicative as a result. Some departing faculty members were forthcoming in not wanting their concerns shared with the department, leaving the CAO with a dilemma, not only because the information gleaned should be acted upon to try to improve the situation for future faculty arrivals, but also in cases where the department wishes to understand issues for departure that they have not recognized.



Interestingly, one CAO raised the issue of how the increasingly fraught nature of discourse on campuses, irrespective of political perspective, was cited by faculty members departing from academia entirely. It would be interesting to learn if other



“If somebody really wants to have an experience as a dean at another institution, I’m going to try and make that happen for them because I see that as important to their professional development. Those are places where the institution might well work in a very proactive way with someone to see if you could help them explore that possibility of professional development.”

colleges were experiencing similar dissuasion from a teaching career among their faculty.

**Less frequent primary factors**

Fewer than a quarter of the CAOs raised the following reasons as significant causes for faculty departures at their institutions, although they likely play a role to some degree at others.

*Social environment*

A couple of CAOs raised the issue of relatively young, single faculty members leaving their institutions purely – they otherwise liked the position and institution – for reasons of social engagement, i.e., the prospect of spending their early career decades, or of finding a partner, unsatisfactory in the (typically) small college town. This was acknowledged in some cases to strongly co-occur with underrepresented race/ ethnicity groups on the faculty. Like partner employment or career re-alignment, retention negotiations seemed largely moot; “preventative” strategies akin to a recruitment process that emphasizes professional expectations, but instead focuses on social milieu, were not raised by the CAOs.

*Family location*

Aside from the issue of partner/ spouse employment, a few CAOs found that a faculty member’s desire to be near extended family – usually parents – prompted the departure. In some cases, it was occasioned by parents’ poor health, other times by wishing to have their children live near their grandparents, or simply wishing to return to the area where they grew up, especially if distance made that routinely inaccessible (e.g., west coast – east coast). Similar to many rationales discussed above, retention negotiations or strategies do not address this specific issue.

*Superior offers*

Superior offers from similar liberal arts colleges were mentioned only a few times by the CAOs from the study set of institutions. I am distinguishing these “superior” offers from those where some other rationale – partner employment, career change, unsatisfactory environment, etc. – is



“Our retention rate percentage-wise is actually pretty good. But every departure is felt deeply... the percentages don’t really tell the whole story.”

perceived by the CAOs to be the primary driver for seeking employment elsewhere. Consistent with the generally low frequency of departures, and dominance of family and professional considerations in departures, very few CAOs reported losing faculty members to other liberal arts colleges, and no CAO rated it as a significant concern. When cited, a superior offer from a similar institution either had another factor influencing the decision – such as family in the area of the move – or was prompted by a period of

institutional stress (e.g., frozen salaries) generally.


No doubt salary and other professional support plays a role in all decisions to leave the origin institution, even when driven primarily by factors such as partner employment, career change, or escaping an unsatisfactory environment. Depending on the relative influence of pertinent factors in any individual case, CAOs usually engaged in retention negotiations when the faculty member was willing, i.e., when there was a possibility of the faculty member remaining. I have discussed the ways in which CAOs have tried to assist underemployed partners, support shifts in career emphasis, or ameliorate work environment, and such strategies are naturally part of retention negotiations when they are relevant.

But all negotiations also almost always include discussions around compensation and other professional support.

In terms of salary, there is an interesting range of approach among the roughly half of the CAOs who discussed this at any length. At one end, there is strong culture or even policy around salary structure, to ensure equity and leaving, in the CAO's view, limited room for adjustments through a retention negotiation process. At the other end, a couple of CAOs described a strong competitive marketplace approach to salary negotiations, more aggressively attuned to retaining strong faculty members. Several CAOs did point out that they simply weren't able to compete against certain industry or government offers, particularly in computer science or economics. Conversely, there was recognition in some cases of faculty members employing a strategy to use an offer from another institution primarily to increase their salary or research funds (a strategy much more common at larger, research institutions). In between these range endpoints, a few CAOs expressed both a sensitivity to the

college faculty's culture around salary negotiation and understanding of salary structure, being reluctant to stray far beyond them, while others acknowledged that on occasion, in seeming exceptional circumstances, that will happen. Overall, there was both a desire to have latitude to engage in retention negotiations and make viable counter offers, but also have the discretion to decide in what cases to do so.

In terms of non-salary support, several CAOs described various levers or menu items in which they had some latitude – often more than for salary – in making a counter offer, variously including research funding, summer research students, sabbatical arrangements, etc. A few CAOs made the point that even though they couldn't compete on salary, supporting the faculty member's ambitions in these other ways, even to the extent of including arrangements for some partner employment or a greater administrative role, were sometimes enough for retention – especially if addressing the primary rationale for departure.



“We know, in every case, the individual situation that is pushing the colleague away, but we don't see it with our white faculty in nearly the same numbers. So, it's a concern.”

## CONCLUSIONS

### OBSERVATIONS

Discussions with these 22 CAOs were informative, and impressive in the breadth of understanding and depth of commitment to institutional betterment and faculty happiness. It would be easy to lose track of the fact that we were discussing these issues because they are not easy to fix. Perennial frustrations such as partner employment and the slow rate of faculty diversification render these issues – and exit interviews and retention negotiations – more and more fraught. Often, departure and retention discussions with individual faculty members are confidential, which adds

to the difficulty of devising policy for faculty-wide dissemination. As a result, there is a great desire to share experiences and best practices with other institutions, even as most CAOs are trying to discern pattern among the relatively few sample cases they experience. That relatively few cases of departure garner such attention speaks to the uniqueness of the academic, and small college, workplace community. One should be cautious about over-analysis in our desire to learn, understand, and improve our institutions, and I was struck by one CAO that reminded us of “less tangible” aspects of an institution that may,



“It’s very hard to find community, you know; community is more than the color of the skin.”

in some cases, override those I have discussed at length.

Compared to research universities, at which these issues have been previously examined, the phenomenon of faculty departures at small liberal arts colleges showed both common characteristics and distinctive features. At an approximate 2% average departure rate, with a substantial wider range indicated in CAO interviews, the proportion of faculty leaving small liberal arts colleges is not dissimilar from those reported from research universities. Thus, departure may be influenced by common factors across the academy – such as the reduced mobility that is a consequence of the tenure system, which typically still predominates in the small liberal arts college context.

The costs of departures to research university and liberal arts college home institutions appear similar, at least proportionally, notwithstanding the

wide range of resources available to the individual institutions represented in this study. However, the smaller number of faculty at these colleges is also likely to mean that the added workload occasioned by departures – new searches, orientation of new faculty members, and prolonged shouldering of advising, college service, and other responsibilities of post-tenure faculty members – will be felt more intensely than at larger, research, institutions. Similarly, the social costs related by some CAOs are probably higher at small institutions and the departments typical of these colleges.

It seems clear that the workplace cultures of research universities and liberal arts colleges are different, and have influence on faculty departure dynamics at the respective institutional types. The counter-offer culture, described by O’Meara (2014) as “a major component of departure decisions, retention efforts, and academic reward systems,” and required by some institutions for a faculty member to negotiate a higher salary, does not seem as strongly developed among liberal arts colleges, at least as represented by this set of CAOs. In keeping with this sense, Maher (2016) indicated that salary



“We’ve lost a lot of really good, young staff members just because they like the job, but they don’t want to spend their 20’s and 30’s here, especially if they don’t have a significant other; so, that’s true for faculty, too.”

was among the most common reasons for “leaving” and “going” among the seven research universities he reviewed. This was not the case, overall, among the liberal arts colleges studied here, with superior external offers only featuring a few times among the COAs interviewed here.

Job structure – the relative roles of teaching, research, and service – and partner employment were prominent reasons for departure at both

types of institutions. These observations were confirmed by Benson et al. (2016) in their pilot survey of faculty departure among campuses in a state university system. However, the ability to address these issues does seem to differ substantially between the colleges and universities considered here. The scope for mitigating faculty job structure issues seems much more limited at liberal arts



“We have a couple of younger, really younger, faculty, who have partners or spouses who couldn’t get work; but they also said, because they had young children, that they needed to go back to their families.”

colleges, the CAOs in these interviews in general recognizing them as a non-resolvable issue of institutional fit. Partner employment is ubiquitous – and perhaps more common than job structure – in its prominence as an issue in instigating faculty departure. While data are not sufficient to determine this impression, it seems that there is more scope for job creation/ accommodation at larger institutions than smaller ones. The liberal arts colleges considered in this study were largely limited to assistance in job search and facilitation of faculty schedules due to extenuating partner employment commuting.

A number of issues were concerns of both research universities and liberal arts colleges, but seem to impact the colleges more because of their distinctive character of intimate educational settings. The setback to faculty diversification caused by faculty of color departures was especially severe for CAOs whose institutions were located in rural and small, less-diverse, communities, with the recognition that recruitment to those institutions itself is challenging. In parallel, the dynamics of the liberal arts college workplace, while not occurring more frequently as a reason for departure than at research universities, seemed to loom larger for the

colleges when it did occur, perhaps because the smaller size of the colleges and their constituent academic departments provide fewer avenues for mitigation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In these interviews, it was clear that understanding faculty departures in ways that were specific to the institution – influences of location, resources, faculty employment and job structure policies, observed over sufficient time for deep institutional knowledge – was a prerequisite for managing such departures beyond an ad hoc reactive approach. The issues that prompt departure, that emerged from these CAO interviews, can be categorized as either those that are systemic to the institution and are predictable issues for many faculty (e.g., job structure, partner employment, and minority community) or as emergent issues for individual faculty members, i.e., occur on an infrequent basis or are idiosyncratic and thus unpredictable. Broadly applied policy can be developed to address the former, but the latter requires flexible customized negotiation. Whether issues fall into the former or latter categories will depend in part on the physical or cultural natures of the institution and understanding how they influence



“But frequently, if a faculty member does have an offer elsewhere, they almost always come and talk to me and I do the best that I can to counter the offer. In most cases, a faculty member will come see me before they’ve made a decision and will say, ‘I’ve received an offer. Here are the terms.’ And depending on the situation, I’ll do what I can to counter that offer.”

departures. I summarize the strategies in each of these areas – understanding, systemic retention, individual negotiation – that emerged from these interviews.

### Understanding departures

One interesting discovery in this set of interviews is the wide range of institutional approaches to understanding faculty departures. At one extreme, some CAOs had little sense of the phenomenon before their own tenure, thus reliant upon the



“Again, in thinking about my list, the hardest question for me has been the two-body one. That’s the place where I feel that we have not figured out a way to really address that issue at our scale. I would love to know what creative solutions some other institutions have come up with.”

anecdotal experience of others in their approach to the issue – a situation particularly vulnerable to the weaknesses of sensemaking as discussed by O’Meara et al. (2014). At the other end of the range, some CAOs were instituting processes to collect longitudinal data as objectively as possible. Those approaches with most promise as indicated by the CAOs include:

- Professional climate survey. For all faculty, exploring the degree to which faculty members consider the issues most frequently associated with departure.
- Establish a formal, systematic, exit or “off-boarding” process. At the center of this would be an exit interview or survey that standardizes questions and archives data for all departures. In order to attain as full a picture of the rationale for departure as possible, it should be conducted or administered by human resources or another administrator other than the CAO. Separate from any (failed) negotiations around retention with the CAO, this would mitigate CAO assumptions and faculty member reticence around the departure rationale. The CAO may conduct a supplementary interview if this hasn’t occurred already, but shouldn’t replace a formal “independent” interview.
- Institutionalize longitudinal tracking of exit

interviews or surveys. A majority of CAOs agree there is valuable information to be gleaned from exit interviews, and in one instance such formal tracking contradicted an expectation of gender imbalance in departures. This value is enhanced greatly by building information over successive CAO terms; the loss of experience with CAO turnover and subsequent reliance on anecdote seems the greatest obstacle to improving the management of faculty departures.

### Creating conditions for strong retention

The COAs recounted several strategies pertaining to various stages in the faculty career arc, from recruitment through early/mid-career development to late career shifts in professional focus. These strategies are aimed at building systemic, faculty-wide, conditions of employment and career support that minimize, rather than mitigate, issues that can foster an intent to leave the institution. Most of these systemic retention strategies are widely known and reported elsewhere in the literature, but their emergence among this set of CAOs confirms their currency among small liberal arts colleges as strategies to secure investments in these institutions’ faculties.

- The conscious communication of teaching expectations and teaching/research balance through the recruitment process. This should not simply cover teaching load or course assignments, but what career consequences flow from a decision to join the college. This may include frank discussions with senior faculty members about their experiences.
- Coordination of faculty searches among nearby academic institutions. While hiring will hardly be driven by the appointment of a partner at a different institution, it seems that some institutions are much more successful at presenting opportunities to dual-career couples to pursue such positions. A few CAOs expressed expectation that such arrangements should be fruitful, giving examples where this was the case for temporary positions, although they have been unable to develop policy or normalized arrangements around tenure-track

- hires.
- Dual-career accommodation. While difficult to address satisfactorily, this can include institutional demonstration of support through area job-search assistance and other accommodations for professional compromises (e.g., commuting) made by dual-career couples.
- Targeted recruitment of faculty of color. CAOs included here the building of candidate pools proactively, building knowledge of the institution among doctoral and postdoctoral students of underrepresented groups, and targeting candidates who are familiar with the institution.
- Proactively building community for minority groups. This can include coordination with regional academic institutions and, most innovatively, beyond the institution to include other non-academic professional groups.



“So, I don’t [yet] know the faculty’s will with regard to compensation philosophy and whether or not we should try to retain people by matching whatever market is... as an offer from someone else. It’s a really important question, and I want us to talk about that: are we market driven in this way or not? I’ve been at institutions that have been, and I’ve been at institutions that have not been...”

are only those who are willing to discuss conditions to remain, this may be an example of the drawbacks of sensemaking described by O’Meara et al. (2014) – a rationale built upon experience of administrators that is limited and self-fulfilling. Early career faculty members may not be strong self-advocates and lack the experience to optimally navigate departure-decision negotiations with college administration. Yet, ensuring early conversation is difficult. Maintaining open discussion around common departure reasons through annual review or reappointment processes may be the most proactivity chairs or CAOs can achieve.

- Supporting evolving career interests. Providing facilitative avenues for tenured faculty to develop new research interests or explore administrative roles when they are communicated. This is notably limited for early career faculty as, in general, flexibility in teaching load or access to graduate students is limited among these

liberal arts colleges. Developing a culture to proactively support evolving faculty careers may be an additional systemic retention strategy (above), but among interviewed CAOs, these issues were raised idiosyncratically by individuals.

- Mitigating workplace conflict. While only a minority of CAOs identified departmental dynamics as an issue in departures, they indicated that it was significant when it did occur, with potential long-lasting effects and not uncommon recurrence. This is likely to be exacerbated by the small-college setting, where small departments are more usual and conflict, when it occurs, unavoidable. A reluctance among departing faculty to expose colleagues with professional standing – lack of candor, or insistence on confidentiality,

### Responding to potential individual departures

Once given research into understanding departures, of sufficient depth to gain specificity to the particular institution, and applying this understanding to create conditions for strong retention, we are then left with applying that understanding to emergent, idiosyncratic, issues that can be negotiated with individual faculty members to influence retention. From this study of liberal arts college CAOs, a number of recommendations are presented.

- Discovering departure intention early. While it can be argued that faculty members who are interested in discussing a potential departure early in their decision making

on the part of departing faculty members in discussing these issues – render the problem particularly pernicious. Chronic conflict thus remains in place indefinitely, leading to future departures (or certainly their intent), with limited scope for addressing the underlying causes. Notably, no CAOs discussed strategies for retaining faculty members under these circumstances. It is likely that such problems of conflict among colleagues are unique to each situation and previous experience is of little value in subsequent situations. However, it is also likely that such issues are assumed to fall within the everyday acceptable scope of workplace interactions until they rise to a point of faculty departure, when it is too late to rectify the situation even if an effective remedy was available. Until this passive approach to dysfunctional departmental dynamics changes – a shift the culture around administrative intervention in these cases – little can be done to prevent faculty departures for this reason.

### POTENTIAL OF COLLABORATIVE STUDY

As mentioned above, one of the frustrations CAOs expressed was the difficulty in discerning any pattern to faculty departures because of the low numbers over time. This is coupled with a keen desire to understand – not simply from a management perspective, but also from sincere support for faculty members in their professional career development and personal lives, insofar as the former influenced the latter.

It is also clear, both from the range of experience amongst the CAOs interviewed and, by chance, experiences of some of those CAOs who had served at more than one institution, that colleges differ in their climate, the positivity of the work environment, and other “less tangible” aspects of campuses that contribute in significant ways to faculty retention. Perhaps because of this, there is also a sense of a delicate balance among faculty workplace contentment and retention, dissatisfaction and departure.

As a result, the CAOs I spoke to did have a great desire to learn what other institutions are doing in these regards, and especially what are the best practices in play at the moment. Perhaps sharpest among the related issues was what has contributed to any semblance of success that institutions have had with partner employment or faculty-of-color retention.

Despite regular conferences and other opportunities for CAOs to meet and discuss pertinent professional issues, there is clearly an opportunity for broader analysis to allow pattern discernment, which this paper begins to do. The recurrent themes among CAO interviews represent an opportunity to pursue collaboratively, as a first step to developing understanding across the liberal arts college landscape and agreement upon best practices in faculty departure management. The recommendations contained herein are merely a first step in the development and dissemination of best practices for the unique educational environment that is the US liberal arts college.

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