



EAB

EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

Higher Ed's **Talent Imperative:** What It Takes to Become an Employer of Choice

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A Clarion Call for Leadership

As college and university leaders chart a course for the decade ahead, they face ever-greater challenges and ever-higher strategic ambitions: intensified competition for students with heightened needs and expectations, transformations of both digital and physical campuses, and new demands to lead local and regional economic development. At each institution, the most important asset for achieving these and other critically important aims is talent. All too often the cabinet relegates questions about talent to unit leaders or HR functions. But how cabinet leaders decide to manage talent as an asset, or whether they opt to not manage it, will determine their institution's ability to thrive.

Starting in the 1990s with the advent of the internet and job search engines, the overall workforce became more mobile, more fluid, and more demanding. Corporate employers not only responded with a new playbook for recruitment, retention, and engagement: they also seized the moment to transform HR from a transactional function to strategic partner.

The pandemic period from 2020 to 2022 represented another irreversible tectonic shift. For office workers, the widespread, mandatory adoption of remote and tech-enabled work arrangements untethered their connections to employers and coworkers. Even more broadly, the pandemic spurred many to grapple with existential questions about their life's purpose and relationship to work. Hardly temporary blips, these shifts reflect enduring changes to a labor market unlikely to revert to pre-pandemic norms.

Now, in the wake of the Great Resignation, higher ed faces a greater number of competitors for talent. Demographic decline in the workforce, not just among high school graduates, means more competition for fewer people. With their talent management capabilities decades behind the competition, it won't be enough for colleges and universities to simply play "catch-up." Cabinet leadership and new investments are critically needed across multiple dimensions of talent strategy to become employers of choice and fulfill all aspects of the university mission.

Our Focus on Higher Education Staff

Higher ed employs a uniquely complex workforce. It encompasses both academic faculty and administrative staff, who are often divided along structural and cultural lines. These distinct employee groups require their own specific talent management practices and policies, although institutions' broader talent strategy and investments must include both.

This brief focuses primarily on higher ed staff, given the disproportionate level of turnover in this group. In some instances we specifically call out where faculty have been impacted by staff shortages or disengagement and where aspects of talent strategy extends to both faculty and staff.

Talent Strategy Diagnostic: How Far Behind Is My Institution?

STRATEGY

Cabinet Leaders

On the right are select hallmarks of a high-performing talent organization in the higher education sector. Use these to gauge your cabinet leadership team's current performance and assess the level of attention and investment in talent needed on your campus.

- We have a prioritized set of funded Strategic Talent initiatives with specific and measurable goals that flow from our broader institutional strategy.
- We have a shared understanding of what talent we need and want to attract based on our identity and aspirations as an institution.
- We have a compelling value proposition for why people should work at our institution and not other places.
- We understand what we must do to recruit and retain high-performing faculty and staff in the most competitive fields.
- Our leadership team proactively monitors labor market trends and prepares for potential future disruptions.

DEIJ-Focused Talent Imperatives

- We have a shared understanding of and commitment to building a diverse workforce and inclusive campus climate.

- Our talent function proactively partners with divisional leaders to develop hiring and staffing plans that advance unit-level strategic priorities and objectives.
- We clearly articulate why people should work at our institution and not other places across multiple channels (e.g., job descriptions, employment websites).
- We partner with senior leaders to promote our institution's role, reputation, and quantifiable impact as an employer in the local community and regional economy.

DEIJ-Focused Talent Imperatives

- Our function collaborates with our chief diversity officer and DEI office to ensure goals align and support strategy execution.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND INVESTMENT

- Every executive leader personally devotes 20%+ of their time to talent activities (e.g., recruitment, retaining top performers, partnering with HR).
- We regularly review and increase spending on HR and talent initiatives in response to rising labor costs, heightened competition, and increased technological demands.
- Our budget model ensures that limited resources are allocated to high-priority, hard-to-recruit/retain units and roles.
- We adapt our organizational structures, roles, and service models to increase administrative efficiency.

- Our cabinet consistently invests time and central resources to initiatives that are designed to help recruit and retain diverse talent.

- We collect reliable, easy-to-access, and campus-wide data on key talent metrics (e.g., turnover rate, time-to-hire, internal fill rate) that we regularly use to inform decision-making and strategy.
- We actively track, quantify, and communicate the ROI of our most important talent-related investments to key stakeholders (e.g., cabinet, academic deans, unit leaders) to help justify and inform future investment decisions.
- Instead of many shadow systems, we use a suite of modern HR technologies and tools that are centrally managed, integrated with one another, and consistently deployed across campus units.
- We strategically deploy efficiency tactics including position control, process improvements, and/or shared services.

- We use staff engagement and climate data to identify trends and remove barriers that prevent specific staff populations from feeling a sense of belonging and staying at the institution.

POLICIES AND OPERATIONS

- We engage in succession planning for all executives and critical roles across campus.
- We promote internal career mobility, prioritizing hiring from within our current workforce.
- We regularly evaluate and reward leadership and manager performance on talent metrics (e.g., unit turnover rates).
- Performance management is integral to our institution's culture and internal processes.

- We actively solicit employee feedback on how to update campus policies and operations to be more inclusive.

- We intentionally build a strong, diverse talent pipeline by constantly sourcing new talent and deploying a digital-first, candidate-centric recruitment process for all vacant roles.
- Our policies, procedures, and job structures enable multiple forms of career development and advancement (e.g., upward, lateral).
- We have a formal remote/hybrid work policy with well-articulated goals and eligibility requirements that support our goals of engaging and retaining employees.
- We ensure equitable, standardized employee evaluations are routinely conducted across the entire institution.

- We have tailored our policies and processes to flexibly address individual employee needs, identities, preferences, and circumstances.

Section 1

What Higher Ed Stands to Gain from Treating Talent as a Strategic Asset

Higher Ed Is Ill-Equipped to Retain And Recruit Sufficient Staff, Much Less Top-Tier Talent

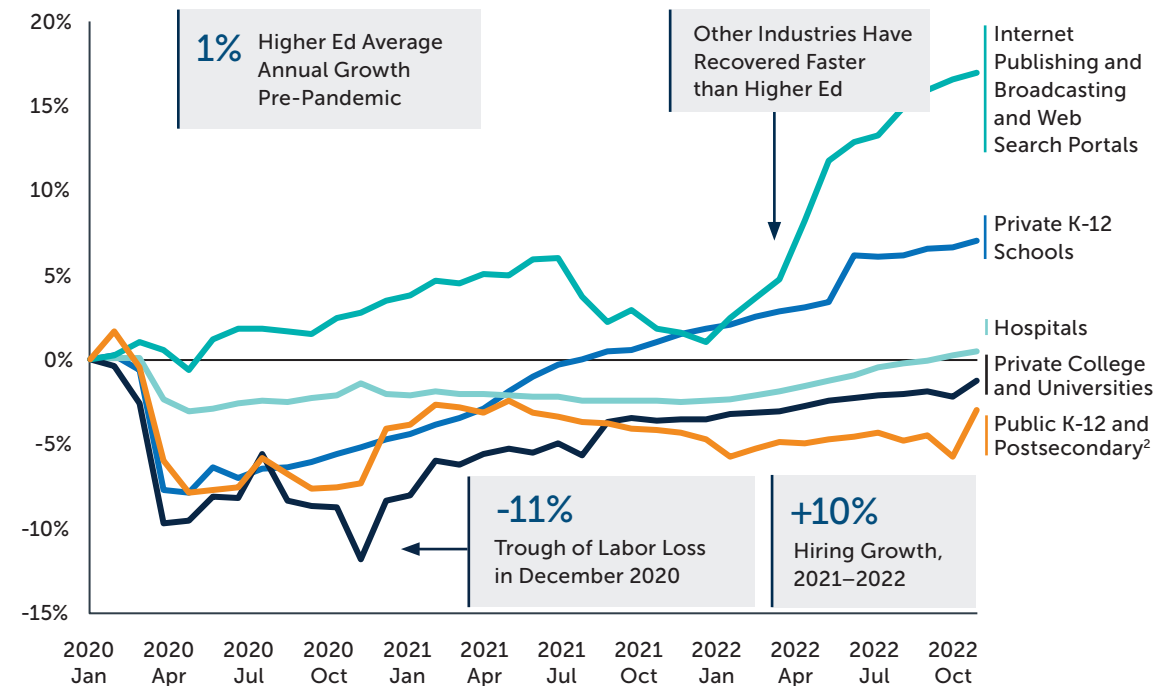
The 1990s were a pivotal decade for talent strategy at out-of-sector organizations. The advent of the internet and job search engines such as Monster and Hot Jobs introduced a wealth of options to employees and simultaneously allowed employers to cast a wider net for top-tier talent. Corporate employers responded by abandoning the assumption that employees would dedicate their lives to one company and instead developing competitive practices for recruitment, retention, and engagement. Instead of trying to keep employees in their current roles for as long as possible, corporate employers embraced internal career mobility with the goal of strategically moving people into their next role within the company.

But while the out-of-sector job market transformed, higher ed remained largely insulated. Still able to attract talent with stability, benefits, and mission-orientation, colleges and universities did not feel the same pressure to invest in infrastructure or develop the capabilities to proactively recruit, retain, and engage the types of talent needed to execute on their broader organizational strategy.

By fall of 2020, though, the landscape had irrevocably changed. Colleges and universities were experiencing an exodus of talent as we all tried to navigate the early days of the pandemic and the volatile labor market and economic shocks it brought. Sector-wide, four-year institutions lost 11% of their labor force in 2020, a drop-off steeper than that experienced by K-12 schools or even hospitals during the same period.¹ It took a herculean effort for the sector as a whole to return to overall staffing levels approximating “normal.” And even for the institutions with sufficient staffing, the onset of disengagement campus-wide threatened leadership’s ability to execute on institutional strategy.

Historically High Hiring Growth Stresses Higher Ed HR

Percent change in total employees from January 2020, seasonally adjusted



This graph illustrates the change in workforce size for several different industries across a two-year period (January 2020–January 2022). Prior iterations of this data separated K-12 (public and private) and higher education (public and private), showing that higher education overall experienced the greatest percent decline in total employees and that K-12 has recovered more quickly than higher education.

This crisis and hard-won recovery laid bare higher ed’s lack of talent infrastructure. Institutions’ HR teams and structures weren’t designed to support such rapid and widespread hiring and were quickly pushed beyond their limits. And for the many institutions still struggling with constant staffing churn or widespread disengagement, decades of historical disadvantages in the labor market became too much of a liability to ignore. To start, colleges and universities simply have fewer resources than most out-of-sector competitors. This, of course, means an inability to match corporations on compensation or to staff an HR function with the bandwidth to proactively recruit, much less retain and engage, top-tier talent. But with the quality of its benefits fast eroding, a workforce prioritizing self-fulfillment over stability, and the mission of higher ed increasingly called into question, colleges and universities are hardly positioned to compete.

Meanwhile, something more profound has changed in how staff perceive their work. For many, the pandemic period revealed a disconnect between the lofty missions of their institutions and the day-to-day hard realities for staff on the front lines. Deep disillusionment set in as higher ed employees struggled to find meaning in their work and some even felt that higher ed's mission was being used against them. Staff critiqued so-called "mission-based gaslighting," calling out institutions for offering a deep sense of purpose to employees seeking meaningful work, but then using that same purpose to justify low-pay, long hours, and eroding benefits.³



Stop saying things like, 'What did you expect to get paid? You work in education!'...By **using the mission to make your staff members feel ridiculous** for asking for a raise or better benefits, you are shutting down legitimate concerns."⁴

Marci Walton, Former Higher Ed Employee
(Left for Private Sector Role in Spring 2021)

This growing dissatisfaction and defection of talented employees to better-resourced competitors also shines a harsh light on both the engagement and performance of employees who have opted to stay. Here, higher ed's longstanding neglect of career development and performance management has caught up with it. Many of the employees who choose to stay at their institutions (often for decades) are often the least equipped to innovate, perform top-of-license work, execute on strategic imperatives, or take on additional tasks when understaffed.

Beyond just an infrastructure problem, though, higher ed has a strategy problem. Most institutions have not invested senior leadership time and mindshare to critically assessing what kind of talent they need, especially in the long-term, based on their institutional identity, aspirations, and strategic goals.

Acknowledging the Constraints on Talent Strategy in Higher Ed

There are many forces that can restrict colleges and universities' ability to respond to market shifts and drive talent strategy forward, especially union activity and regulations governing public institutions and state systems. The instability of an institution's leadership team can also hamper progress on otherwise straightforward initiatives. While these constraints represent real challenges, they cannot be used as an excuse to underinvest in talent. Even the most constrained institutions have opportunities to act. For example, unions can be unexpected allies in developing career advancement initiatives, public institutions can capitalize on the benefits of scale afforded by state employment systems and programs, and leaders can choose to prioritize their time and attention for talent initiatives, regardless of their time in seat.

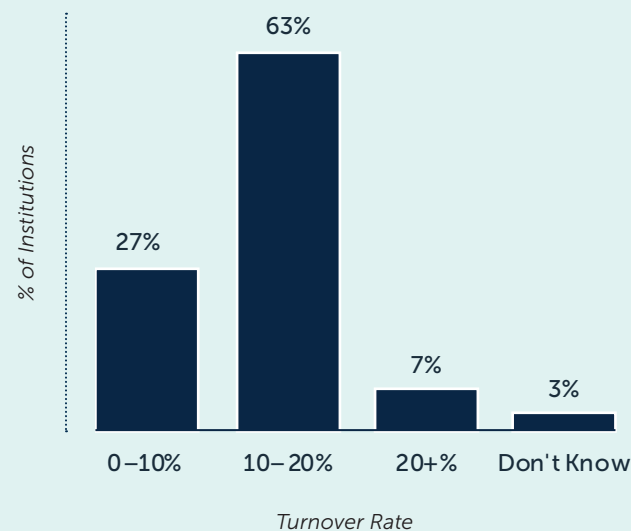
Cascading Impact Across Every Priority on Campus

Business Continuity Still Under Threat Amid Chronic Churn and Disengagement at Every Level

The higher education sector overall has rebounded to near pre-pandemic staffing levels, which is a testament to the hard work of campus leaders and HR teams. But institutions are far from out of the woods. The narrative of recovery and double-digit hiring growth has overshadowed several deeper, longer-term sources of workforce instability.

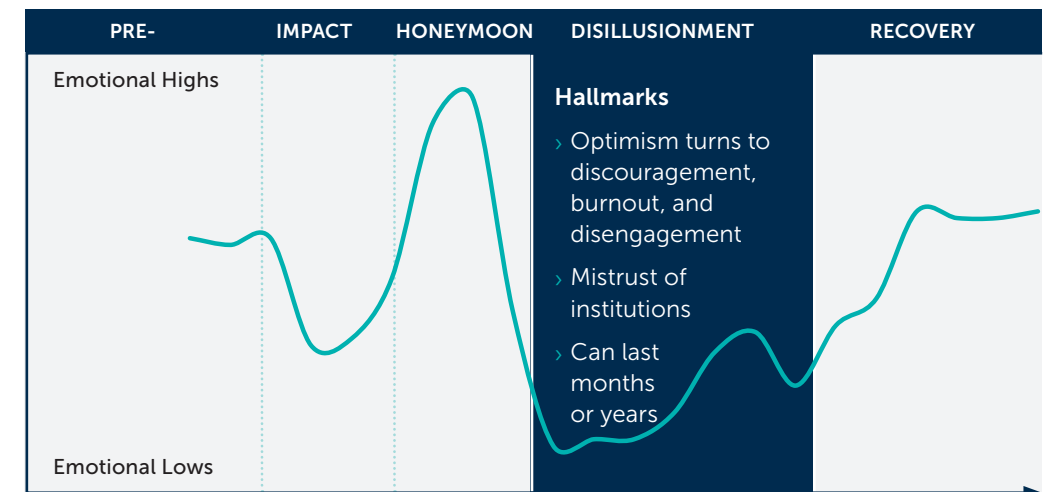
For starters, record-setting staff turnover rates mean many campus units are still operating below capacity. This comes precisely at a time when stakeholder expectations and demand for services are at an all-time high. Many units simply can no longer sustain either the quantity or quality of their services and operations amid such high turnover, especially since every time they fill a vacancy another rears its head. Institutions' slow adoption of more efficient technologies and failure to invest in business process redesign and position control have only made the effects of staffing shortages worse.

What is your best estimate for the turnover rate of full-time staff in FY22?



Staff who have stayed are left to pick up the slack, only stoking growing disillusionment and tensions between administrative groups. Back-office staff have seen their workloads steadily climb, as many of their units were hardest hit by both initial hiring freezes and staffing reductions as well as subsequent resignations. Fewer student-facing positions were cut during the pandemic, but these staff bore the brunt of in-person crisis management and operations. As a result, many are burnt out and struggling to maintain work-life balance. At the same time, staffing shortfalls in other areas have caused service degradation that only makes their already tough jobs even harder.

How Disaster Relief Theory Can Prepare Institutions for Future Challenges



Much of the same can be said for faculty. They experienced heightened workloads and absorbed additional student support responsibilities during the pandemic, leading to widespread burnout, disengagement, and change fatigue. Now, faculty must grapple with the ripple effects of double-digit staff turnover, as they are called upon to ensure continued student support at a time when they themselves lack their usual levels of staff support.

Even institutions that have thus far been largely spared by widespread turnover are not immune from this rising tide of disillusionment across the higher ed workforce. Employee concerns about workloads, job expectations, and the purpose and impact of their work are neither wholly new to the industry nor confined to institutions that have recently faced significant recruitment and retention challenges. Moreover, these concerns are unlikely to fade with the pandemic and, if left unchecked, will threaten not only business and service continuity but also the broader campus climate.

Higher Ed Can't Do Well by Its Students Without Doing Well by Its Employees

Perhaps even more alarming than the risks to business continuity and campus operations is the downstream impact on student experience and success, both inside and outside the classroom. For example, a shortage of mental health counselors can directly result in reduced services for high-need students, leading to decreased academic performance and eventually increased attrition. Other roles critical for delivering student services and support in areas such as financial aid, admissions, and student affairs have been similarly hard-hit. And even in cases where institutions are not experiencing staffing churn or a lack of capacity, staff disengagement can negatively affect service quality and student interactions. Retaining people who aren't invested in the work can be as much of a liability as failing to retain the people who were engaged.

The failure to invest in talent infrastructure and strategy is, in fact, a failure to invest in student success. If institutions strive to be student-centric, they must first recognize the importance of being employee-centric. That is a critical prerequisite for recruiting and retaining the workforce needed to deliver on their promise of a high-quality student experience.



Student success **cannot happen without having engaged employees**. Yet despite this, there are not a lot of universities that recognize employee satisfaction through investment and development of their employees as a key pillar in their strategic plan."

Michelle Benoit, VP Finance and Administration,
Saint Mary's University Halifax

Inability to Execute On Broader Mission and Strategy, Much Less The Strategic Plan

What's more, without a sufficient and engaged workforce, institutions must also confront the broader challenge of making progress on other strategic initiatives, including their plans to execute on them. Overloaded employees cannot take on the many "side-of-desk" activities and task forces involved in strategic planning, causing plan development and implementation progress to stall out.

Any cabinet leader tempted to delegate talent strategy, believing that this work belongs squarely in the realm of HR, has overlooked the larger institutional risk of an insufficient, disengaged, and underperforming workforce. Perhaps even more significantly, leaders also stand to miss out on the greater opportunity of maximizing talent as a high-performance strategic asset to the institution.

Strong Business Case for Investing in Higher Ed Talent (And Mounting Risks for Those Who Don't)

While the consequences of underinvesting in talent infrastructure and strategy are steep, high-performance talent organizations reap the rewards. In the private sector today, more than 80% of a company's value is intangible assets, with human capital the largest and fastest-growing proportion.⁵ As a result, hiring and retaining a talented and diverse workforce drives growth and financial performance for out-of-sector organizations. This means investing in people is good not only for employees but also for the bottom line. Moreover, managing the organization is managing its people.

Even more so than many of their out-of-sector competitors, colleges and universities are inherently in the business of human capital development. That means the value of higher ed's intangible assets, especially faculty and staff, is likely even higher than in other sectors and the potential gains that come from investing in talent as a strategic asset an even greater source of competitive advantage.

RISK 
Consequences of Poor Talent Strategy Extend Beyond Labor Shortages, Productivity Losses

OPPORTUNITY 
Organizations With Strong Talent Strategy More Valuable, Competitive

- Trickle-Down Effects*
-
 - Reduced service quality
 -
 - Compliance issues and security threats
 -
 - Workplace incivility and litigation
 -
 - Negative impact on student experience and success
 -
 - Reputational damage
 -
 - Weakened campus culture

80+%
of company value is intangible assets, including human capital

77%
of executives view labor as a key to their growth in 2022

36%
Increased likelihood of financial outperformance at companies with more ethnic diversity

Section 2

How Did We Get Here?

5 Critical Dimensions of
Change That Have Reshaped
Competition for Talent

For decades, labor market dynamics changed around higher ed. But while out-of-sector employers changed with the market, higher ed stood still. Today, campus leaders ignore broader labor market transformations and the corporate talent playbook at their peril. Out-of-sector ideas have long been a source of innovation for higher ed leaders, but when competing for talent, out-of-sector practices are no longer optional. Colleges and universities that once competed mainly with one another for talent now must go head-to-head with corporate employers on a large scale. Nearly two-thirds of higher ed staff are open to opportunities at private, for-profit companies, which is almost the same proportion as those looking within higher ed itself.⁶

Realistically, most institutions cannot compete with corporate employers on salary alone. Cabinet leaders have therefore asked us over and over again: how can we compete for talent beyond compensation? While some of the most commonly cited responses are “benefits” or “better HR technology,” the answer is actually much, much bigger than that.

EAB has identified five critical dimensions of change that have reshaped the competitive landscape for talent and spurred progressive out-of-sector employers to transform their talent management strategy.

- 1 MINDSET**
Every organization, including higher ed, is in the people business.
- 2 INVESTMENT**
Talent is no longer just a cost center, but a strategic asset worthy of continuous investment and modern infrastructure.
- 3 ORGANIZATION/FUNCTION**
HR is no longer narrowly focused on transactions and compliance, evolving instead into a strategic business partner capable of driving data-informed decisions.
- 4 JOB MARKET**
Job-seekers and employers alike benefit from an increasingly fluid, often boundaryless job market.
- 5 SOCIAL CONTRACT**
Though employees no longer devote themselves to a single organization for decades, their expectations for personalized and fulfilling employment experiences are higher than ever.

While higher ed faces some distinct challenges responding to these changes, campus leaders can no longer afford to wait to develop core talent capabilities over time. Instead, they must “leapfrog” some of the developmental steps that other companies took and undergo rapid talent strategy transformation.

This brief focuses on the key dimensions of talent strategy that require cabinet leadership attention and new investment. Additional EAB research and advisory services provide tactical advice, implementation tools, and tailored support to help institutions drive progress on their individual campuses.







Every organization, including higher ed, is in the people business.

The growing recognition across industries that talent fundamentally drives business success has fueled a widespread corporate embrace of the idea that all businesses are people businesses and therefore require a “Talent Mindset.”⁷ This outlook demands that leadership holds itself accountable for talent goals and outcomes across the organization. Corporate leaders commit significant amounts of their time and capacity to talent-related activities: they lead the effort to define their organization’s employee value proposition, build strong relationships with HR, and even personally recruit top prospects and close candidate offers.

Non-HR Leaders Should Invest Personal Time, Talent Efforts In Three Areas



Sample Talent Maker™ Activities in Higher Ed

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 
Involve direct reports in setting talent goals for unit, team(s) | 
Use one-on-ones with staff to identify, proactively reach out to top talent | 
Schedule regular check-ins with talent director, team |
| 
Integrate talent metrics, performance into feedback, reviews | 
Meet with final interview candidates within unit, division | 
Work with HR on key initiatives (e.g., job description updates) |

In people businesses, leaders hardwire activities that support talent goals throughout the organization and cascade accountability for talent performance throughout their teams. Talent is a standing item on team agendas, performance evaluations take into account metrics including retention and internal fill rate, and leaders develop and evaluate hiring as a skill on their teams.

By contrast, colleges and universities have focused their ambitions not on becoming employee-centric but on becoming student-centric. With this goal in mind, the academic success and well-being of students trumps other priorities, including the success and well-being of staff. This relentless focus on students as higher ed’s most important stakeholder has crowded out leadership mindshare for employees, even though it is the employees themselves who ultimately determine the student experience.

Where Do We Go From Here?



Talent is no longer just a cost center but a strategic asset worthy of continuous investment and modern infrastructure.

In most industries, labor can account for as much as 70% of business costs.⁸ Unsurprisingly, corporate employers have historically viewed talent as a cost center to be managed. Over time, though, these companies began to realize that cuts to their talent budgets often cost more than they saved while talent investments yielded strong ROI and business outcomes.

Out-of-sector businesses, now convinced that people are a smart investment strategy, have therefore consistently funneled resources into employee compensation and talent budgets. With more dollars at their disposal, their HR teams have invested in high ROI functions and services, such as dedicated employee learning and development (L and D). At the same time, they have adopted a sophisticated tech stack and upskilled employees to deploy it against business goals such as improved efficiency and service quality. What's more, these employers have intelligently prioritized when to fill vacancies versus reallocate or redesign roles and doubled down on data collection and analysis so they can better inform future decisions and investments.

This paradigm shift has not yet taken hold in higher ed. Student-facing expenditures frequently trump "back-office," with administrative functions like HR often at the top of the list for cost containment rather than investment. In fact, higher ed HR budgets tend to be 50–75% lower than other industries,⁹ and nearly half of institutions have not increased talent spending in recent years despite an uptick in labor and technology costs.¹⁰

As a result, colleges and universities struggle to even be "market relevant," no less "market competitive," especially when it comes to staff salaries. Their tech stack is outdated at best, fragmented at worst. And institutions lack even the most basic talent data, making it nearly impossible to intelligently invest in their workforces.

47%

of full-time workers with master's degrees earn less than \$50K in higher ed

\$10K+

Average salary increase for leaving higher ed

Where Do We Go From Here?

Baseline Investments to Get in the Game

- Implement position control process to critically assess whether to fill vacancies or reallocate resources.
- Inventory HR/workforce systems and tools across campus to assess current functionality and utilization.
- Create web- and/or Cloud-based career and performance tools and resources for employees and managers.

Transformational Efforts

- Create flexible model of faculty/staff line allocation that enables leaders to shuffle resources and capacity based on changing needs/priorities.
- Strategically allocate limited resources (especially compensation dollars) to high-priority and hard-to-recruit/retain roles and units.
- Create a high-performance culture by aligning budget model and incentive structures with talent achievements.
- Integrate and/or sunset disparate technologies and legacy systems to improve user interface, service quality, and data sharing and analytics.

HR is no longer narrowly focused on transactions and compliance, evolving instead into a strategic business partner capable of driving data-informed decisions.

HR has long had a reputation for focusing on compliance and transactional matters like workplace policies and benefits administration. But with the introduction of new technologies and tools, along with growing business urgency to make smart investments in talent, out-of-sector companies launched HR transformation projects decades ago to modernize the function.

Through structures including HR business partners and centers of excellence, out-of-sector leaders have reimagined HR as a key partner for achieving organizational strategic aims. They elevated HR to the C-suite, creating a Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) tasked with setting and advancing the organization's people strategy. With this new position, it would have been easy for other executives to delegate all talent work to HR and avoid their own responsibility for talent outcomes. Instead, out-of-sector companies doubled down on shared accountability, holding divisional leaders responsible for talent and workforce engagement metrics. This required more extensive data collection, monitoring, and analytics than ever before, but the payoff has been high. Data-informed decision-making is now the norm, especially for key activities such as strategic workforce planning and performance management.

HR Business Partner (HRBP)

A role that is focused on aligning business objectives with talent strategy and management in assigned business units. An HRBP acts as an internal consultant, strategic advisor, and proactive collaborator with unit leadership.

Center of Excellence

A group that possesses expertise in a specific area of HR (e.g., talent acquisition, learning and development) and provides shared resources and services to other internal groups in support of broader business objectives and organizational goals.

In contrast, HR organization and function at most colleges and universities is still stuck in the early 1990s. Making matters worse, decentralization means that institutions frequently have dozens of duplicative or disparate HR systems, conflicting policies, inconsistent titles or roles for similar work performed, and drastic variation in service quality across their campuses. As a result, most institutions lack easy access to the baseline talent data (e.g., accurate headcount, turnover rate, time-to-fill) needed to make even the simplest strategic decisions.

Notably, many colleges and universities have created a CHRO position. However, this is often either a symbolic gesture or misconstrued as a silver bullet for HR issues. Without new resources, technology, and staff with the competencies needed for strategy-oriented HR work, no CHRO or institution stands a chance of bringing their talent function into the 21st century.

Symbolic Changes Not Enough to Elevate HR From Tactical to Strategic

71% of institutions have CHRO/VPHR position

Problem:
Title often not accompanied by updates to role responsibilities, compensation, resources

Solution:
Redefine CHRO role, competencies to focus on business strategy vs. HR operations

18% of CHROs/VPHRs report to the President/Chancellor

Problem:
Does not improve cabinet partnerships or embed CHRO in broader strategy discussions

Solution:
Require CHRO to set cabinet talent agenda, raise data-informed problems and solutions

Where Do We Go From Here?

Baseline Investments to Get in the Game	Transformational Efforts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Invest in baseline data collection (e.g., turnover rate, time-to-hire, employee satisfaction). <input type="checkbox"/> Recruit and/or develop a strategic CHRO by redefining role and competencies to focus on business strategy versus HR operations . <input type="checkbox"/> Start upskilling current HR staff with a focus on technology, data analytics, and talent strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Restructure HR roles and competencies to improve employee recruitment, retention, engagement, and performance. <input type="checkbox"/> Redesign HR organizational structure to align staff capacity with talent strategy. <input type="checkbox"/> Use shared services and/or outsourcing to improve HR efficiency and service quality, as well as free up staff capacity for higher-value activities.

Job-seekers and employers alike benefit from an increasingly fluid, often boundaryless job market.

The rise of digital tools like LinkedIn and Glassdoor in the early- and mid-2000s ushered in a new era of job market fluidity. All of a sudden, people working in office-based roles and service and knowledge industries could access thousands of job postings in any location in a matter of seconds, provided that they had internet access. With greater autonomy and transparency, the way that prospective applicants navigated the job search changed for good.

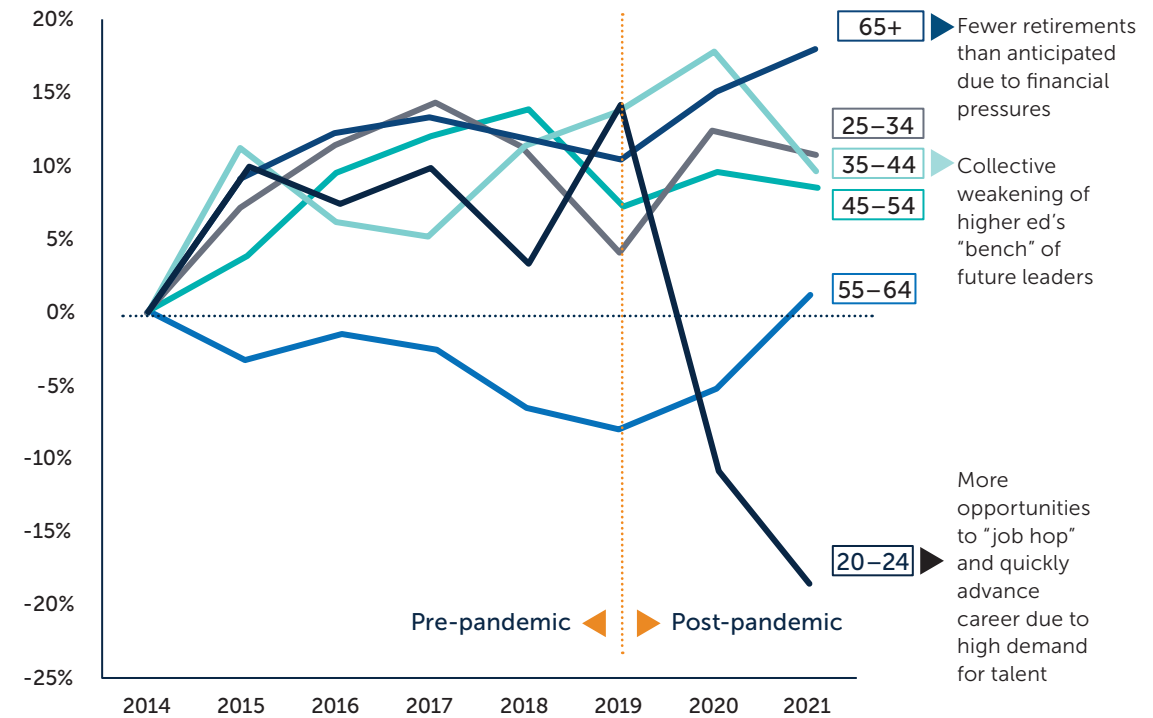
Out-of-sector companies quickly learned they could no longer sit back and rely on passive recruitment to develop robust candidate pools. Instead, they had to develop active recruiting capabilities and targeted sourcing strategies to build a talent pipeline and capitalize on new sources of newly available candidates. The tables also turned with the realization that employers were not just interviewing applicants; applicants were also interviewing them. This required new recruiting processes designed to “sell” positions to applicants as much as screen them.

Along with changing the way applicants search for work, more recently, remote work technology has also transformed the boundaries of the workplace itself. It has eliminated geographic barriers for certain roles and fields, enabling employers to tap previously inaccessible talent pools.

Historically, higher ed’s above-average workforce stability insulated colleges and universities from this new dynamism. “Post-and-pray” recruiting tactics and slow-moving interviewing timelines are still the norm even today. Many campus leaders also underestimate how crucial internal hiring and career development for staff are in today’s competitive recruiting environment, resulting in a weakened leadership bench and underdeveloped talent pipeline. Moreover, higher ed’s deeply engrained culture of in-person operations means tech-enabled work modes (e.g., remote, hybrid) remain the exception, not the rule, for most staff.

But in a job seeker’s market, institutions can no longer afford to wait for applicants to seek them out, nor can they ignore the growing role technology plays in recruiting and retaining top talent.

A Growing Divide Between Early- and Late-Career Workers in Higher Ed
Percent change from 2014, not seasonally adjusted



Where Do We Go From Here?

Baseline Investments to Get in the Game	Transformational Efforts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift from passive to active recruiting techniques to grow prospective applicant pipeline. Reduce barriers to entry (e.g., years of experience) and bias in job descriptions and hiring processes that narrow applicant pool. Create remote work policy that broadens applicant pools and helps retain top performers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grow digital-first recruiting capabilities among HR staff and hiring managers. Use digital tools and tech to streamline and personalize candidate experience. Explore full range of flexible work (e.g., non-standard hours, four-day week) and employment (e.g., contract, gig) models to attract and retain talent.

Employees no longer devote themselves to one employer for decades, but their expectations for personalized and fulfilling employment are higher than ever.

The new fluidity of the job market and continuous workforce churn meant corporate employers stopped assuming people would work for the same company for decades. Companies modernized their expectations and practices for recruitment, retention, and engagement to align with more frequent turnover. They also recognized some turnover is not only inevitable, but beneficial. Vacancies offer opportunities to reimagine roles and advance high-potential employees internally within the company.

Even though most employees no longer spend decades working at a single company, expectations for a quality employee experience have kept rising. Employees expect not only competitive benefits packages, but also more personalized benefits tailored to their individual needs. They seek not only meaningful work but also deep personal fulfillment from their roles. Out-of-sector employers have therefore invested in family-friendly benefits, employee well-being and culture initiatives, and broader social impact to enrich their employee value proposition.

An **Employee Value Proposition (EVP)** is all the ways through which an organization provides value to employees and convinces people to want to work (and stay) there. More than just a list of benefits and perks, an EVP draws on the intangible benefits and emotional impact of working at an organization. Conversely, an EVP helps employers attract the talent they want and need based on their broader strategic goals. A compelling EVP is a key part of the corporate talent playbook but is often missing from Talent strategy in higher education.

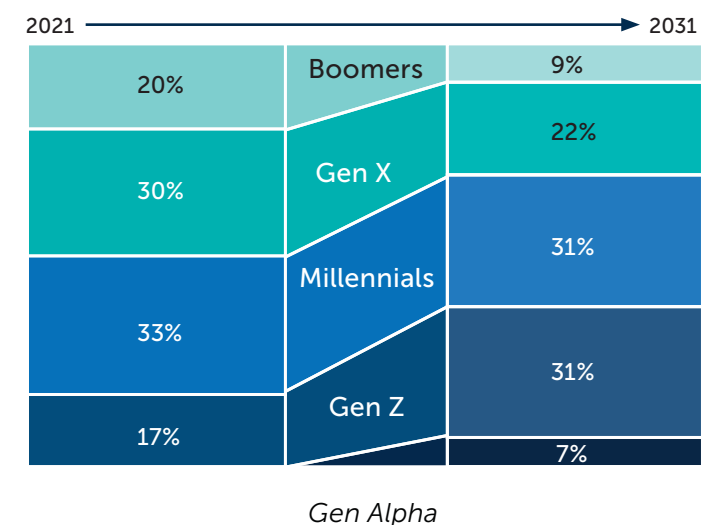
In higher ed, historically lower-than-average employee churn has masked this trend and created a false sense of security and employee loyalty. Similarly, higher ed's track record of strong benefits such as tuition remission have caused leaders to assume these offerings are differentiators. But while higher ed could once claim that its non-compensation benefits were distinctive, that is no longer the case given widespread adoption out-of-sector.

The redefinition of higher ed's social contract goes even deeper. While institutions often position themselves as an engine of social mobility for their students, the same cannot be said for their employees. In truth, the question of higher ed's ROI applies not just to students expecting a rewarding career after graduation but also to staff seeking a rewarding career at the institution.

Indeed, the very definition of career ROI has changed. Once a simpler calculation of tangible compensation and benefits, younger generations seek a larger purpose, psychological fulfillment, and access to future opportunities. These heightened expectations only make it more imperative that institutions develop a compelling Employee Value Proposition.

Preparing for a Five-Generation Workforce

Change in Higher Ed Workforce Composition by Generation, 2021–2031 (Projected)



Where Do We Go From Here?

Baseline Investments to Get in the Game	Transformational Efforts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make exit and stay interviews the status quo across all divisions and departments via training and incentives. <input type="checkbox"/> Audit current benefits offerings to assess employee uptake and competitiveness in the market. <input type="checkbox"/> Embed organizational values and social impact into recruitment (e.g., employment website, job descriptions). <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and deploy tactics to increase career development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Establish campus-wide succession planning process and requirements, including for non-executive roles. <input type="checkbox"/> Build intentional career lattices and a culture of talent sharing to strengthen your internal talent pipeline and enable employee mobility and agency. <input type="checkbox"/> Develop and articulate a compelling employee value proposition that aligns with modern workforce needs/preferences and incorporates intangible benefits of working at the institution.

CODA

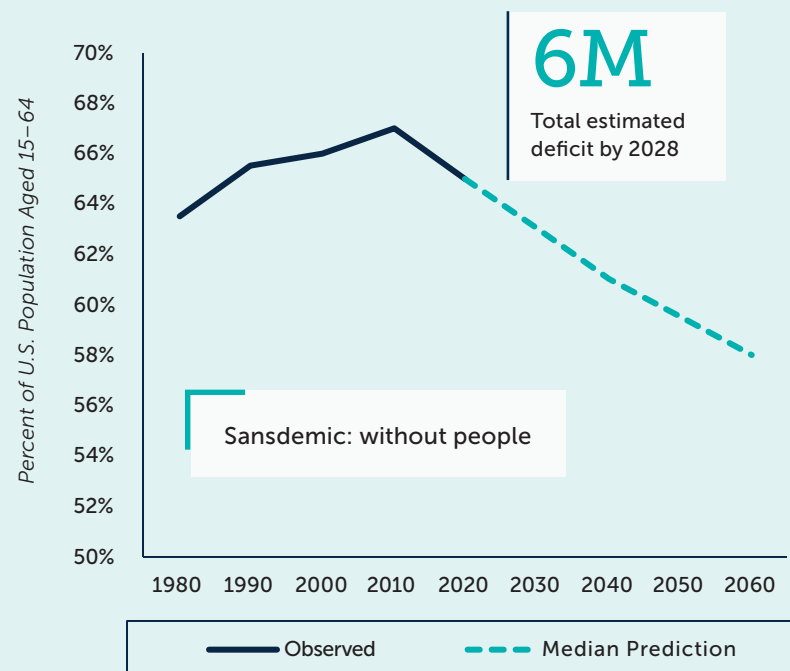
Preparing for a Workforce With Fewer People

The Demographic Cliff Just as Urgent for the Workforce

The looming demographic decline of 18-year-olds has provoked a robust response at many institutions concerned about the threat to enrollment. But few institutions also recognize what this population decline will mean for their future workforce. It will be yet another of the far-reaching effects of the coming Sansdemic, a term meaning “without people.” By 2028 the United States will face a six million deficit in workers aged 15–64.¹¹ Today’s heightened competition, smaller applicant pools, and constant turnover are not temporary phenomena—they are long-term structural challenges.

From Great Resignation to Great Sansdemic

Decline in working age population



Just as campus leaders have responded to the enrollment threat, they must now prepare to weather the contracting labor force. Not only will competitive recruitment, retention, and engagement be more important than ever, but institutions will also need to proactively develop the administrative efficiency, flexible worker skillsets, and top-of-license performance required to operate with a leaner and higher-performing workforce. The importance of recruiting the right people, not just enough people, to the right roles will be at a premium.



We’ve had plenty of strategic cabinet conversations about enrollment and the demographic cliff, but we have not had enough about talent and changing workforce demographics. This needs to be on the agenda.”

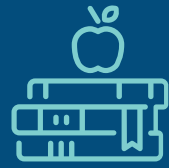
Jean Gallagher, Vice President for Strategy and Partnerships, Pace University

As institutions navigate the ever-changing labor market, EAB will continue to assess potential threats while providing best practices and ongoing support to build a competitive, high-performance talent organization. **See pages 36–37 for immediately available services for Strategic Advisory Services partners.**

How EAB Can Help You Advance Talent Strategy

Access Tools and Resources

1



Recruitment and Retention Resource Center

Review best practices for inclusive hiring, flexible work, career development, and employee experience.

2



Staff Recruitment and Onboarding White Paper

Learn how to address four major pain points in recruiting and onboarding processes.

Apply Best Practices on Your Campus

3



Job Description Audit and Review Service

Revise descriptions to reduce barriers, increase readability, and better convince applicants to apply.

4



Employment Website Audit and Review Service

Modernize your website to bolster the usability and value for applicants.

5



EAB-Facilitated Session for Senior Leadership Team

Bring EAB experts to your campus (in-person or virtual) to facilitate a discussion on talent strategy.

6



Financial Performance Collaborative

Implement peer-tested solutions to promote administrative effectiveness and performance.

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