College staff continue to be unsung heroes.

Aldemaro Romero Jr.
CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

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For many of us in higher education, the staff that work at colleges and universities are unsung heroes. After all, most faculty are protected by tenure and academic freedom. Administrators also have a great deal of autonomy and job security. Yet, staff members—who are department secretaries, computer specialists, food service workers, groundskeepers, parking attendants, custodians, and library technicians—have little or no protection for advancement and can sometimes be dismissed without notice.

Faculties, administrators, and students are all part of the public consciousness, but little is known about staff. Now a new report is shedding some light on these often invisible people.

A study titled “Staff in Higher Education Salary Reports: Key Findings, Trends, and Compensatory Tables for the 2016-17 Academic Year” published last May is providing some very interesting and sometimes surprising information.

Among the findings are that higher education staff have an annual median pay of $37,000, hardly enough to support a family unless someone else in the household is also working. Among them, the skilled craft workers on the highest pay, and service/ maintenance workers the lowest.

As expected, there is also a great deal of geographic variation when it comes to salaries. Staff, with schools in the Northeast paying the most and those in the South paying the least. Yet, once adjusted for cost of living, the salaries come out to be about the same.

One surprising finding is that racial/ethnic minorities are underrepresented in college and university jobs in all but service/ maintenance positions. This is also in line with the pattern that the staff areas except skilled crafts, they are paid less than men in all except office/ clerical work. When it comes to ethnicity, there is also a minority pay gap favoring white staff over other races.

Also, the gender pay gap is greater among older employees. The study found that experience—measured by number of years in a position—does not mitigate this imbalance, as the pay gap is also greater for those with more seniority. The authors of the report also found that there is a wide pay range for staff positions, ranging from the early $10s to $75 per hour for age 65 and beyond. The exception is in the area of skilled craft positions, where most are likely to be in their late 40s and early 50s.

The authors of this study with Jacqueline Briel and Jasper McChesney, who produced it for the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPHR). They found that the overall median years in a position for higher education staff was four. The lowest turnover is among skilled craft workers in the Northeast, who have a median of 11 years in their position.

These authors surveyed 727 institutions, which provided data on 169,358 staff for the 149 position types studied. The colleges and universities they analyzed are well representative of type of institution—research-focused, teaching-focused, public universities, community colleges, and region.

The survey findings are very comprehensive and include key demographic variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, birth year (estimated age), and years in position to position all the variables for staff. The survey was carried out online between November 2016 and February 2017. The findings are available at http://www.cuphr.org/surveys/sha.aspx.

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