Issue Brief September 2008

TOO MANY RUNGS ON THE LADDER?

FACULTY DEMOGRAPHICS AND THE FUTURE LEADERSHIP OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SUMMARY

There is a dearth of young permanent faculty who will have the time and opportunity to advance up the academic career ladder into positions of administrative leadership at colleges and universities. This scarcity of young academics seems to be the combined result of three developments: an aging professoriate, rising numbers of part-time and non–tenure-line faculty, and students completing doctoral education and entering the professoriate later in life. This issue brief describes the demographics of junior faculty, explains why there are so few young adults in the professoriate, outlines the level of experience expected of current leaders, and discusses the implications for the future leadership of higher education. Among the highlights:

- Only 3 percent of faculty at four-year institutions are individuals aged 34 or younger working in tenure-line positions. Adding tenured or tenure-track faculty aged 35 to 44 only raises this proportion to 15 percent. Similarly, only 3 percent of community college faculty are full-time employees aged 34 or younger. When those aged 35 to 44 are added, this proportion increases to 11 percent.[1]

- Although women and people of color generally make up a larger proportion of young tenure-line faculty than of older faculty, the low total number of young faculty translates to very few women and people of color in the permanent faculty. Women under the age of 45 in permanent positions make up 5 percent of faculty at four-year institutions and 6 percent of community college faculty. People of color under the age of 45 in permanent positions represent 4 percent of faculty at four-year institutions, and 6 percent of faculty at community colleges.

- At four-year institutions, explanations for the dearth of young permanent faculty include the rising number of untenured positions, students completing doctorates at a later age than earlier generations, the increased prevalence of postdoctoral appointments, and the rising number of male and, in particular, female young academics who take time away from their careers to care for young children.

- At community colleges, the prevalence of part-time faculty is a major explanation for the low number of young full-time faculty. In addition, it appears that for many community college faculty, teaching may be a second career.

- At the same time that there are few young academics on the first rung of the higher education career ladder, ACE research has found that leaders at the top of the ladder—college and university presidents—are older and more experienced than at any time in the last 20 years.

[1] Throughout this issue brief, permanent faculty are defined as those in tenure-line (tenured or tenure-track) positions at four-year institutions and those in full-time positions at community colleges. For more information, see “Important Differences Between Four-Year Institutions and Community Colleges” on page 3.

These data paint a clear picture of an emerging problem: Permanent junior faculty make up a diminishing share of the professoriate, and most of these individuals will not have time to earn tenure (at four-year institutions and some community colleges) and then rise up the traditional administrative ladder from department chair, to dean, to chief academic officer, amassing the kind and amount of experience typical of current leaders. If the current model will not work for those entering the leadership pipeline today, then higher education must find ways to bring more young people into the permanent faculty and advance them through the academic ranks more quickly, alter the career ladder so that people can skip rungs and rise to the presidency with fewer years of experience, or become more open to individuals from areas other than academic affairs.

INTRODUCTION

Two major trends have dominated discussions about the academic workforce in recent years. First, the graying of the faculty has been a trend in higher education since the abolition of mandatory retirement in 1994. As the baby boom generation approaches retirement age, campuses have paid increasing attention to developing retirement policies and programs that meet both institutional and individual faculty needs.[2] Second, faculty organizations and others have raised alarms about the increased use of contingent faculty and other part-time and non-tenure-track instructors.[3]

What seems to have flown below the collective radar of higher education, however, is the combined effect of these and several other trends—students delaying graduate school in order to gain career experience, students taking longer to complete doctoral programs, and the growing prevalence of postdoctoral appointments—on both the number and age of permanent faculty. Across higher education, young faculty who will have time and opportunity during their careers for an extended period of scholarly or administrative leadership are increasingly rare. As a result, higher education may be required to re-examine its traditional career ladder that leads from junior faculty member, through the faculty ranks and various levels of academic administration, culminating in the presidency. Future leaders of higher education simply may not have time to touch every rung on this ladder.

[2] Wheeler, David L. (2008, June 13). Colleges explore new ways to manage retirements. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*

[3] See, for example, American Association of University Professors. (2003, November). Contingent appointments and the academic profession. Washington, DC: Author.

Important Differences Between Four-Year Institutions and Community Colleges

At four-year institutions, the near universal use of tenure makes it easy to identify faculty who will have the option to pursue future positions of leadership. Faculty outside tenure-line positions rarely have permanent status and are generally excluded from the traditional academic career ladder. The diverse nature of academic work at community colleges makes it much more difficult to readily identify faculty who are in the pipeline to serve as academic and administrative leaders. Many community colleges do not use traditional academic ranks, for example, although others do. More importantly, tenure may reflect either time in position, as at elementary/secondary schools, or a judgment about the quality of an individual's work, as at four-year colleges and universities. A better criterion for identifying community college faculty who are in the pipeline to serve institutions as academic and administrative leaders is full-time employment with faculty status. While far from perfect, these conditions do at least allow for an examination of individuals for whom academic work for a single institution is the primary occupation and who are likely to be eligible to move into positions of leadership.

Given these important differences, this issue brief presents information separately for faculty at four- and two-year institutions and makes no comparisons between faculty at these two types of institutions. The section on four-year institutions focuses on tenure status and rank, as well as age, while the section on two-year institutions focuses on full- or part-time employment, age, and years in academe.

PROFILE OF FACULTY AT FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

In 2003–04, the last year for which data are available, almost half (48 percent) of all faculty at four-year institutions were either not in tenure-track positions or worked at institutions that do not offer tenure (see **Figure 1**).[4] The remaining faculty, who were either tenured or tenure-track, were divided as follows: 21 percent held the rank of full professor, 15 percent were associate professors, 14 percent were assistant professors, and the remaining 2 percent were instructors, lecturers, or held some other title. The share of faculty who were tenure-track assistant professors ranged from 11 percent at private not-for-profit master's universities to 18 percent at public master's universities (see **Figure 2**).[5]

In 2004, the median age of tenure-track assistant professors was 40; only 19 percent of them, or approximately 19,000 individuals across all public and private not-for-profit four-year institutions, were aged 34 or younger.[6] Combining data on faculty age with the information

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all data on faculty are from the 2003–04 National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF 04), produced by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. All statistics cited refer to individuals with faculty status who had instructional duties for credit (teaching courses, advising or supervising students' academic activities, serving on undergraduate or graduate thesis or dissertation committees, supervising independent study or one-on-one instruction, etc.) during the fall 2003 academic term. Statistics for four-year institutions include public and private not-for-profit institutions; statistics for community colleges include only public two-year institutions.

[5] These statistics include the small number of faculty who have already earned tenure but retain the rank of assistant professor. Across all four-year institutions, only 6 percent of assistant professors are tenured. Because these individuals are also potential future faculty or administrative leaders, they are included with those assistant professors who are on the tenure track but have not yet earned tenure.

[6] Because assistant professors represent 86 percent of all tenured or tenure-track faculty at four-year institutions under the age of 35, they are the focus of this issue brief.

presented in Figure 1 about the proportion of faculty in tenure-line positions reveals that only 3 percent of all faculty are tenure-track individuals aged 34 or younger (see **Figure 3**). Adding tenured or tenure-track faculty aged 35 to 44 raises this proportion, but only to 15 percent.

Although women and people of color generally make up a larger proportion of young tenure-line faculty than older faculty (see **Table 1**), the low total number of young faculty in tenured or tenure-track positions translates to very few women and people of color in the permanent faculty roles that would position them for future leadership. Across all four-year institutions, only 5 percent of all faculty are women under the age of 45 working in tenure-line positions. Similarly, only 4 percent of all faculty are people of color who meet the same description.[7] Further, the racial/ethnic distribution of young faculty of color does not match the distribution of either the general population or student enrollment; more than half of young tenure-line faculty of color are Asian American.

FACULTY EDUCATION AND CAREER TRENDS AT FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Why are there so few young faculty in tenured or tenure-track positions? Of course, one reason is higher education's growing reliance on adjunct faculty to cope with shrinking state support and shifting student academic interests. Between 1993 and 2003, the proportion of faculty at four-year institutions in tenure-line positions dropped from 60 percent to 52 percent (see **Figure 4**).

Another clear reason is that faculty are completing doctoral programs at a later age. Forty-seven percent of full professors in 2003 had completed a doctorate before turning 30; only 24 percent of assistant professors in the same year had completed a doctorate while in their 20s.[8] Conversely, while only 20 percent of full professors completed their doctorates after turning 40, 40 percent of assistant professors did not complete a doctorate until after the age of 40. Similarly, 41 percent of full professors had earned a doctorate within six years of completing a bachelor's degree. Only 22 percent of assistant professors had moved so quickly through the educational pipeline. For half of assistant professors, 10 or more years passed between earning a bachelor's degree and completing a doctorate. It is not clear whether the trend toward completing graduate education later in life is due primarily to students entering graduate school later or taking longer to complete a doctorate; most likely, both have occurred.[9]

In the sciences and engineering, it often is not possible to obtain a faculty job without first completing a postdoctoral appointment, further delaying the age at which students enter the professoriate. The number of "postdocs" has expanded rapidly at four-year institutions, primarily in the sciences. According to the National Science Foundation, the number of individuals with

[7] Sample sizes are inadequate to accurately estimate the percentage of tenure-line faculty at four-year institutions who are young women of color.

[8] The figures in this paragraph refer only to tenured and tenure-track faculty with doctorates.

[9] Findings from the Survey of Earned Doctorates suggest that the trends toward older doctorate earners and longer time-to-degree peaked in the mid- to late-1990s (see National Science Foundation. (2006, March). Time to degree of U.S. research doctorate recipients. Info Brief NSF06-312). Further, a Council of Graduate Schools analysis shows that the median age of doctoral students dropped from 31 in 1995–96 to 29 in 2003–04, suggesting that the aging of doctoral students may also have peaked (see Council of Graduate Schools. (2007, January/February). Data sources: Who is enrolling in doctoral programs? The changing characteristics of doctoral students, 1996 to 2004. *CGS Communicator*).

science or engineering postdocs rose by 30 percent between 1996 and 2006, although the rate of growth has slowed considerably since 2003.[10]

Finally, young academics often must slow their progress toward either earning a doctorate or achieving tenure in order to start a family. While men are increasingly active in childrearing, women are still more likely to reduce professional activities in order to care for young children. This pattern is borne out in the data; the median age of female assistant professors is two years higher than the median age of male assistant professors (41 and 39, respectively).

PROFILE OF FACULTY AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Part-time faculty account for the majority of the academic workforce at community colleges; in fall 2003, 62 percent of faculty at community colleges worked part time. Among the minority of faculty who worked full time, only 7 percent were aged 34 or younger. When employment status and age are combined, only 3 percent of all community college faculty are full-time employees aged 34 or younger (see **Figure 5**). When those aged 35 to 44 are added, this proportion increases to 11 percent.

Even though women make up half of all young full-time faculty at community colleges, because there are so few such faculty (see **Table 2**), only 6 percent of all community college faculty are women aged 44 or younger in full-time positions. Likewise, while the proportion of young full-time faculty who are people of color is higher than among their older peers, only 6 percent of all community college faculty are people of color under the age of 45 working in full-time positions.[11]

FACULTY EDUCATION AND CAREER TRENDS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Only one in five full-time community college faculty has a doctorate or professional degree, so trends in doctoral education have less effect on the age at which individuals enter the professoriate. Most full-time faculty (64 percent) had earned their highest degree before turning 35, so delays in completing the requisite training do not appear to have a large effect on the age of community college faculty.

What does seem to have changed is the age at which community college faculty enter this line of work. Among the full-time community college faculty who entered academe in the 1980s, only 14 percent were aged 40 or older when they became faculty. Among those entering academe since 1996, more than 40 percent were aged 40 or older. It appears that, for an increasing proportion of community college faculty, teaching may be a second career.

Of course, the most significant trend has been the increased use of part-time faculty. In 1993, 53 percent of community college faculty worked part time. A decade later, that proportion had risen to 62 percent (see **Figure 6**). While the total number of faculty increased by one-third during this decade, the number of full-time faculty under age 45 declined, from approximately 34,000 to approximately 32,000.

[10] National Science Foundation. (2007, December). First-time, full-time graduate student enrollment in science and engineering increase in 2006, especially among foreign students. Info Brief NSF08-302.

[11] As at four-year institutions, the sample size is not large enough to accurately estimate the percentage of full-time community college faculty who are young women of color.

THE ACADEMIC CAREER LADDER

These data present many possible implications for higher education. For example, how inspired will current undergraduates be to pursue an academic career if they see few young faculty? Or, how well can higher education keep pace with rapid changes in technology if so few of our faculty are part of the "net generation"? This issue brief addresses only one of the many possible questions arising from these data: What are the implications for the future administrative leadership of higher education? If these future leaders must demonstrate the level of experience demanded of those in charge today, is the current leadership model sustainable?

The aging of junior faculty might not pose a problem for the future leadership of higher education if these individuals could rise rapidly to positions of authority. However, findings from the ACE American College President Study suggest that the road to the senior leadership of colleges and universities is longer today than at any time in the past 20 years.[12] In 1986, 42 percent of presidents were aged 50 or younger; 20 years later, only 8 percent of presidents fit this description. Conversely, in 1986, only 14 percent of presidents were aged 61 or older. In 2006, almost half of all presidents (49 percent) were in this age bracket (see **Figure 7**).

Not only are today's college presidents older, but they are also more experienced. Twenty-one percent came to their current position from another presidency (up from 17 percent in 1986), and 8 percent have served in at least two presidencies (up from 6 percent in 1986). Forty-seven percent served in the chief academic officer position during at least one of their last two prior positions, up from 33 percent in 1986. Presidents in 2006 had served an average of 8.6 years in their current position, up from 6.3 years in 1986. In total, current presidents had an average of 22 years of experience in their current and prior two positions alone, plus an average of eight years of experience as full-time faculty.[13]

The range of prior positions that current presidents have held was also narrower in 2006 than in 1986, suggesting that boards and presidential search committees are demanding not only more experience, but also that presidents have ascended through the traditional hierarchy of academic affairs. In 1986, 40 percent of presidents came to their current positions from either another presidency or the chief academic officer position. By 2006, that percentage had risen to 53 percent (see **Figure 8**).[14]

[12] American Council on Education. (2007). *The American college president: 2007 edition.* Washington, DC: Author.

[13] Average total years of experience based on a new analysis not published in *The American College President: 2007 Edition.* A small proportion of presidents were full-time faculty in one or both of their two prior positions, so there is overlap between these two averages for some presidents.

[14] The percentage of presidents who came from outside academe has been relatively stable, rising from 10 percent in 1986 to 13 percent in 2006. ACE does not have consistent trend data on the share of presidents coming from administrative roles outside academic affairs, such as chief administrative, development, or student affairs officer. In 2006, these individuals accounted for only 17 percent of presidents.

IMPLICATIONS

The level of experience now required of presidents is, at least in part, driven by the increased complexity of the job. The American College President Study also has documented the changing nature of the presidency and the ever-broadening scope of issues and challenges that presidents must address. It is therefore not surprising that boards and search committees have sought out the most experienced leaders. That boards have been successful in tapping such experienced leaders is a reflection of the current demographics of higher education; there is a large reservoir of individuals who entered academe as young faculty during higher education's period of rapid expansion in the 1960s and '70s, and who haven risen through the ranks of academic leadership. As these individuals retire, it is an opportune time for the higher education community to re-examine the leadership pipeline and whether it will continue to serve higher education's needs given the changing nature of the professoriate.

ACE's studies of college presidents reveal that the road to the presidency is both longer and more circumscribed than at any time in the last 20 years. When these findings are considered along with the information presented here about the composition and demographics of faculty, a clear problem comes into focus: Permanent junior faculty make up a diminishing share of the professoriate and most of these individuals will not have time prior to the typical retirement age of 65 to earn tenure (at four-year institutions and some community colleges) and then rise up the traditional administrative ladder from department chair, to dean, to chief academic officer, amassing the kind and amount of experience typical of current leaders.

Of course, many people today are very active in their careers well into their 70s, and so it may be that today's 40-year-old assistant professors will be tomorrow's 65- and 70-year-old college presidents. But if the demands of leading higher education institutions continue to grow, many of these potential future leaders may opt out of taking on that enormous responsibility at the time that their peers are contemplating retirement. If this latter scenario proves correct, the current model will not work for those entering the leadership pipeline today. Higher education must find ways to bring more young people through graduate school into the permanent faculty and advance them through the academic ranks more quickly, alter the career ladder so that people can skip rungs and rise to the presidency with fewer years of experience, or become more open to individuals with career paths other than the traditional academic route. The market may eventually drive these changes, but it makes little sense to wait to consider this problem until it is at our doorstep. Now is the time to begin discussing how the leadership pipeline might be altered to adapt to current demographic realities.

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This issue brief is part of **The Spectrum Initiative: Advancing Diversity in the College Presidency**, a multiyear national agenda designed to diversify and broaden executive leadership talent in higher education through programmatic and research initiatives. For more information on the initiative, visit www.acenet.edu/spectrum.

Figure 1.
Distribution of Faculty at Four-Year Institutions, by Tenure Status and Rank

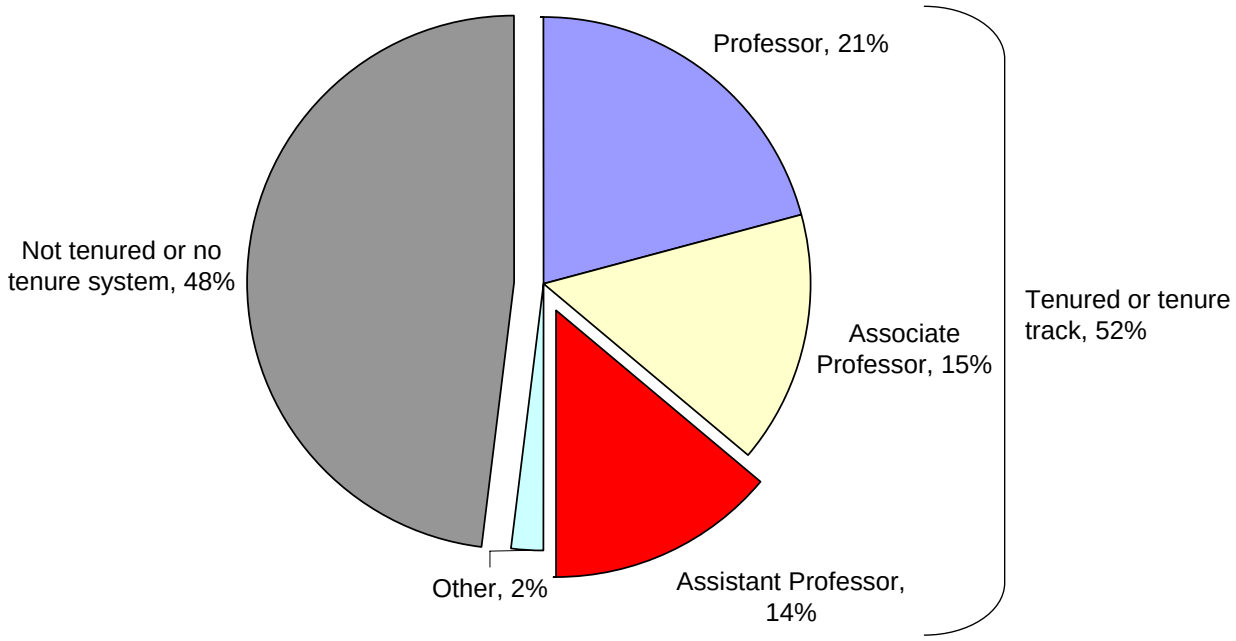


Figure 2.
Tenure-Track Assistant Professors as a Percentage of All Faculty, by Institution Type

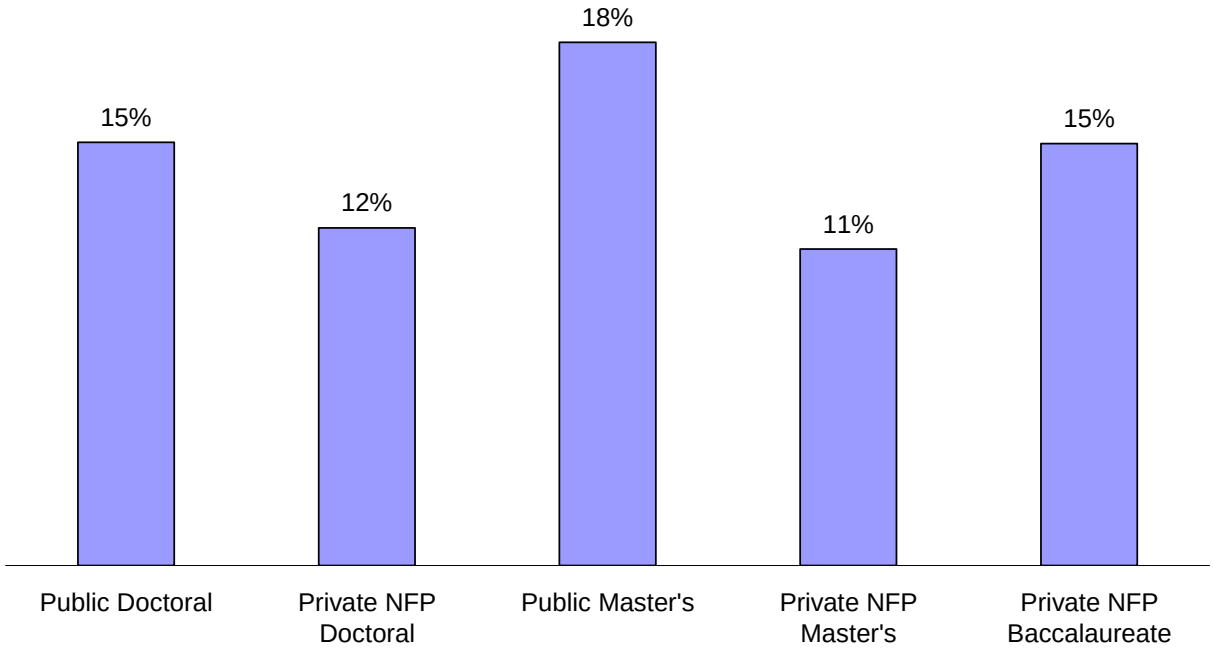
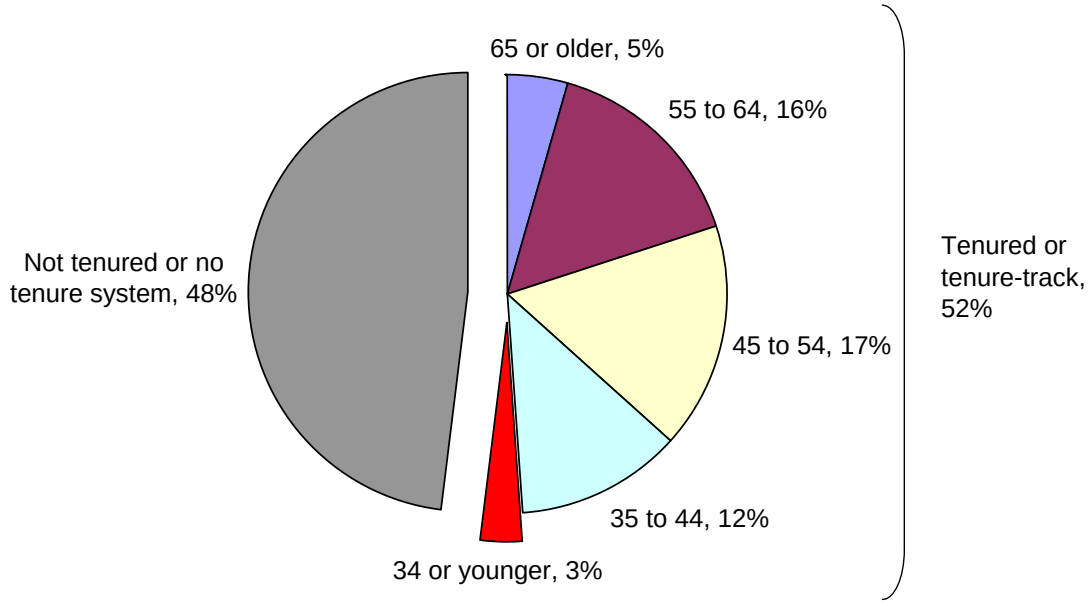


Figure 3.
Distribution of Faculty at Four-Year Institutions, by Age and Tenure Status



Note: Details do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 1
Gender and Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Tenure-Line Faculty at Four-Year Institutions, by Age

	Gender		Race/Ethnicity					
	Male	Female	White non-Hispanic	African American	Hispanic	Asian American	American Indian	More than one race/ethnicity
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
All Faculty	*68.8*	*31.2*	*81.3*	*5.0*	*2.4*	*9.2*	*0.3*	*1.9*
34 or Younger	62.0	38.0	72.0	8.4	2.8	14.3	0.1	2.4
35-44	64.9	35.2	75.0	4.7	3.3	14.2	0.2	2.7
45-54	65.7	34.4	81.4	5.1	2.6	8.9	0.3	1.8
55-64	72.9	27.1	85.9	4.9	1.8	5.6	0.3	1.5
65-70	80.8	19.2	89.2	3.2	1.9	4.0	0.2	1.5
71 or older	84.8	15.2	84.0	5.5	0.7	8.2	0.5	1.2

Figure 4.
Distribution of Faculty at Four-Year Institutions, by Tenure Status and Rank: 1993 and 2003

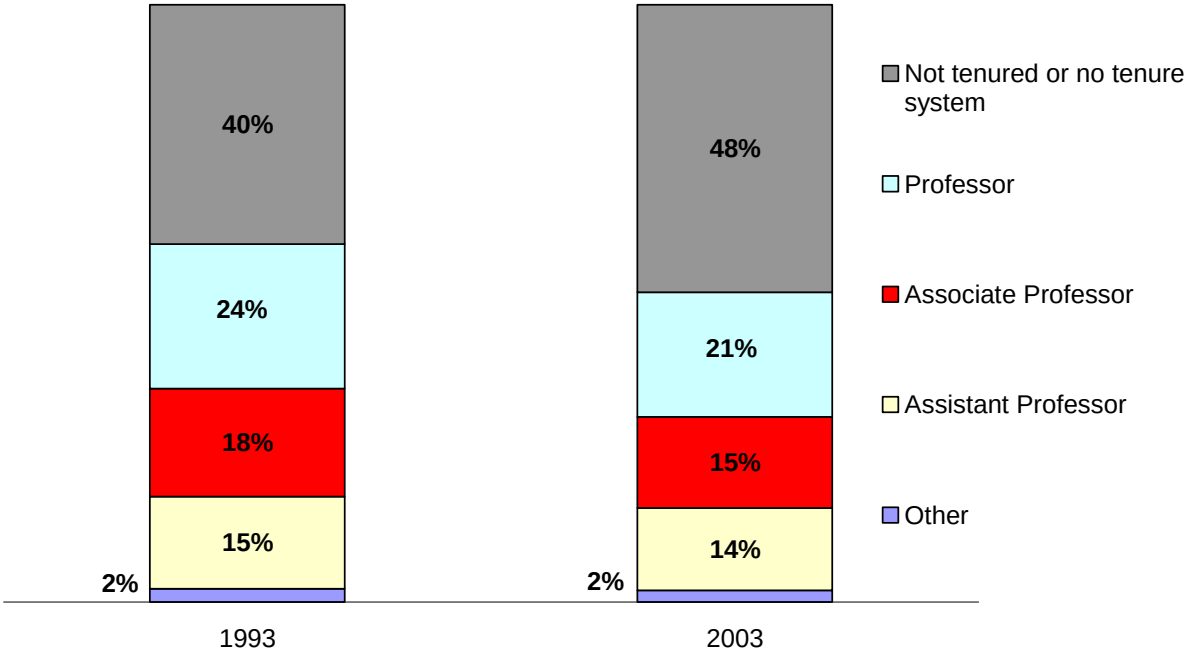


Figure 5.
Distribution of Community College Faculty, by Employment Status and Age

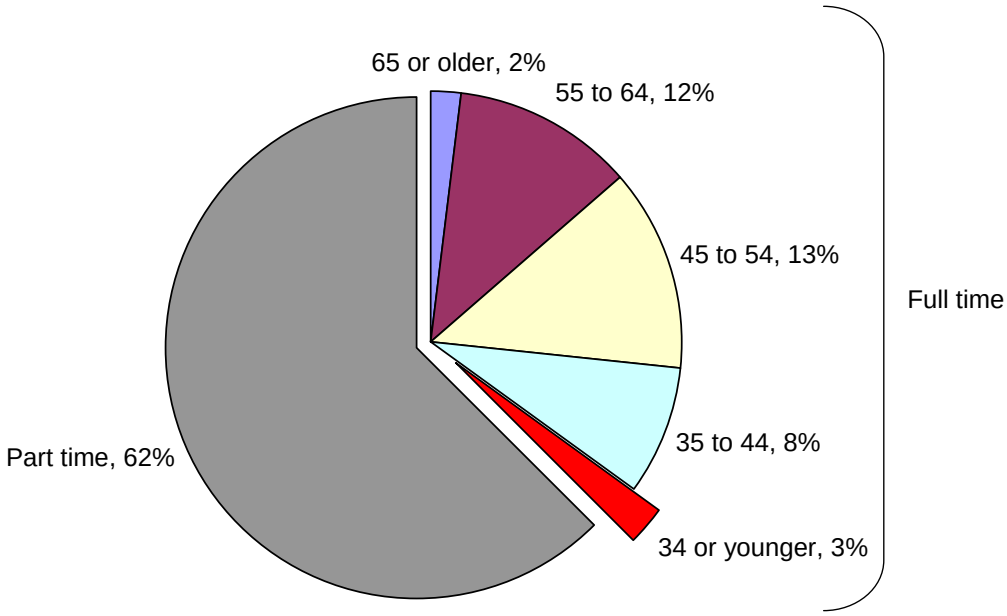


Table 2
Gender and Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Full-Time Faculty at Community Colleges, by Age

	Gender		Race/Ethnicity					
	Male	Female	White non-Hispanic	African American	Hispanic	Asian American	American Indian	More than one race/ethnicity
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
All Faculty	*51.9*	*48.1*	*81.4*	*6.5*	*4.9*	*3.9*	*0.4*	*3.0*
34 or Younger	49.6	50.4	73.5	11.7	8.3	3.1	1.6	1.8
35-44	48.3	51.7	79.4	7.2	6.7	4.0	0.1	2.6
45-54	47.4	52.6	80.1	6.3	4.9	4.6	0.3	3.9
55-64	58.4	41.6	84.9	5.1	3.1	3.8	0.5	2.7
65-70	62.4	37.7	88.9	5.6	3.0	1.6	0.0	1.0
71 or older	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Figure 6
Distribution of Community College Faculty, by Employment Status and Age: 1993 and 2003

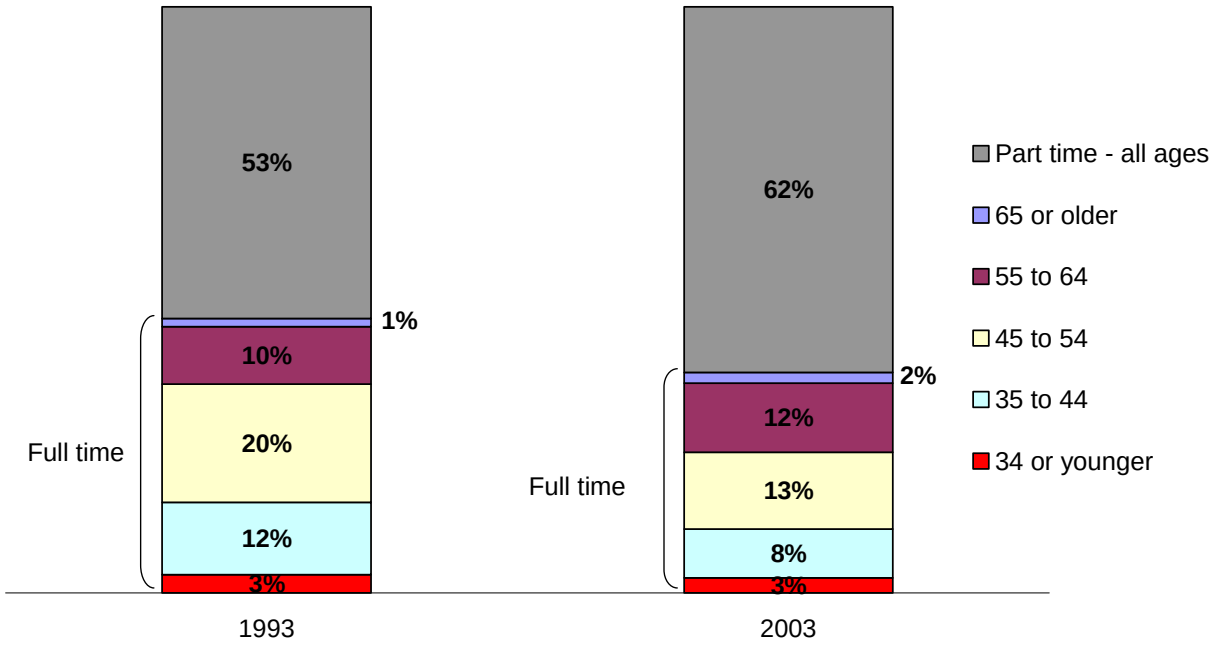


Figure 7.
Distribution of Presidents by Age: 1986 and 2006

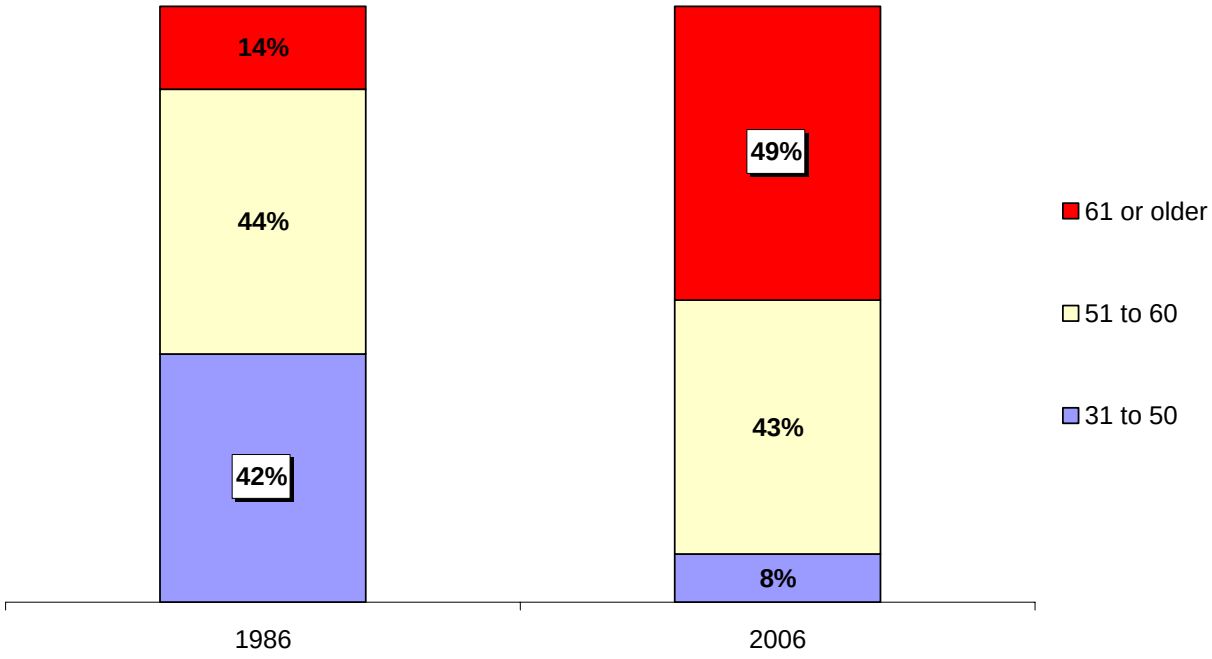
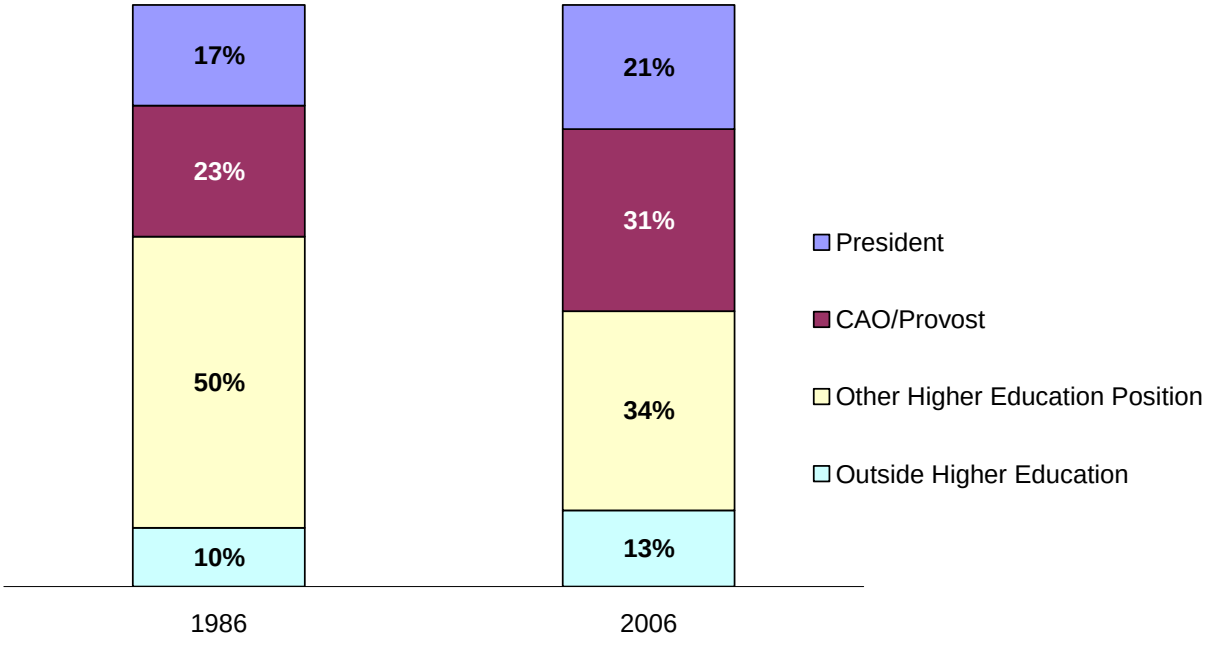


Figure 8.
Distribution of Presidents by Immediate Prior Position: 1986 and 2006



Note: Because of differences in question wording between the 1986 and 2006 surveys, it is not possible to disaggregate the "Other Higher Education Position" category.