A Living Wage for Education Support Professionals

By Vicki J. Rosser

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Colleges and universities are healing from the Great Recession, but their workers are growing impatient with the countless excuses they’re given for failing to restore salaries. At best, education support professionals (ESPs) receive minimal increases. Many ESPs just maintain their current salaries or suffer decreases. Meanwhile, administrators expand their ranks, and legislators give million-dollar tax breaks to business startups.

Salary discussions for ESPs must focus on earning a living wage: the amount it takes to live in the communities where they work. This chapter first updates the number of ESPs in each occupational category for public and private postsecondary schools, and then discusses the living wage debate in five states.

EMPLOYMENT BY OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORIES

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education disaggregated the former employment classifications into 11 more precise occupational categories. The new categories include business and financial operations; computer, engineering, and science; community service, legal, arts, and media; librarians, curators, and archivists; other teaching and instructional support; healthcare practitioners and technical; and service occupations.

Total employment at public and private institutions for the 11 categories is 1,795,170 (Figure 1). Office and administrative support is the largest category with 501,941 or 28 percent of all employees. Then follow service occupations (246,026 or 14 percent), computer, engineering, and science (237,342 or 13 percent), business and financial operations (196,225 or 11 percent), community service, legal, arts, and media (170,334 or nine percent), other teaching and instructional support (135,337 or eight percent), healthcare practitioners and technical (125,509 or seven percent), natural resources, construction, and maintenance (76,701 or four percent), librarians, curators, and archivists (67,278 or four percent), production,
transportation, and material moving (20,075 or one percent), and sales and related occupations (18,402 or one percent). A breakdown by gender and race/ethnicity in the employment categories is not yet available.

**PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**
For public institutions (total employees = 1,145,217), office and administrative support continues to be the largest occupational category with 317,678 or 28 percent of the total employees (Figure 2). The other categories in descending order: computer, engineering, and science (162,835 or 14 percent), service occupations (162,293 or 14 percent), business and financial operations (125,322 or 11 percent), community service, legal, arts, and media (98,725 or nine percent), other teaching and instructional support (96,347 or eight percent), healthcare practitioners and technical (80,655 or seven percent), natural resources, construction, and maintenance (56,182 or five percent), librarians, curators, and archivists (25,202 or two percent), production, transportation, and material moving (15,076 or one percent), and sales and related occupations (4,892 or less than one percent).

**PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS**
For private institutions, including non-profit and for-profit colleges (total employees = 649,953), office and administrative support made up (184,263 or 28 percent) of all employees, followed by computer, engineering, and science (74,507 or 11 percent), service occupations (83,733 or 13 percent), community service, legal, arts, and media (71,609 or 11 percent), business and financial operations (70,903 or 11 percent), healthcare practitioners and technical (44,844 or seven percent), librarians, curators, and archivists (42,076 or six percent), other teaching and instructional support (38,990 or six percent), natural resources, construction, and
maintenance (20,519 or three percent), sales and related occupations (13,510 or two percent), and production, transportation, and material moving (4,999 or less than one percent) (Figure 3). The shift in rank between the number of employees in sales and related occupations and in production, transportation, and material moving in public and private institutions suggests different workforce priorities by type of control within these two categories.

**A LIVING WAGE FOR CAMPUS WORKERS**

“People who live in the community should be able to live decently and raise their families,” states the *Harvard Living Wage Fact Sheet*. “Wage and benefits [must] take into account the area-specific cost of living, as well as the basic expenses involved in supporting a family.” In Massachusetts, for example, a wage earner with a family of four would have to net about $13 an hour, seven hours a day, five days a week, for 52 weeks a year to meet the federal poverty line of just over $23,000 a year.4 “Very few low-wage workers on American campuses even earn a poverty-level income, let alone receive health benefits,” states the report. “In 2009, 36 private-college presidents received more than $1-million in salaries, while provosts and other high-level administrators also received ample compensation packages—these are the primary culprits in denying living wages to low-wage employees.”5

Presidents earned exorbitant salaries in Maryland, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. ESPs, by contrast, received no meaningful raises in these states. At St. Mary’s College in Maryland, “students and the faculty senate are considering a new salary plan to get all the college’s staff off food stamps, ensure those lowest-paid employees see their wages...
rise with inflation and rein in administrative costs...to link presidential pay to that of the lowest-paid employees, and [that] would force a cut in salary at the top or raises for those at the bottom of the pay scale, and thus limit the president's salary to no more than 10 times the salary of the lowest-paid full-time staffer.”

At Brandeis University in Massachusetts, “After...President Jehuda Reinharz’s retirement package became public, an alumnus started a petition calling on the university to prevent the highest-paid employee from making more than 15 times the salary of the lowest-paid employee.” At the University of Miami, “President Donna Shalala makes $913,000, which is about 37 times the salary of a 40-hour-a-week janitor who makes $11.59 an hour.” Vanderbilt University’s “President Zeppos makes about $1 million a year in salary and bonuses, while some cafeteria workers make $16,500 a year—or 61 times less than Zeppos.” By contrast, Raymond Burse, Kentucky State University’s interim president, donated $90,000 of his salary to boost the pay of KSU minimum wage workers—allowing a jump in their hourly wages from $7.25 to $10.25.

Campus workers understand that they will never be in the “one percent” salary income category; that they work to fulfill an almost altruistic calling to help college students succeed. But taking a financial hit for the campus collective is one thing; paying the rent and putting food on the table for dependents is another. At Blue Ridge Community College, in Virginia, employees have had no “meaningful” raises in four years. State formulas constrain salaries at many public institutions. So when state finances are bleak, as they are now, what seems like modest pay at the onset can flatten out for long periods.
Administrators compensate for low-wages and soften the clamor for a living wage by offering benefits. Some employees perceive salaries and benefits as equally valuable. In addition to basic health, eye, and dental coverage, benefits offered in place of living wages include worker and dependent tuition reimbursement, financial incentives to purchase houses, wellness programs, defined contributions retirement plans, mini-grants to pursue individual interests, and job security and stability. But benefits were designed to enhance wages, not to replace their earnings or avoid paying a living wage.

How many ESPs live below the poverty level in the states where presidential salaries have substantially increased? The 2013 NEA ESP Data Book ranks Maryland third in average salaries for full-time campus workers at $47,775 (Table 1). Of the state’s 15,528 ESPs, 11,127 or 71.7 percent work full time, 4,401 or 28.3 percent work part time, and 1,421 or 10.1 percent live below the poverty level. The Data Book ranks Florida 31st in full time average earnings at $37,003. Of the state’s 27,727 ESP workers, 20,154 or 72.7 percent work full time, 7,573 or 27.3 percent work part time, and 2,674 or 10.3 percent are living below the poverty level.

Tennessee is ranked 47th in full time average earnings at $30,399. Of the state’s 10,837 ESPs, 8,187 or 75.5 percent work full time, 2,650 or 24.5 percent work part time, and 1,331 or 13.3 percent are living below the poverty line. Kentucky is ranked 40th at $35,046. Of the state’s 10,639 ESPs, 7,728 or 72.6 percent work full time, 2,911 or 27.4 percent work part time, and 1,530 or 15.5 percent are living below the poverty line. Finally, Virginia’s rank is ranked 29th at $37,339. Of the state’s 21,580 ESPs, 15,119 or 70.1 percent work full time, 6,461 or 29.9 percent work part time, and 2,874 or 14.8 percent are living below the poverty level. Together, 98,660 or 15.7 percent of ESP employees live below the poverty line on the nation’s college and university campuses.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter updated the public and private ESP employment numbers by occupational category, and then discussed the living wage for campus workers. It presented the rank of five selected states in average salaries for full-time ESPs, the status of full- and part-time workers, and the number and percent of campus workers living below poverty. A low salary rank did not necessarily result in a greater proportion of workers living below the poverty line, though the proportion in all five states was above ten percent. Senior administrative salaries and benefits continue to rise significantly and outpace ESP workers salary and benefits. ESP benefits should not be an “in kind” replacement for wages.

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NOTES

1 Fuller, 2012; Jaschik, 2011.
4 Eisenberg, 2012.
5 Ibid.
6 Rivard, 2014.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Davis, 2014.
10 Gose, 2012.
11 Ibid.
12 National Education Association, 2013, 72, 83, 84, and 111-112.

REFERENCES


