How do Purdue’s workforce patterns compare to other public research institutions? The Delta Cost Project at the American Institute for Research recently released a study, Labor Intensive or Labor Expensive, examining hiring trends of colleges and universities over time. Their study uses the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data going back to 1990. This report looks at how the Purdue West Lafayette campus compares on a number of items.

Nationally, the number of employees at colleges and universities between 2000 and 2012 grew more than 50% faster than the previous decade. The workforce increased by 19% for public research institutions between 2000 and 2012, while Purdue increased by 16%. However, since Purdue did not grow as much in the previous decade, the growth between 2000 and 2012 was 140% more than the growth from 1990 to 2000.

The proportion of Purdue's workforce has changed some over the years. Full-time faculty slightly decreased from 16% of the workforce to 15% while Purdue's percentage of part-time faculty was stable at 2% along with graduate assistants at around 30%. The largest differences were with staff positions, with the decrease in nonprofessional staff at 37% in 1990 to 32% in 2012. The professional positions increased by three percentage points during that time. This reflects planned growth in the areas of research, engagement, information technology and student affairs.

Comparably, the public research institutions' dramatic change in workforce since 1990 has attracted significant media attention. For public research institutions, administrative professional positions increased five percentage points to represent 25% of the workforce. The nonprofessional staff saw the largest decline as they were 23% of the workforce, compared to 39% in 1990. "Administrative bloat" is a rising concern across higher education, as nonfaculty staffing has grown considerably—but this growth stems largely from an increase in professional support jobs rather than high level executives and administrators" (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; pg 7). Meanwhile, graduate assistants at public research institutions saw the highest growth in 2012 from 12% to 20%, now equaling the same proportion of full-time faculty. The growth was much smaller at Purdue (.9 percentage points).
Delta Cost Project Comparison

The Delta Cost Project emphasized the growth of part-time faculty and graduate assistants. The report stated that research universities depended heavily on graduate assistants to provide part-time instruction and that "public research institutions, in particular, now employ as many graduate assistants as full-time professors" (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014; pg. 10). At Purdue, the number of part-time instructors and graduate assistants has remained relatively constant over time. The Delta Cost Project report makes the assumption that a significant number of graduate assistants are likely providing instruction, given the small share of part-time faculty (relative to total faculty) at research institutions compared with non-research institutions. However, when examining the breakdown of graduate assistants the claim does not seem to hold. Of the graduate assistants, less than half (45%; n=2,061) were teaching assistants at Purdue, and the rest (55%) were research assistants in 2012.

Additionally, during the last decade the focused interest in research at Purdue resulted in a growth of research assistantships by 9% (526 positions). Since 2002, the earliest year this breakdown is available, teaching assistantships have gone down by 267 positions.

Ten years ago, the three assistantship categories were more evenly divided for the public research institutions. There were 33% assistants, 31% research assistants, and 37% other (public service, or a combination of all three types). As of 2012, the graduate assistants category was made up of 42% teaching assistants, 30% research assistants, and 28% other. Yet, the claim that graduate assistants provide more instruction than full-time faculty is misleading. In 2012, there were a little over 248,000 full-time faculty members and approximately 98,000 teaching assistants. Clearly, more faculty members are providing instruction than teaching assistants.

Back in 1990, public colleges and universities averaged more full-time faculty positions than administrative positions (executive and professional). In 2012, the two were almost equal; a little less than one to one full-time faculty member (.9 at public research institutions; .8 at Purdue) for every administrator.

When including part-time faculty into the calculations, twenty years ago there were almost two faculty FTE members (1.9) to every administrator at Purdue. Over time, Purdue's index decreased to 1.4 (FTE) faculty positions per one administrative position. Comparatively, the public research institutions changed from 1.6 to 1.3 FTE faculty members per administrator.

One of the primary foci of the Delta Cost Project was the dramatic increase of professional administrative positions within higher education. The new professional positions provide business, research, information technology, or student services. Much of the expansion of professional administrators has come with a large drop in non-professional lower skilled staff positions. Explanation of the growth include the rise in government mandates, more complex information technology, enhanced student services, expanded research focus, and the growing reliance on fundraising revenue (Desrochers & Kirshstein, 2014). As this brief illustrates this shift has occurred at Purdue as well. However, not in as dramatic a fashion, as Purdue has seen lower growth in the proportion of professional staff while maintaining relatively the same proportions of full-time and part-time faculty and graduate assistants.


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