

The lowest-paid workers in higher education are suffering the highest job losses

By **Danielle Douglas-Gabriel** and **Alyssa Fowers**

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Eugenia Bradford believed her job was safe. After all, she was the only administrative assistant for college advising services at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. Who else would schedule appointments or supervise work-study students if she were gone?

But weeks before the fall semester began in August, Bradford’s boss told her the department was downsizing and her position would be eliminated. The university offered to pay her through mid-October, but after that she was on her own. No more health insurance. No more peace of mind.

“I was in total shock and disbelief for about three days,” said Bradford, 57, a mother of three. “I see myself getting depressed, but I pray ... get out and walk. My rent is due soon. My last paycheck was barely \$400.”

Colleges and universities are shedding jobs at an unprecedented rate. And some of the lowest-paid workers in higher education are bearing the brunt of the layoffs, mirroring broader trends of the most unequal recession in modern U.S. history. It’s difficult to pinpoint the exact number of job losses tied to higher education. But the financial crisis gripping the sector has far-reaching implications for the people and communities relying on colleges and universities to earn a living.

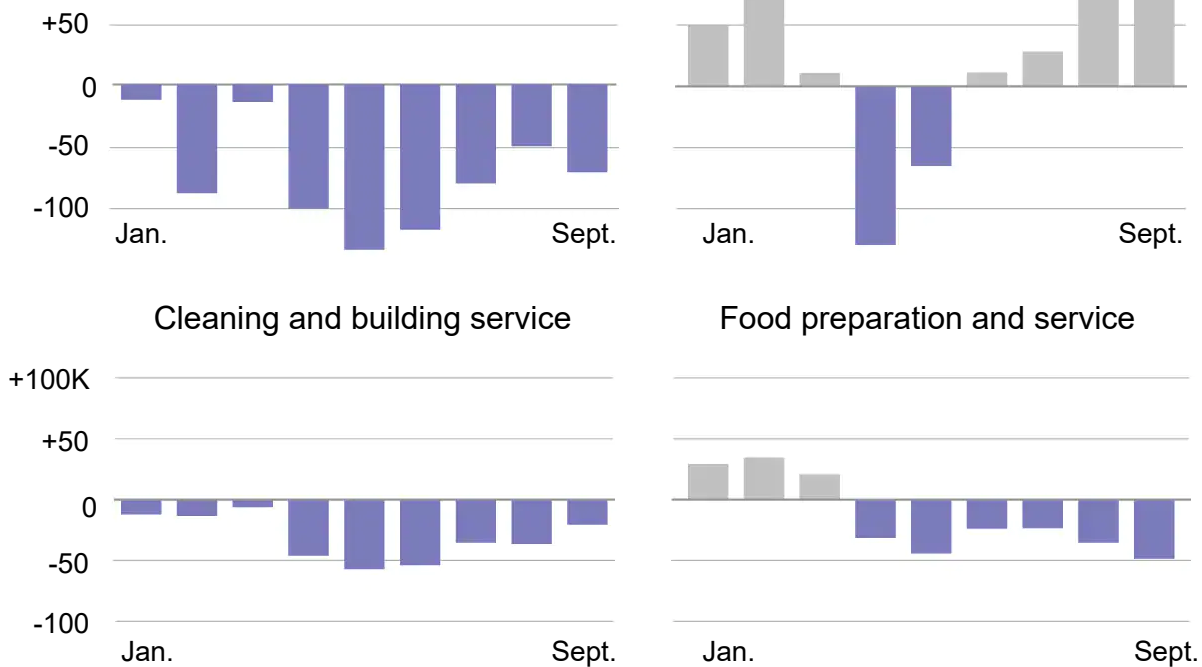
Employment in higher education usually grows at the start of the fall semester. That growth stalled this year: Only about 20,000 jobs were added between August and September, compared with 180,000 in the same period last year. Employment at private colleges and universities actually fell in September after accounting for seasonal variation, reversing an apparent summer recovery.

A Washington Post analysis of federal labor data found office and administrative staff employed by colleges have suffered the largest and most consistent job losses. These are people who on average earn around \$40,000 a year, like Bradford. Those who worked part-time were especially impacted when schools began shedding jobs in the spring, as were people with some college credit and no degrees, and younger workers aged 18 to 24 — probably students with campus jobs.

Administrative workers face ongoing job loss in higher education

Change from 3-year average employment in occupations that saw largest job loss in April





Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics via IPUMS

THE WASHINGTON POST

Job losses among instructors have fluctuated wildly since the start of the pandemic. In the spring, instructors with master’s or bachelor’s degrees and part-time educators with some college faced the most layoffs. The pattern suggests these are adjunct instructors, who are often hired on a semester or annual basis, or graduate teaching assistants. In the fall, instructors with doctorates fell from full-time to part-time, suggesting adjunct instructors teaching fewer courses or tenured and tenure-track faculty being furloughed for days or weeks at a time.

Unemployment at public and private institutions of higher education skyrocketed from 3 percent in February to 8 percent in April. While unemployment for the country as a whole improved from May onward, it climbed to 11 percent through June and July at colleges and universities. Colleges typically shed jobs over the summer but not at such high levels.

Even as some schools began rehiring workers in the fall, unemployment hovered at 5 percent in September, according to the latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And that’s just accounting for workers employed directly by colleges and universities, many of which use independent contractors to feed students who are no longer on campus or clean and secure buildings that are no longer in full use.

“The hidden costs to families are showing up in the devastation covid has done to campuses, both in terms of the layoffs ... and the recession affecting the towns surrounding the colleges,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, a union that represents 240,000 higher education workers.

Higher education is facing an existential crisis that has laid bare the inequalities in resources among institutions and the people they employ. No school is immune from the financial disruptions caused by the pandemic, but those with hefty endowments and reserves are faring better than those without. Colleges that rely heavily on tuition are watching their revenue dry up as enrollment has fallen, while the expense of testing and reopening has risen.

Institutions that were struggling before the pandemic erupted are suffering the most now, said Michael Danner, a partner in the higher education practice at BDO, a consulting firm. That includes small, private liberal arts schools that have offered steep discounts on tuition for years and public institutions with poor enrollment.

Spending on building repairs, new hires, retirement contributions and other auxiliary expenses contracted early on to stave off deep cuts. When those stopgap measures fell short, schools turned to their largest expense: personnel.

The College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College, which is tracking the pandemic response at schools around the country, found nearly a quarter of the 1,442 public and private institutions it surveyed have announced layoffs since the start of the pandemic. About 459 schools have also disclosed furloughs.

Layoffs have hit in waves. April ushered in the largest round of job losses as schools contended with unforeseen costs from the shift to online learning and refunding housing and dining charges. Building maintenance, groundskeepers and other staff whose jobs rely on a fully operational campus were hit hard at this stage.

Custodian Bill Rosser, 48, was one of 139 support staff at Ohio University whose positions were eliminated in the first of three rounds of layoffs beginning in May. His wife, son and uncle all lost their jobs at the public university. Although his wife has since been rehired in culinary services, she earns less than before and is now supporting a family of four on one paycheck. The couple went from making \$68,000 a year to about \$30,000.

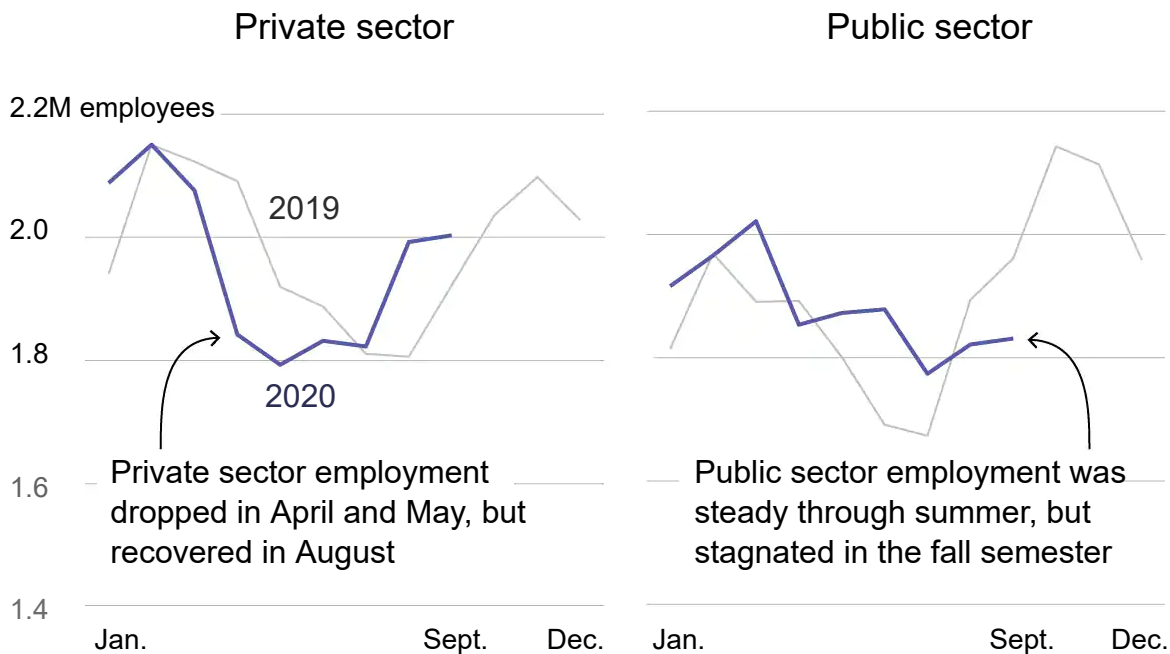
Rosser saved the \$600 in extra weekly unemployment insurance he received before the benefit expired at the end of July, but the money is running out. There is no mortgage on his home, which was built on land Rosser's father gave him, but food, utilities and other living expenses are draining the family.

"We're not going to be homeless. We just might not have any power or water," Rosser said.

His oldest son, 25, cashed out his retirement savings to cover his bills when the university let him go and has since found a part-time job at the post office. Rosser has not been as fortunate.

"It's either I'm too old, don't have not enough experience or the hours — I can't be here with my daughter," he said.

Higher education's private sector suffered in spring, while public sector faces a dismal fall



Not seasonally adjusted

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics via IPUMS

THE WASHINGTON POST

Public colleges and universities were slower than private institutions to shed jobs but have also been slower to bring workers back. Private employment cratered in the spring but began to rebound in the fall, according to the Post analysis of federal labor data.

Private institutions are more sensitive to external threats than their public counterparts, which can rely on state funding, and took more aggressive action as the pandemic set in, said Adrianna Kezar, director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California.

At summer's end, as many private schools "were hitting their enrollment targets ... they were able to recover some," Kezar said. Public schools "started to do more cut backs when it became apparent we might be in this for the long haul."

After the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia in June barred the use of furloughs to offset a loss in state funding, Kennesaw State began eliminating 22 staff positions, according to the university. Kennesaw State's budget plan required that any reductions would not impact a student's ability to complete their degree, so no faculty were affected.

When Bradford lost her job, she was encouraged to apply to open positions elsewhere in the 26-campus system. She has browsed listings, submitted résumés, followed up, but no one calls back. Her best bet was a sales job paying less than the university did but offering commission. The interview went well, and the company offered her the position days before her November rent was due.

This is not what Bradford envisioned when she uprooted her life in Chicago to take the job at Kennesaw almost two years ago. The pay was lower than her last job, but Bradford could be closer to one of her two sons and earn enough to help her daughter with tuition at the University of Missouri.

"My kids are like, 'Mom, if you need anything, let us know.' But I don't want to put a hardship on them when they got bills, they got their families to take care of," Bradford said.

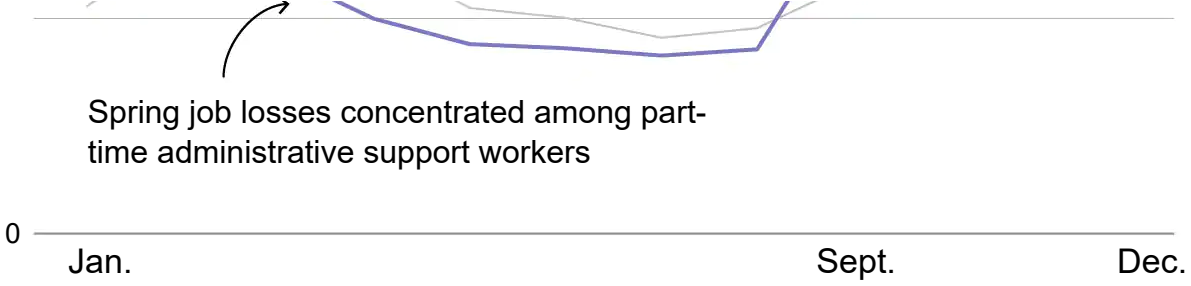
Labor leaders and some in higher education say colleges could do more to save the jobs of the lowest-paid employees, many of whom are women and people of color. They argue universities could use unrestricted endowment funds or reserves to avoid layoffs, but schools have said that would endanger their long-term stability.

"Most schools are carefully monitoring their cash reserves and using them as needed," said Jim Hundrieser, vice president for consulting and business development at the National Association of College and University Business Officers. "Most institutions also need to keep these reserves to maintain debt covenants and other agreements. So while dollars exist and are being used, almost all need to be very conservative."

Part-time workers bore brunt of spring job losses in higher ed, but full-time workers lost hours in fall

People employed in higher education, by hours worked in the last week





Spring job losses concentrated among part-time administrative support workers

0 Jan. Sept. Dec.

Not seasonally adjusted

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics via IPUMS

THE WASHINGTON POST

Federal stimulus dollars helped stem losses at many colleges, but the American Council on Education and other higher-ed groups estimate the sector needs at least \$120 billion in additional support. Without federal intervention, education groups say the ramifications of this crisis will linger well after the country has recovered from the pandemic. And those who will suffer the most will be the most vulnerable students, workers and communities.

The decision of which employees bear the weight is raising questions about equity and fairness.

At the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, nearly 1,000 support staff, including dining workers, groundskeepers and clerical assistants, were indefinitely furloughed to address the university's \$170 million budget hole. The designation made workers eligible for unemployment benefits and preserved their health care, but some wonder why faculty and administration have not been subjected to the same treatment.

"It's demoralizing," said Melinda Nielsen, a scheduling coordinator in the student activities department who is on indefinite furlough.

Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy told the campus community in September that the university has enacted salary reductions for senior administrators and is working with the faculty union to minimize further staff reductions. Still, for Nielsen and others, it's hard to feel valued when her contribution seems so expendable.

Many public universities have yet to feel the impact of lower state appropriations, as the current budget for most states was crafted before the pandemic eroded tax revenue and increased expenditures. Some states, including New York, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin, have already clawed back funding, while others are expected to follow suit in the next budget cycle.

Franky Laude, 42, learned in June that Medgar Evers College would not be renewing his three-year appointment to teach art history at its Brooklyn campus. The school, part of the City University of New York, laid off Laude and 60 other adjunct instructors in line with a systemwide purge of some 2,800 employees.

Adjuncts and part-time staff bore the brunt of the layoffs at CUNY, which said the cuts were needed to offset the loss of funding from the city. The union representing system employees sued the public university system to rehire employees, questioning why CUNY has not used federal stimulus dollars to avoid layoffs.

CUNY administrators say some of those dollars are being deployed to reimburse campuses for pandemic-related expenses, while others are earmarked to support students. CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez and Board Chair William C. Thompson Jr. said in August, "If the fiscal and enrollment situations become more favorable, we plan to re-appoint as many adjuncts as we can."

In the meantime, Laude, who has taught at Medgar Evers for 11 years, is without health insurance in the middle of a pandemic that has claimed the lives of several of his friends.

“Paying for health insurance would be like almost paying for rent,” Laude said. “But I keep thinking, ‘What if I catch covid? What would I do?’ ”

Updated November 4, 2020

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