



Occupational Stability of New College Graduates

Contrary to popular opinion, new college graduates leave teaching at lower rates than those who enter most other occupations

In March 2001, Robin R. Henke and Lisa Zahn authored a study for the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education) entitled “*Attrition of New Teachers Among Recent College Graduates: Comparing Occupational Stability Among 1992-93 Graduates Who Taught and Those Who Worked in Other Occupations.*”ⁱ The study used a national sample survey of college graduates called “The 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study” (B&B93), and examined the occupation stability of bachelor’s degree recipients during the first four years after receiving the bachelor’s degree.

The authors conclude that

[A]mong 1992-93 college graduates who worked in April 1994, approximately a year after they had completed their bachelor’s degrees, those who taught at the K-12 level were among the most stable of all employed graduates with respect to their occupations three years later.... Graduates who worked in other occupations for which employees train as undergraduates (e.g., engineering and health occupations) also had relatively low rates of attrition.

The report has been criticized because the researchers excluded from their comparison college graduates who had been employed in April 1994 but were not employed in April 1997. The concern was whether those who started as teachers in April 1994 may have left the workforce by 1997 at a higher rate than in other occupation categories. The IERC

decided to re-analyze the B&B93 data to test this hypothesis. For our analysis we included all 1992-93 college graduates who were employed either full time or part time in April 1994, whether or not they were still employed in April 1997. Chart 1 provides retention rates by occupational category for all 1992-93 college graduates working full time April 1994, with Henke and Zahn’s results in parentheses. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the 1997 status of all 1992-93 college graduates working both full time and part time in April 1994.

We found that the Henke and Zahn findings hold up.

- For 1992-93 college graduates who were full-time teachers in April 1994, 76 percent were teaching three years later, a percent that is similar to those who entered the health occupations (76%), and higher than the other occupational categories. Seventeen percent were employed in a different occupation category, 2 percent were students, 1 percent were unemployed and 4 percent were not in the workforce.
- For other occupational categories (excluding health occupations) the proportions employed in other occupational categories in April 1997 ranged from 25 percent for Law Enforcement occupations/military to 67 percent for clerical occupations.
- For 1992-93 college graduates who were part-time teachers in April 1994, 61 percent were

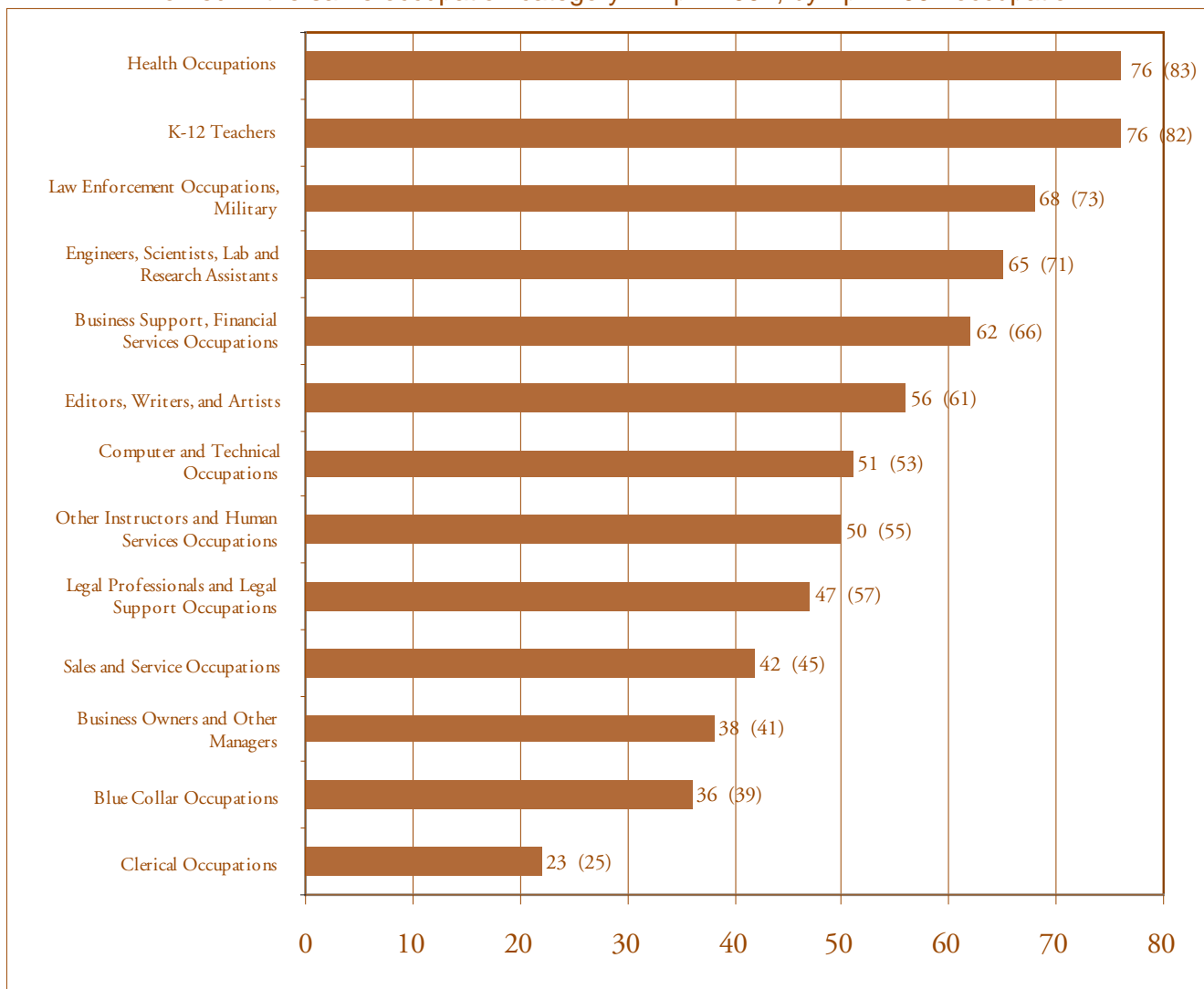
teaching three years later, somewhat lower than those in the health occupations, but higher than the rate of retention for the other occupation categories.

- Higher proportions of 1992-93 college graduates who were working full time in the engineering or legal occupational categories in April 1994 were non-working students in April 1997 (7% and 14% respectively).

- 1992-93 college graduates who entered the clerical occupation category on a full-time basis were most likely to be out of the workforce in April 1997 (6%). Teachers were second at 4 percent. But these are small proportions and are not a significant exit path during the first three years after college.

CHART 1

Among 1992-93 bachelor's degree recipients who worked full time in April 1994, percentage who worked in the same occupation category in April 1997, by April 1994 occupation.



Numbers in parenthesis are from Henke and Zahn (2001) for full-time workers in April 1994 who were also working in April 1997.

TABLE 1

Employment status in April 1997 of 1992-93 bachelor's degree recipients who worked in April 1994, by 1994 occupation and employment status.

| Occupation in 1994 | Same Occupation (%) | Different Occupation (%) | Student Not Working (%) | Unemployed Not Student (%) | Not in Workforce (Not working, Not student) (%) |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| HEALTH OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 76.2 | 15.6 | 3.4 | 2.4 | 2.4 |
| Part-time | 72.6 | 18.4 | 3.6 | 0.0 | 5.4 |
| K-12 TEACHERS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 76.0 | 16.9 | 2.1 | 1.4 | 3.7 |
| Part-time | 61.3 | 30.1 | 1.3 | 2.6 | 4.7 |
| LAW ENFORCEMENT OCCUPATIONS, MILITARY | | | | | |
| Full-time | 68.4 | 25.4 | 3.1 | 1.4 | 1.8 |
| Part-time | low n | low n | low n | low n | low n |
| ENGINEERS, SCIENTISTS, LAB AND RESEARCH ASSISTANTS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 64.7 | 26.1 | 6.8 | 1.1 | 1.4 |
| Part-time | 36.5 | 48.7 | 11.8 | 1.8 | 1.3 |
| BUSINESS SUPPORT, FINANCIAL SERVICES OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 62.4 | 31.5 | 2.8 | 0.6 | 2.6 |
| Part-time | 52.0 | 40.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 7.9 |
| EDITORS, WRITERS, AND ARTISTS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 56.4 | 36.8 | 1.9 | 1.8 | 3.2 |
| Part-time | 38.9 | 52.7 | 7.6 | 0.0 | 0.9 |
| COMPUTER AND TECHNICAL OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 50.9 | 45.3 | 2.5 | 1.1 | 0.2 |
| Part-time | 24.5 | 65.9 | 7.5 | 0.0 | 2.0 |
| OTHER INSTRUCTORS AND HUMAN SERVICES OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 49.6 | 40.7 | 3.7 | 2.8 | 3.3 |
| Part-time | 38.3 | 46.6 | 7.9 | 2.1 | 5.1 |
| LEGAL PROFESSIONALS AND LEGAL SUPPORT OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 47.1 | 35.9 | 13.9 | 0.9 | 2.2 |
| Part-time | low n | low n | low n | low n | low n |
| SALES AND SERVICE OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 42.0 | 51.5 | 2.4 | 1.3 | 2.8 |
| Part-time | 23.0 | 62.2 | 4.5 | 2.7 | 7.7 |
| BUSINESS OWNERS AND OTHER MANAGERS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 37.9 | 55.1 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 3.2 |
| Part-time | 21.0 | 71.0 | 2.7 | 1.9 | 3.4 |
| BLUE COLLAR OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 36.4 | 56.4 | 3.0 | 1.9 | 2.4 |
| Part-time | 20.6 | 65.6 | 7.3 | 3.3 | 3.2 |
| CLERICAL OCCUPATIONS | | | | | |
| Full-time | 22.5 | 66.9 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 5.7 |
| Part-time | 8.9 | 76.1 | 5.5 | 2.4 | 7.2 |

Conclusions and implications for policy and practice:

For new college graduates who enter the workforce, attrition from the *profession* of teaching is lower than for most other occupations. High attrition from initial occupations is the norm, as college graduates learn about the workplace and about their strengths and weaknesses, and their career interest. Henke and Zahn concluded that “reducing attrition (from the profession) among new teachers may be as much a matter of helping college students and new graduates choose, plan, and prepare for their careers as supporting new teachers and professionalizing teaching.” Illinois has recognized the importance of giving those in pre-service programs the opportunity to have early experiences in the classroom. Results from the B&B93 national sample confirm the importance of ensuring a good fit.

But the findings also provide a more positive perspective on teaching as an occupation than much of the recent rhetoric that casts teacher attrition as a symptom of a profession in crisis. Newly minted college graduates across all occupational categories change their minds about what they want to do with their lives, and teachers are no exception. But contrary to popular opinion, they are more committed to their first occupation than are most college graduates.

We end by noting that attrition from the *profession* is different from school-site turnover. Some schools experience high teacher turnover as teachers enter, gain experience, and move on to other teaching opportunities. And this is bad for those schools’ students and professional climates. But it is a school site issue, not a teaching profession issue. The policy implications are quite different and call for more assertive action to support and reform hard-to-staff schools.

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ABOUT THE ILLINOIS EDUCATION RESEARCH COUNCIL: The IERC was established in 2000 to provide Illinois with objective and reliable evidence for P-16 education policy making and program development. It is housed at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

¹ U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *Attrition of New Teachers Among Recent College Graduates: Comparing Occupational Stability Among 1992-93 Graduates Who Taught and Those Who Worked in Other Occupations*. NCES 2001-189, by Robin R. Henke and Lisa Zahn. Project Officer: C. Dennis Carroll. Washington, DC: 2001.