



The Higher Ed Professional Workforce: Composition and Pay Equity by Gender and Race/Ethnicity From 2016-17 to 2023-24

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Introduction

Higher ed professionals are the knowledge workers who sustain key university functions. They typically have at least a bachelor's degree, and most of their positions are what are traditionally considered as white-collar work that helps maintain day-to-day functions of the institution. Without higher ed professionals, universities would not have key student services, robust libraries, laboratories, athletic programs, and external relations. Higher ed professionals recruit, admit, and help students afford tuition. They support students on campus, providing tutoring, mental health services, housing, and career planning. They work to support institutions' information technology and facilities operations to ensure the institution has the necessary infrastructure to accomplish its goals. Higher ed professionals also manage finances and recruit and retain employees to support the mission and priorities of the institution.

Though higher ed professionals are indispensable to higher ed institutions, there is little comprehensive data on them, especially concerning their demographics and pay. Understanding workforce composition and pay equity is important, as many colleges and universities are committed to fostering a workplace where people of many backgrounds can thrive. Further, a diverse workplace benefits employee productivity, improves retention, and enhances teamwork.^{1,2} However, most data that exist either broadly focuses on all employees within higher education (not just professionals), is not current, or does not collect data by gender and race/ethnicity. This report addresses this gap by using CUPA-HR *Professionals in Higher Education Survey* data, which is collected annually on incumbents in higher ed professional positions throughout the United States.³

This report explores the representation and pay equity of professional women and people of color overall and by the total operating expenses of the institution. Focusing on data from 2016-17 to 2023-24, the report highlights trends over time, especially where progress (or no progress) has been made in composition and pay equity. These findings are particularly useful for higher ed human resources professionals, and all leaders who wish to understand and benchmark representation and pay equity at their institutions.

¹ Saxena, A. (2014). Workforce Diversity: A Key to Improve Productivity. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 11, 76-85.

² Hofhuis, J., van der Rijt, P. G., & Vlug, M. (2016). Diversity Climate Enhances Work Outcomes Through Trust and Openness in Workgroup Communication. *SpringerPlus*, 5(1), 714. doi: 10.1186/s40064-016-2499-4

³ CUPA-HR. (2024). [Professionals in Higher Education Survey, 2016-17 to 2023-24](#). [Data set].

The Data

In 1997-98, CUPA-HR began collecting salary data for higher ed professionals, in which each position was aggregated into a single, average salary for each institution providing data. In 2016-17, the CUPA-HR *Professionals in Higher Education Survey* was improved to collect more specific data so that a single salary was reported for each incumbent.⁴ In addition, demographic data was collected on each employee, including gender, race/ethnicity, age, and years in position. The positions surveyed include roles in academic affairs, athletics, external affairs, facilities, fiscal affairs, information technology, institutional affairs, research professionals and related professionals, and student affairs.⁵

The Analyses

In this report, our main goal is to describe patterns and trends for the professional workforce overall.⁶ We examine composition and pay equity for professionals by gender and race/ethnicity from 2016-17 to 2023-24 overall and by institutional operating expenses. In addition, gender and race/ethnicity data are evaluated among professionals in the highest-paying positions in comparison to all other positions and in comparison to the composition of U.S. bachelor's degree holders. Finally, pay equity by gender and race/ethnicity is examined by employee age. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the analyses which include the long-standing pay equity biases that largely affect women of color, and that the representation of men of color remains a challenge in higher ed. Considering these findings, we recommend institutions conduct comprehensive pay equity analyses for their higher ed professionals, continue to design and implement strategies to recruit more people of color, and enhance their efforts to retain employees, especially women and people of color.

⁴ CUPA-HR. (2024). [Professionals in Higher Education Survey, 2016-17 to 2023-24](#). [Data set].

⁵ These broad professional areas are further defined in the [Professionals in Higher Education Survey Methodology](#) document.

⁶ Details on individual professional positions and functions are available in the CUPA-HR [Professionals in Higher Education Survey Participation and Information Template](#).

Composition and Pay Equity of Professionals by Gender and Race/Ethnicity From 2016-17 to 2023-24

Increases in the Representation of Women of Color Outpace Men of Color

The representation of women in the higher ed professional workforce has increased slightly over time, with women representing 58% of all professionals in 2016-17 and 62% of all professionals in 2023-24 (Figure 1).⁷ Similarly, the representation of people of color increased from 22% of professionals in 2016-17 to 26% of professionals in 2023-24.⁸ Over this period, the increase in the representation of women of color was more than double that of the increase in the representation of men of color. The representation of women of color increased from 13% to 16% (a 26% increase), whereas the representation of men of color increased from 8% to 9% (a 10% increase).

Previous in-depth analyses have shown that representation varies depending on which professional area is examined. In 2022-23, positions in human resources (33%) and diversity and equal opportunity (33%) each had roughly one-third representation of people of color, among the highest compared to other professional areas. The areas with the lowest representation of people of color were librarians (14%) and development and fundraising (14%).^{9,10}

⁷ Data were collected in CUPA-HR's [Professionals in Higher Education Survey](#) with an effective date of November 1 of each academic year. (For these charts, the academic year is denoted with the last part of the year, e.g., 2024 is academic year 2023-24). Analyses include only non-profit institutions of higher education. Each year of data includes at least 802 colleges and universities and at least 153,015 professionals.

⁸ The term "people of color" refers to people who identify as Asian; Black; Hispanic or Latina/o; Native American or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; or two or more races.

⁹ CUPA-HR. (2023). [Professionals Composition and Pay Equity by Gender and Race/Ethnicity](#).

¹⁰ Salary and demographic data for specific professionals positions is available with a subscription to [DataOnDemand](#).

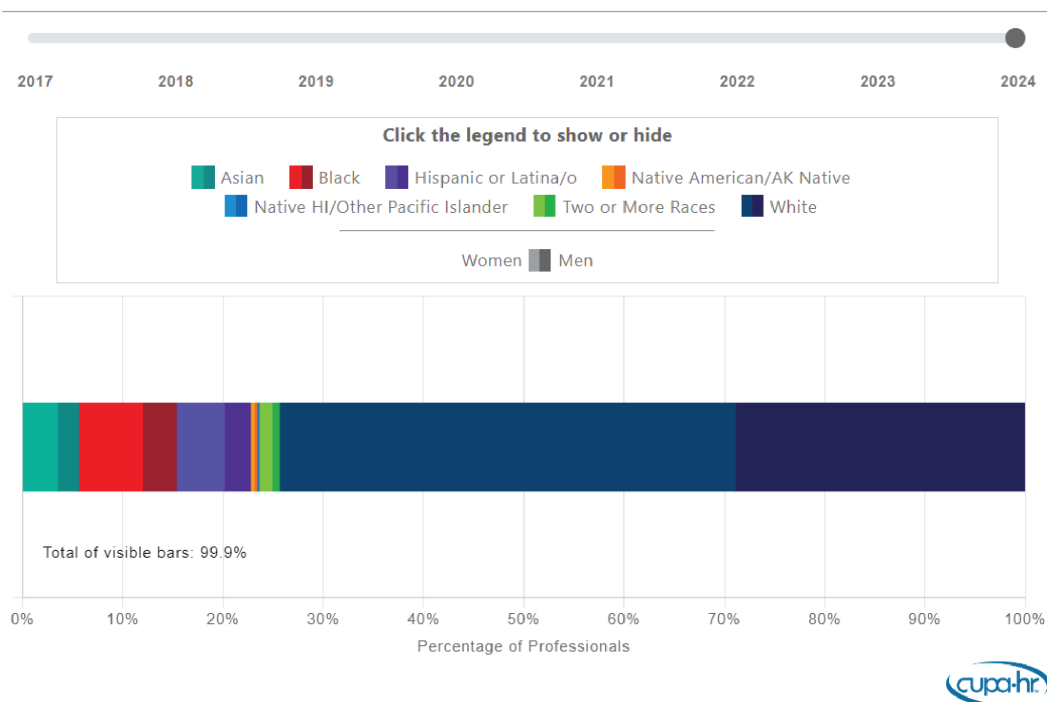
Composition of Professionals by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Figure 1. Composition of Professionals by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Asian and Hispanic Men Are Underrepresented Compared to U.S. Bachelor's Degree Holders

To understand whether certain groups are underrepresented among professionals overall, we compared the composition of higher ed professionals to the composition of U.S. bachelor's degree holders. This sample provides a good point of reference of the available pool of candidates who at least hold the educational credentials generally necessary to obtain most professional positions.¹¹

In 2023-24, men of color were underrepresented among professionals compared to men of color who hold bachelor's degrees in the U.S. (Figure 2). The proportion of men of color who were higher ed professionals was 9% compared to 14% of U.S. bachelor's degree holders. In examining specific races/ethnicities, Black men were similarly represented among higher ed professionals (3%) and U.S. bachelor's degree holders (4%). However, the

¹¹ Flood, S., King, M., Rodgers, R., Ruggles, S., Warren, J. R., & Westbery, M. (2022). [Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 10.0](#) [Data set].

representation of Asian men (4%) and Hispanic men (5%) was twice as high (or nearly twice as high) among U.S. bachelor's degree holders as it was among higher ed professionals (2% for Asian men and 3% for Hispanic men). Even if there are no gains in the representation of Asian and Hispanic men among U.S. bachelor's degree holders, it will take approximately 15 years for Hispanic men and 39 years for Asian men to reach parity among higher ed professionals if their representation continues to increase at a similar rate as it did between 2016-17 and 2023-24. Women of color had similar representation among higher ed professionals and U.S. bachelor's degree holders.

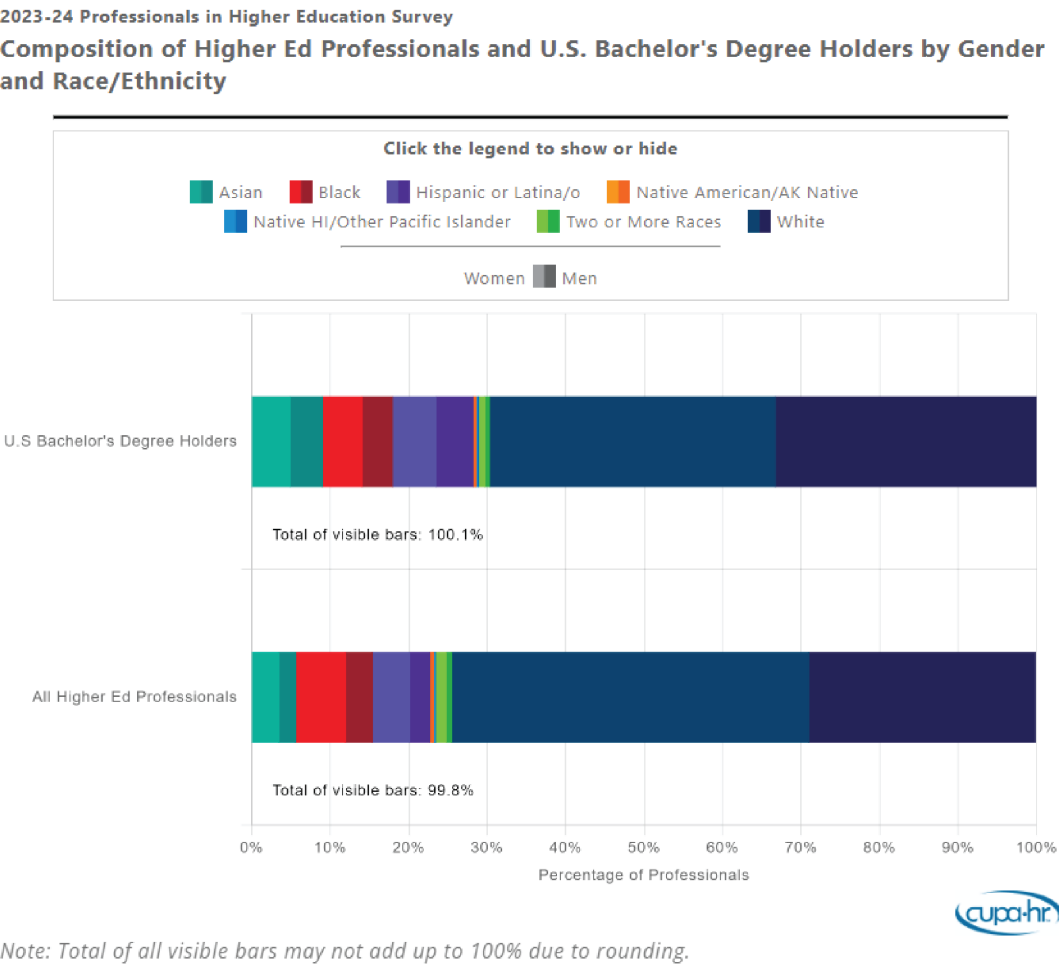


Figure 2. Composition of Higher Ed Professionals and U.S. Bachelor's Degree Holders by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Women Continue to Be Paid Less Than Men

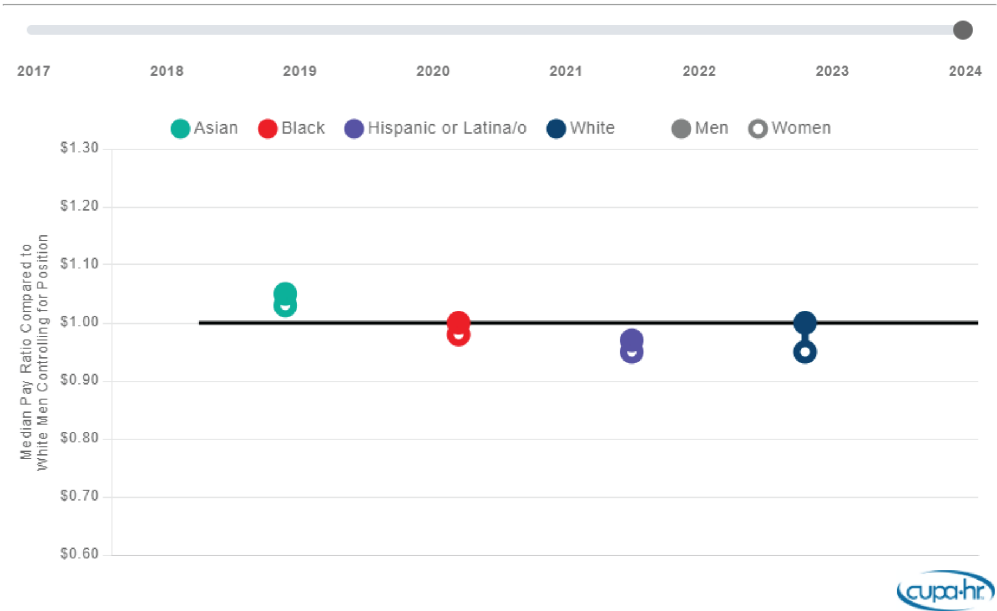
From 2016-17 to 2023-24, pay equity for professionals overall improved slightly for women (Figure 3).¹² The only exception is that Hispanic women had no improvement — they were paid \$0.95 per \$1.00 paid to White men both in 2016-17 and 2023-24. The greatest improvement was for Black women, whose median pay ratios increased by \$0.05 between 2016-17 and 2023-24 (although they were still paid on median two cents less per dollar paid to White men in 2023-24).

Even with some improvement in pay equity since 2016-17, professional women of all races/ethnicities in 2023-24 continued to be paid less than men with the exception of Asian women (Figure 3).¹³

¹² Due to smaller sample sizes and limited generalizability, median pay ratios for Native American or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or two or more races were excluded from pay ratio analyses.

¹³ Median pay ratios control for position. Median salaries by race/ethnicity and sex for each professional position were obtained; then the median of those medians was calculated by race/ethnicity and sex. Finally, each group's median salary was divided by the median salary of White men to calculate the pay ratio. This controls for the fact that women and people of color may be represented differently in specific positions that pay higher or lower salaries, and it means that the wage gaps present are not explained by the fact that women or people of color may have greater representation in lower-paying positions.

2016-17 to 2023-24 Professionals in Higher Education Surveys
Median Pay Ratios by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



Note: Values with fewer than five institutions reporting are not included.

Figure 3. Median Pay Ratios by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Composition of Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Pay Level, and Age

Women and People of Color Are Less Represented in the Highest-Paying Jobs

We next examined whether the composition of professionals differs in the highest-paying positions in comparison to all other positions. To accomplish this, we first found the median salary for each professional position. Positions with a median salary of \$100,000 or above (33 positions or 8% of all positions in the survey) were categorized as highest-paying positions.¹⁴

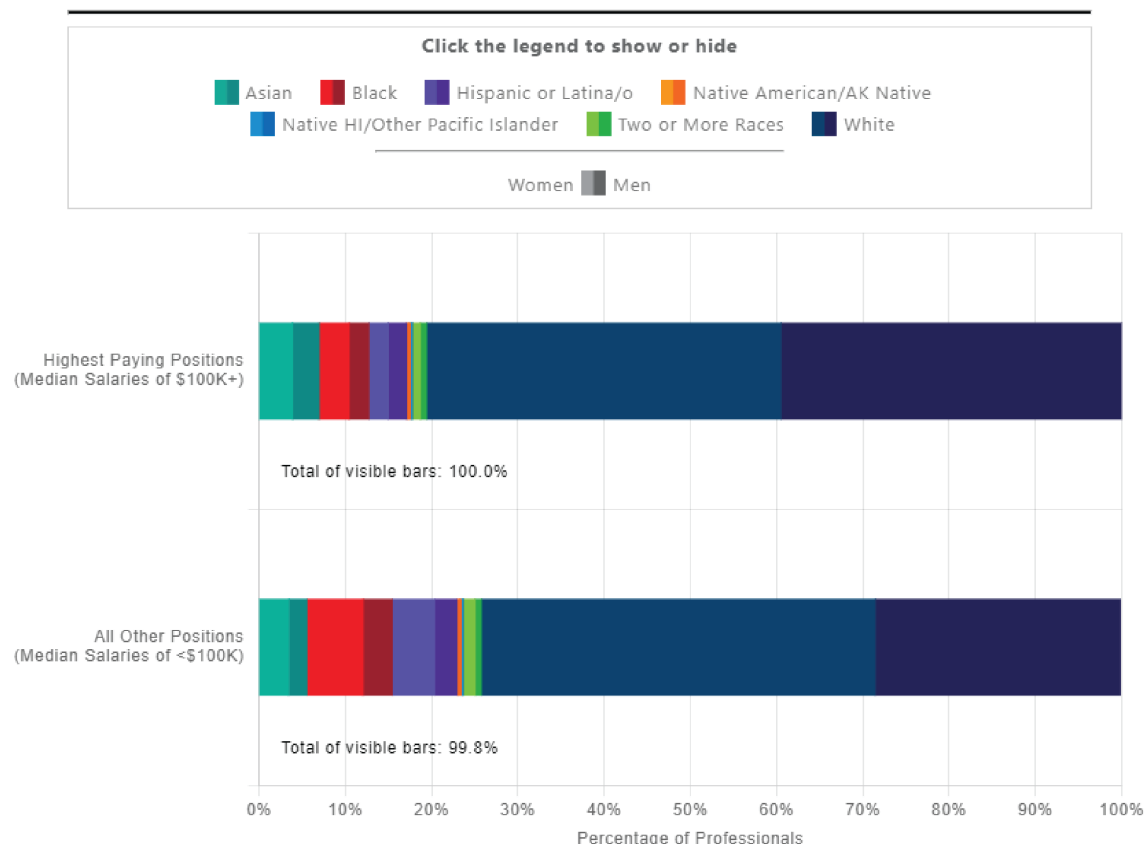
In 2023-24, the representation of women is higher among positions that pay less than \$100,000 than among six-figure positions.¹⁵ Women of all races/ethnicities represent 62% of positions that pay less than \$100,000 and only 52% of six-figure positions. Similarly, the representation of professionals of color was lower among six-figure positions (19%) than among positions that pay less than \$100,000 (26%).

When focusing on specific combinations of gender and race/ethnicity, only White men, Asian women, and Asian men have higher representation among six-figure positions than in positions paying less than \$100,000. For instance, White men comprise 40% of six-figure professional positions, yet they comprise only 28% of positions paying less than \$100,000.

¹⁴ The 33 positions with a median salary of \$100,000 or more include mechanical and electrical engineers, database and computing administrators, programmers, IT architects, accountants and controllers, investment analysts, principal gifts officers, heads of college/division, heads of campus museum, heads of construction, principal research scholars, coaches, nurse practitioners, ombudspeople, and staff attorneys and physicians.

¹⁵ Sample sizes were $n = 8,607$ for 100K+ positions and $n = 206,184$ for positions paying less than \$100K.

Composition of Higher Ed Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Pay Level



Note: Total of all visible bars may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Figure 4. Composition of Higher Ed Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Pay Level

Older Women Experience Greater Pay Gaps Than Younger Women

With the exception of Asian women, women higher ed professionals of all races/ethnicities are paid less than White men who hold the same position (Figure 3). To understand whether pay equity is an even greater challenge for older women, we examined whether median pay ratios differed by age. First, we calculated the median age across all professionals, which was 42, and then categorized incumbents into either a 42-and-younger group or an older-than-42 group.

We found that the pay gaps experienced by women worsen with age (Figure 5).¹⁶ Overall, as women age, their pay gaps increase in comparison to the pay of White men of the same age. Hispanic men show the same pattern as women, in that their pay gaps increase with age. In contrast, as Asian and Black men age, their median pay relative to White men increases.

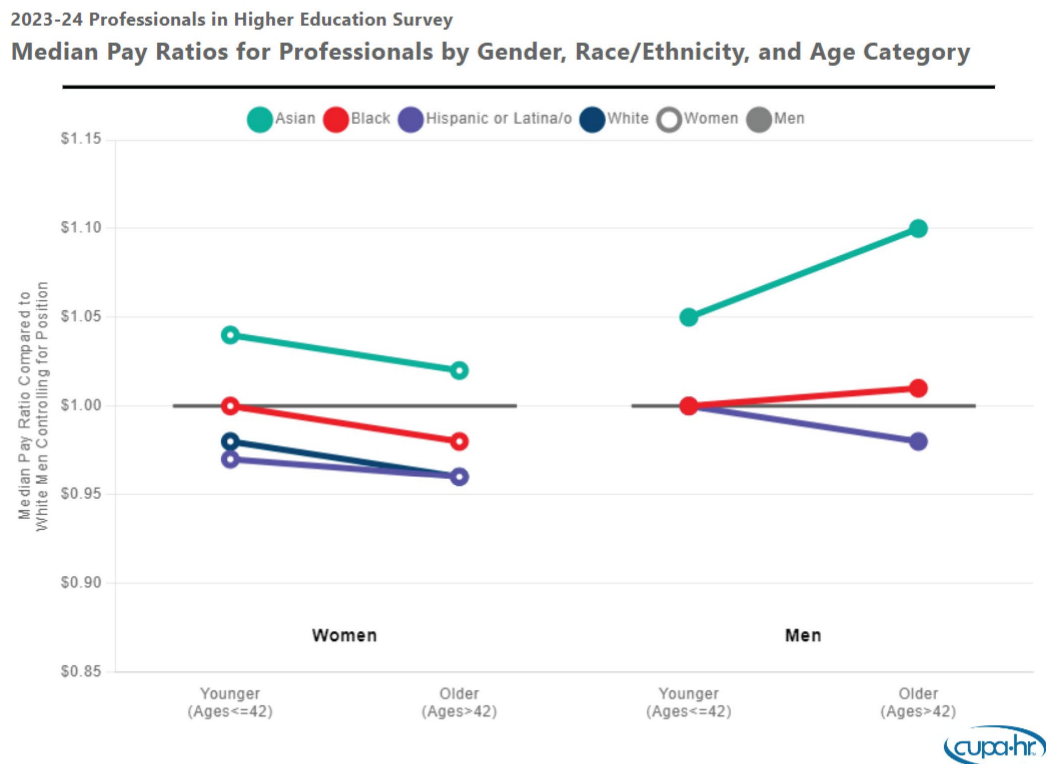


Figure 5. Median Pay Ratios for Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Age Category

¹⁶ Professionals were categorized into either younger ($n = 101,302$) or older ($n = 95,170$) groups.

Composition and Pay Equity of Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Operating Expense Quartile From 2016-17 to 2023-24

Professionals of Color Have Better Representation at Institutions With More Resources

To understand whether patterns of composition and pay equity differ by the amount of an institution's financial resources, we analyzed data by total operating expense quartile.¹⁷ Expense quartiles divide all institutions into 4 equal groups, based on their operating expenses. Each group, or quartile, therefore, is comprised of 25% of all institutions, with the 1st quartile consisting of the 25% of institutions with the least financial resources (less than \$56,914,228 in operating expenses), the 2nd quartile consisting of the 25% of institutions with the second least financial resources (\$56,914,228 to \$115,431,874 in operating expenses), the 3rd quartile consisting of the 25% of institutions with the second greatest financial resources (\$115,431,875 to \$263,670,173 in operating expenses), and the 4th quartile, which consists of the 25% of institutions with the greatest financial resources (greater than \$263,670,173 in operating expenses). This analysis was performed for every academic year from 2016-17 to 2023-24.¹⁸

In 2023-24, as financial resources of institutions decrease, so too does the representation of people of color. Professionals of color have the highest representation at institutions with the greatest financial resources (Figure 6), and this disparity is a trend. In 2016-17, people of color comprised 13% of professionals at institutions with the least financial resources (1st quartile institutions) and comprised 25% of professionals at institutions with the greatest financial resources (4th quartile institutions). In 2023-24, people of color comprised 18% of professionals at institutions with the least financial resources and comprised 28% of professionals at institutions with the greatest financial resources. Even though the overall representation of professionals increased over time between 2016-17 and 2023-24 (Figure 1), within each year, institutions with greater financial resources continued to have higher representation of professionals of color than institutions with fewer financial resources.

¹⁷ This data is collected in the [Institutional Basics](#) section of all CUPA-HR surveys.

¹⁸ Because institutional budgets change (and tend to increase) over time, each year of analysis uses slightly different cutoffs for expense quartile, so quartiles differed slightly for each year in the analysis. The analyses included at least 205 institutions and at least 9,826 incumbents in any given operating expense quartile.

Composition of Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Expense Quartile

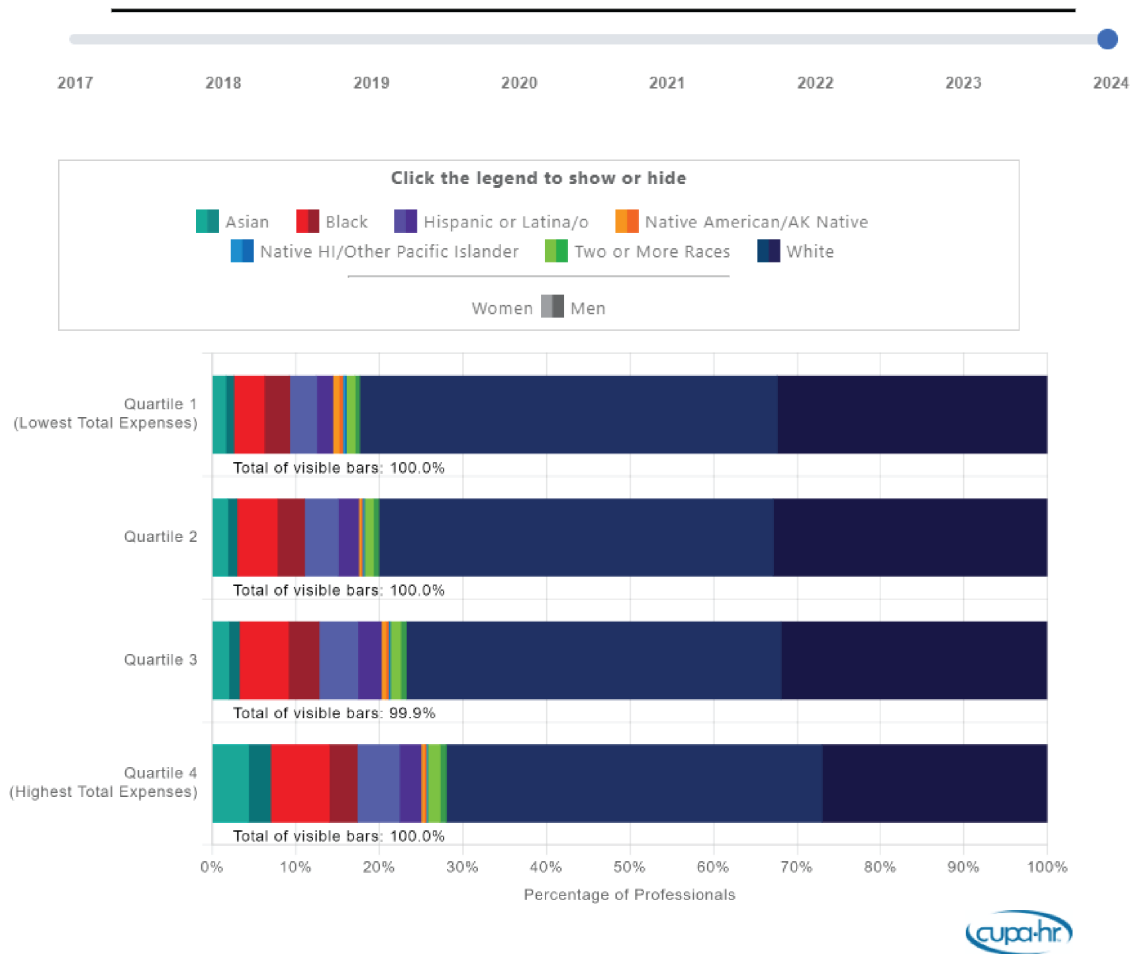


Figure 6. Composition of Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Expense Quartile

Institutions With More Resources Consistently Pay Women Less

We also examined median pay ratios at each operating expense quartile across time. In 2023-24, as financial resources increased, pay ratios overall decreased for women of all races/ethnicities examined; this pattern has been relatively stable over time (Figure 7).¹⁹ For instance, at institutions with the least financial resources, Hispanic women were paid \$1.02, respectively, for every \$1.00 White men were paid. At institutions with the greatest financial resources, Hispanic women were paid \$0.92, respectively, for every \$1.00 White

¹⁹ Ibid.

men were paid. There is no discernable pattern for median pay ratios by institutional financial resources for Asian, Black, or Hispanic men.

Since 2016-17, institutions with the greatest financial resources (i.e., 4th quartile institutions) show the most consistent pattern of women being paid less than men of the same race/ethnicity. Similarly, since 2016-17, Asian men are the only group to be paid equitably in the 4th quartile. This indicates that the institutions with the greatest financial resources persistently have the largest pay gaps for women.

2016-17 to 2023-24 Professionals in Higher Education Surveys

Median Pay Ratios for Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Expense Quartile

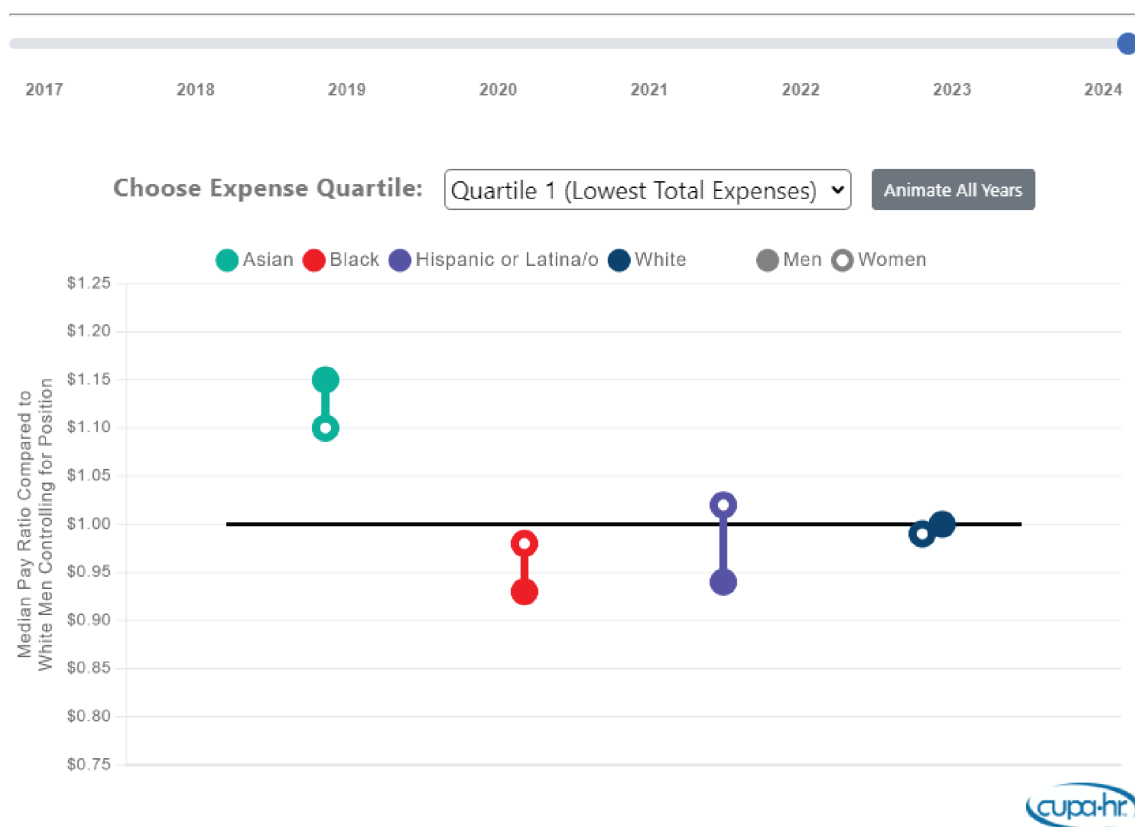


Figure 7. Median Pay Ratios for Professionals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Expense Quartile

Conclusions

Over the past eight years, the representation of people of color increased among higher ed professionals; the increase in the representation of women of color was more than double the increase in the representation of men of color. Over the past eight years, the representation of people of color increased from 22% of professionals in 2016-17 to 26% of professionals in 2023-24. During this time, women of color had more than two times the increase in their representation than did men of color (26% increase for women versus 10% increase for men). These data suggest that institutional efforts to recruit and retain people of color has been successful, particularly for women of color.

Asian and Hispanic men are underrepresented among higher ed professionals compared to U.S bachelor's degree holders. Although women of color now have parity among higher ed professionals relative to U.S. bachelor's degree holders, much progress is still needed for Asian and Hispanic men to reach parity. Asian men and Hispanic men currently have about half of the representation among higher ed professionals as among U.S. bachelor's degree holders. If representation for Asian and Hispanic men increases at its current pace, it would take more than a decade to see parity for either race.

Pay equity has improved slightly for women over the past eight years, but women of most races/ethnicities are still paid less than White men. For women of most races/ethnicities examined, pay gaps were lower in 2023-24 than they were in 2016-17. However, except for Asian women, women of all other examined races/ethnicities were paid less than White men in 2023-24. In 2023-24, Hispanic men were also paid less than White men, whereas Asian and Black men were paid the same as (or more than) White men. What do the results of the data mean practically? In 2023-24, a Hispanic woman who worked as a higher ed professional was paid 95 cents per dollar paid to a White man higher ed professional. If her salary is \$68,266, she was paid \$3,527 per year less than a White male colleague in the same position, or \$17,634 less in five years. Pay gaps seen for women of most races/ethnicities translate into notable gaps in purchasing power, retirement savings, and resources relative to White men, and these differences only compound over time and over the course of women's careers.

Women and people of color have lower representation among the highest-paying professional jobs. In addition to being paid less than White men in the same position, women and people of color are also less likely to hold higher-paying positions. Women and people of color have lower representation among six-figure (i.e., paid more than \$100,000) jobs in comparison to all other professional jobs. White men held 40% of six-figure jobs but held 28% of jobs paying less than \$100,000. This pattern highlights another way women and people of color are paid less than White men among higher ed professionals.

Older women experience greater pay gaps than younger women. Women of most races/ethnicities are already paid less than White men. However, this pattern worsens as women age. Women over age 42 had larger pay gaps relative to White men than did women age 42 or younger. Conversely, older Asian and Black men (over age 42) had lower pay gaps relative to White men than did younger Asian and Black men (up to age 42). As women age, they may advance in their careers, but their barriers to receiving equal pay also increase. This effect compounds for women professionals over time.

The representation of people of color increases as institutional financial resources increase, but so do pay gaps for women of color. As institutional financial resources increase, so too does the representation of people of color. Particularly, Black and Hispanic women were best represented at institutions with the greatest financial resources. However, pay gaps for women also increased as financial resources increased. This pattern holds over time. In brief, the institutions where women of color are most likely to work as higher ed professionals are also the least likely to pay women of color equitably to White men. The institutions that may have the greatest ability to invest financial resources into ensuring equitable pay are not doing so successfully.

Recommendations

Conduct regular pay equity audits for higher ed professionals and act upon the findings. Women of most races/ethnicities and Black men are still paid less than White men who hold their same professional positions, and women over age 42 experience even greater pay gaps than do younger women. Pay gaps are even greater at institutions with greater financial resources. Institutions, especially those with greater financial resources, should conduct thorough pay equity assessments for professionals and implement the necessary adjustments to eliminate pay gaps.²⁰ Thorough pay equity studies include both internal, peer, and national data, and help highlight problem areas for improvement. Once adjustments are made, it is essential to follow progress on pay gaps over time to ensure that pay gaps do not reemerge.²¹ Leadership is key in helping to eliminate pay gaps particularly in hiring decisions and in determining starting salaries.²²

Enhance or develop strategies to recruit more people of color. Although women of color now have parity among higher ed professionals relative to U.S. bachelor's degree holders, it is imperative that institutions continue to invest in recruiting and retaining

²⁰ CUPA-HR maintains a [list of resources](#) for HR professionals interested in learning more about pay equity, [including a webinar](#) that introduces the process of conducting a pay equity analysis.

²¹ Taylor, L. L., Lahey, J. N., Beck, M. I., & Froyd, J. E. (2020). How to do a Salary Equity Study: With an Illustrative Example from Higher Education. *Public Personnel Management*, 49(1), 57-82.

²² Aamodt, M. (2021). [How Can Organizations Help Close the Pay Gap?](#) Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology.

people of color. First, the progress seen in the representation of women of color suggests that institutional efforts to recruit people of color are having some success, and these efforts should be maintained to ensure progress is not lost. Further, men of color are still underrepresented among higher ed professionals. Institutions must take measures to ensure that hiring biases are minimized. Institutions can create independent committees that review skills and qualifications from de-identified applicants, among other strategies to combat personal biases that are often imposed unwittingly by people responsible for hiring.²³

Enhance or develop retention strategies that include women and people of color, especially including them in succession planning. Getting people to join an institution is only part of the effort to maintain a workforce that reflects many backgrounds; retaining people is also essential. These results suggest that institutional efforts to retain people of color are likely having some success and should be continued to ensure progress is not lost and to improve the representation of men of color. CUPA-HR offers insights on meaningful retention strategies which highlight the importance of job satisfaction and well-being at work, pay raises, and flexible work options.²⁴ Further, this report finds that the representation of women and people of color is lower among the highest-paying professional positions in comparison to lower-paying positions.²⁵ Including women and people of color in succession planning efforts is essential to ameliorate these gaps. So, too, is retaining people in their current position so they continue to gain the skills and institutional knowledge that will serve them well in future positions at your institution.

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²³ Knight, R. (2017). [Practical Ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process](#). Harvard Business Review.

²⁴ Bichsel, J., Fuesting, M., Tubbs, D., & Schneider, J. (2023). [The CUPA-HR 2023 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey](#).

²⁵ Fuesting, M. (2023). [Higher Ed Administrators: Trends in Diversity and Pay Equity From 2002 to 2022](#). CUPA-HR.

17 to 2023-24. CUPA-HR. <https://www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/representation-and-pay-equity-in-higher-ed-professionals-trends-july-2024>