



How do faculty decide whether and when to retire?

Faculty retirement patterns are an ongoing focus for higher education leadership as “late” retirements among a significant share of tenured faculty can present challenges for keeping the faculty workforce dynamic for purposes of teaching, research and service.

Senior tenured faculty fall into three groups, depending upon when they expect to retire and when they would like to retire:

1. Those who expect to retire by normal retirement age (“traditional retirees”).
2. Those who would like to retire by normal retirement age but expect to work longer (“reluctantly reluctant to retire”).
3. Those who want to and expect to work past normal retirement age (“reluctant to retire by choice”).

Table 1 shows the distribution of tenure line faculty age 50 or older across these three groups. The age at which those currently age 50 can begin to collect full Social Security benefits—age 67—is used as normal retirement age.



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Table 1. Distribution of tenured senior faculty

	2019 TIAA Institute/ CUPA-HR Survey	2014 TIAA Institute Survey
Traditional	50%	35%
Reluctantly reluctant	18%	16%
Reluctant by choice	32%	49%

Source: Yakoboski, Paul, and Jacqueline Bichsel, *Financial Well-being and Retirement Readiness in the Higher Education Workforce: Findings from the 2019 Higher Education Financial Wellness Survey*, TIAA Institute and CUPA-HR Special Report (October 2019) and Yakoboski, Paul, “Understanding the Faculty Retirement (Non) Decision,” TIAA Institute *Trends and Issues* (May 2015)

Financial considerations are the primary reason why reluctantly reluctants expect to work past normal retirement age, while psychosocial considerations are key among those reluctant by choice. In both cases, however, assumptions—rather than knowledge—underlie these considerations and drive delayed retirements.

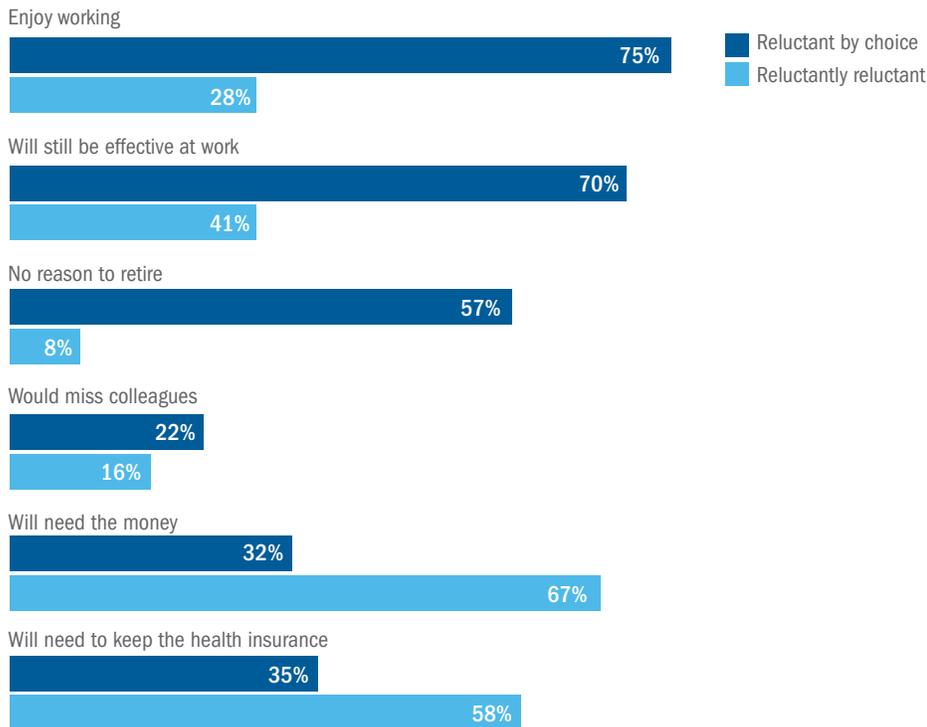
In the 2019 TIAA Institute/CUPA-HR survey, 67% of reluctantly reluctants cited “will need the money” as a major reason for expecting to work past age 67, and 58% cited “will need to keep the health insurance” (Figure 1). However, only 36% of reluctantly reluctants had carefully evaluated when they can afford to retire. Without such an evaluation, individuals are essentially assuming that they cannot afford to retire by age 67.

Financial considerations are the primary reason why some faculty expect to work past normal retirement age even though they would prefer to retire by then.

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Figure 1. Senior tenure line faculty expecting to work past normal retirement age

% citing as major reason for expecting to work past age 67



Source: CUPA-HR—TIAA Institute *Higher Education Financial Wellness Survey* (2019).

Among those reluctant by choice, 75% cited “enjoy working” and 70% cited “will still be effective at work” as major reasons for expecting to work past age 67, yet only 39% reported having carefully evaluated how they could spend their time if they retired. So most of those reluctant by choice have not considered alternative endeavors to academe that might provide an equal or greater level of enjoyment and fulfillment at this point in life.

The same dynamic was apparent in the 2014 survey. Those reluctant by choice were approximately 30 percentage points more likely to cite “enjoy and are fulfilled by work” and “remain effective as faculty member” as major reasons for expecting to work past age 67, while those reluctantly reluctant were 30 percentage points more likely to cite “personal finances necessitate continued work.” At the same time, only 47% of reluctantly reluctants had carefully evaluated when they could afford to retire—and this was likely an over-assessment given that only 31% had consulted with a professional advisor on this within the prior three years. Among those reluctant by choice, only 39% had carefully evaluated how they could spend their time if they retired, and less than 10% had worked with a professional advisor in considering how to spend their time if retired.

Addressing assumptions that drive faculty decisions about whether and when to retire would position faculty to make fully informed decisions. This in turn can lessen the occurrence of deferred retirements and shorten the length of time that retirement is deferred. For more on this, see *Can the reluctant retiree phenomena be addressed?*

Psychosocial considerations are key among those who want to work past normal retirement age.

In both cases, assumptions underlie these considerations and drive delayed retirements.

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Read more:

Paul Yakoboski and Jacqueline Bichsel (October 2019). [Financial Well-being and Retirement Readiness in the Higher Education Workforce](#)

Paul Yakoboski (June 2015). [Understanding The Faculty Retirement \(Non\) Decision](#)

Paul Yakoboski and Valerie Martin Conley (March 2013). [Retirement Plans, Policies and Practices in Higher Education](#)

Paul Yakoboski (December 2011). [Should I Stay or Should I Go? The Faculty Retirement Decision](#)

Jean E. Foster, Linda Naiditch and Lisa Politzer (August 2011). [Motivating Reluctant Retirees in Higher Education: Interviews with College Administrators and Senior Faculty](#)

Conrad Ciccotello, E. Jill Pollock and Paul Yakoboski (July 2011). [Understanding the Reluctant Retiree on Campus: Helping Individuals Make the Right Retirement Decision](#)

Elizabeth Jetton (August 2009). [Moving from Financial Planning to Financial Life Planning](#)

Paul Yakoboski (April 2009). [Managing Retirement in Higher Education](#)

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