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Stuck in the Middle

Associate professors see their earning power drop compared with their colleagues above and below

By Audrey Williams June

Associate professors, in theory, should be hitting a stride in their academic careers. In the middle ranks of faculty, they have typically earned tenure and started to take on broader responsibilities in their departments, juggling more service and governance roles with their teaching and research.

But the earning power of these professors is diminishing compared with their peers in ranks above and below them.

While pay for associate professors has grown by 5.6 percent since 2000, after adjusting for inflation, salaries for assistant professors have increased by 9 percent, according to a Chronicle analysis of data provided by the American Association of University Professors. The gap is widening even more between associate professors and full professors, whose pay has increased by 11.7 percent.

The professors’ association is releasing its annual survey of faculty salaries this week. The average salary for full-time faculty members, the association found, rose 2.2 percent in 2013-14 from the year before. For the first time in five years, the increase in salaries outpaced inflation.

However, the association cautions that the recession’s effect on faculty salaries isn’t over yet. Professors who work at the same institutions as the year before saw an average pay raise of 3.4 percent, which is still below pre-recessionary levels.

The report, titled "Losing Focus," also points out lingering inequities: Pay at private colleges, it says, continues to be higher...
than at public institutions. And the report questions institutions’ focus on their core academic mission, given their decisions to grow administrative ranks and increase spending on athletics.
Pay Has Grown Slowly for Many in the Middle

Across all types of institutions, associate professors—usually those with tenure but lacking in published papers—have lost ground to their academic peers in terms of pay. The average salary for associate professors at doctoral universities has increased at half the pace of full professors’ salaries. Meanwhile, professors of all ranks at two-year colleges have fared the worst. Struggling to keep up with inflation even in the best of times, and still not fully rebounded from prerecession highs, salaries at associate institutions are actually lower today than they were in 2000, when adjusted for inflation.
Despite that kind of environment, in which little money is typically available or set aside for increasing faculty pay, salaries for assistant professors are rising at a faster rate than those of associate professors—mainly because institutions put together competitive pay packages every year to lure new junior faculty members to campus. That leaves associate professors, and even some full professors, to commiserate about salary compression as the gap narrows between their pay and that of their newly hired colleagues.

The average salary for an assistant professor across all types of institutions is $69,848 in 2013-14, compared with $81,980 for an associate professor, according to AAUP data—a gap of about $12,000.

"I see this all the time as I try to hire people on the open market," says Antony H. Harrison, a professor of English and head of the department at North Carolina State University. "Beginning assistant professors can certainly make more than established associate professors in my department.

"It’s a huge problem," he continues. "For us, there just aren’t that many tools in the tool box that you can work with to make a difference."

Meanwhile, the gap between the average salaries of associate professors and full professors is just over $37,000. Salaries for full professors generally rise at a faster rate than those of other ranks, in part because raises and merit pay are typically awarded as a percentage of their already larger base salary. Over time the pay gap between them and their colleagues in other ranks will continue to grow when measured in absolute dollars.

Deans and other administrators face a number of constraints as they make hard choices about how to allocate limited funds for salaries. They have to manage faculty morale as tight budgets limit the possibility of raises, and they must weigh how to recruit new faculty and find money to retain professors who are offered bigger paychecks elsewhere.
"The only way to get a significant raise is to move somewhere else," says Lynn E. Fisher, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "And of course that’s a loss of experience and training to the university."

Ms. Fisher is one associate professor whose salary has crept up only incrementally in recent years. She was promoted to her current rank at the start of the 2006-7 academic year. At the time, the move increased her base salary by $2,500. Since then pay raises for the university's faculty have been sporadic; they were nonexistent in the years following the recession.

Last year, however, employees across the board in the University of Illinois system received merit raises that averaged 2.75 percent.

For associate professors like Ms. Fisher, the next substantive bump in salary would most likely come with a promotion to full professor. At Springfield, advancement to that rank means a $5,000 boost in pay. To apply for the promotion, associate professors must be at that rank for at least seven years and "be able to document a clear record of excellence in teaching, research, and service," among other things, according to university guidelines.

The path to full professor, and the subsequent financial payoff, is often fraught with barriers, particularly for women and minority faculty members. Research shows that both groups are often disproportionately saddled with service activities, such as mentoring undergraduates and sitting on departmental and universitywide committees, and family responsibilities that make it tough for them to take on the kind of work that counts toward promotion.

"In many departments and institutions, the culture and support for professors to come up to full is just not there," says Kiernan Mathews, director of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in
Higher Education at Harvard University, which studies the attitudes faculty members have about their jobs. "What we’ve learned is that the experience of the newly tenured associate professors is a heavier course load and more service work, perhaps even serving as department chair. They’re asked to do all these other additional things without any support to continue their research productivity."

How much earning power associate professors have varies by the type of institution at which they are employed.

According to the AAUP data, they fare the worst compared with their peers at master's institutions, where their pay, after adjusting for inflation, fell by 0.3 percent since 2000-1. Associate professors fared the best at doctoral institutions, where their pay rose 7.1 percent when adjusted for inflation.

The severity of gaps also varies by campus. At Springfield, where Ms. Fisher works, the average associate professor’s pay fell 11 percent between 2000-1 and 2013-14, when adjusted for inflation. In comparison, full professors saw a 21-percent jump in pay. The average pay for associate professors at the University of Chicago rose from $107,500 in 2000 to $118,900 in 2013-14—an increase of 11 percent. But full professors’ average pay rose by 25 percent during that time, from $168,800 to $210,700. At Vanderbilt University, the average pay for associate professors went up 19 percent to $107,500, but average pay for full professors outpaced that with a 25-percent jump.

Associate professors' salaries may be slow-growing partly because of the kinds of faculty members who tend to be part of that rank. Some, for example, never seek promotion. Such longtime associates may have been planning to retire before the recession hit, Mr. Mathews says. However, it’s possible that they’ve now put off those plans and are locked into incremental raises, if any.

Nadine Bean, who has been an associate professor of social work at West Chester University of Pennsylvania for nine years, has decided not to apply for a promotion. That means she is also passing up the pay bump that comes with a move to full professor. She says she has come to realize that meeting the requirements for
promotion would be a stretch for her.

"I'm supposed to do 50 percent teaching, 35 percent research, and 15 percent service, and my research and service is reversed," says Ms. Bean, who worked as a social worker for 25 years before starting a career in academe. "I'm just very active in my profession and in direct service, actively engaging students in the work that I do. To apply for full, I would have to dramatically change my priorities, and I'm just not willing to do that."

Ms. Bean’s decision means she’ll forego a 10- to 12-percent jump in pay at an institution where the average pay for professors at her rank is $85,500. Those who have remained at their ranks have been receiving raises of 1 to 2 percent in recent years as stipulated by the faculty’s union contract.

At some institutions, associate professors and others don’t have to rely solely on raises or promotions to earn extra money. At Central Michigan University, for example, professors of all ranks can earn more pay for teaching courses online or during the summer (although the money wouldn’t be added to their base salary), says Joshua Smith, an associate professor of philosophy and religion and president of the university’s faculty union.

A promotion to associate professor at Central Michigan comes with a base salary increase of $6,250, according to Mr. Smith, and a promotion to full professor comes with an increase of $7,250. Full professors, however, also have a built-in opportunity to increase their earning power at a greater rate than professors of other ranks. Every four years they can earn the same pay raise they did when they were promoted to full professor if they meet the same criteria.

"There’s a strong motivation to get promoted and stay active," Mr. Smith says.

That same kind of incentive exists at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where AAUP data show that, when adjusted for inflation, average pay for associate professors has risen just 1 percent since 2000-1. Yet the average pay for full professors at the institution grew only 5 percent, from $138,300 to $145,200.
Within the University of California system, professors of any rank have a process they can invoke if they believe they are underpaid and want a review of their record and achievements.

"People who are doing good work have a path to move forward and advance throughout their entire career," says David Marshall, dean of the division of humanities and fine arts at Santa Barbara.

Faculty at all ranks are also promoted in "steps," which means that it's possible to get a raise every few years within the same rank before moving on to the next one. A faculty member who has exceeded expectations for a particular step could skip it and move on to the next, Mr. Marshall says.

The pay hierarchy can also be changed, sometimes significantly, when the university counters an offer for a job a faculty member receives elsewhere or when the university makes an aggressive play to land a hotly sought-after assistant professor.

"Sometimes you can find assistant and associate professors with higher salaries than full professors," says Mr. Marshall. "We're aware of the pressure of market forces when you're dealing with recruitment and retention. All universities are dealing with this.

"Still, we do try to keep a sense of the whole picture," he says, "and balance that with what's happening with individuals."

*Jonah Newman contributed to this article.*