

CONVENIENT TRUTHS: HOW A FLAWED FACULTY SURVEY FUELED A FAULTY NARRATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Recent headlines have claimed that “nearly a third of Florida professors” are looking for jobs elsewhere.^[1] Similar stories have appeared about other Southern states, such as Texas, where supposedly one in four faculty say they have already applied for positions outside the state and another quarter intend to do so soon.^[2] All of these reports trace back to a survey called *Faculty in the South*, conducted by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Media outlets are now citing the survey’s results to claim that faculty are fleeing states like Florida and Texas in response to recently enacted measures—such as post-tenure review, restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, and new rules governing general education curricula.

These claims are misleading or overstated as the survey fails to meet basic methodological standards. It does not and cannot answer the question it set out to address. More rigorous evidence is needed before drawing conclusions about faculty retention in the South.

To be sure, the underlying question—whether recent policy changes are affecting faculty retention—is both

reasonable and important. The AAUP survey, however, is not equipped to answer it.

AAUP SURVEY RELIED ON A CONVENIENCE SAMPLE

The AAUP survey cannot be treated as representative of faculty in Florida—or in any other Southern state.

According to the survey’s own author—an English professor at the University of North Georgia—the data are drawn from what researchers call a *convenience sample*. That means the respondents were not randomly selected; rather, they were simply those who happened to see the survey and opted in on their own initiative. Invitations went out through AAUP email blasts, posts on social media platforms (X/Twitter, Bluesky, and Facebook), state chapter networks, and web-scraped faculty email lists. The author also contacted faculty senate leaders directly. In some cases, collaborators at other institutions submitted public records requests to obtain faculty email lists. Most importantly, the survey link itself was publicly accessible, meaning anyone with the URL could take the survey.^[3]

Roughly 3,900 people completed the survey. The author estimates that 40,000-

50,000 emails were sent during the three weeks the survey was open, which, at least on paper, would suggest a response rate of 8–10%. But when only a small fraction participates, the results are more likely to reflect a vocal and unsatisfied minority—not the faculty as a whole. It is entirely possible that this sample consists of faculty with grievances about state policy changes—especially given recent media attention on these issues.

THE AAUP SURVEY LACKS MEANINGFUL COMPARATIVE BENCHMARKS

Even if the AAUP survey had been conducted with a representative sample, its topline findings would still be questionable for a simple reason: it does not tell us how these results compare with faculty in other states nationwide or how they have changed over time.

Assuming the findings here are accurate—and there are no assurances they are—the study offers no comparison between the Southern states in the sample and other states nationwide. Without reliable data on how common it is for faculty across the country to apply for jobs in other states, it is impossible to know whether the reported figures for Florida (31%), Texas (25%), or any other Southern state are unusually high or entirely ordinary. For all we know, similar or higher shares of faculty in California, Illinois, or New York may also be applying elsewhere, for reasons having little to do with politics or state policy. In that sense, headlines pointing to “a third of Florida

professors” applying for jobs elsewhere are more misleading than revealing, since we have no yardstick against which to measure the claim.

What’s more, it is not even clear whether the alleged 31% figure for Florida—or comparable figures for Texas and other states—is greater, lesser, or roughly the same as in previous years. The survey’s author and subsequent media coverage attribute these numbers to contentious new state policies.^[4] But if the job-seeking rate is the same as or even lower than in prior years, such claims would be highly dubious.

Nearly half of those who reported applying for academic positions in other states—including 44% of both Florida and Texas respondents—also applied to at least one state with its own anti-DEI higher-education policies.

Even on their own terms, however, the results don’t clearly support the political narrative being circulated in news media. Nearly half of those who reported applying for academic positions in other states—including 44% of both Florida and Texas respondents—also applied to at least one state with its own anti-DEI higher-education policies.^[5] Strikingly, this was true even among those who gave political or socio-political reasons for seeking jobs elsewhere: 43% of that

group, and more than a third (35%) of those who cited only political reasons, also applied to “anti-DEI” states.[6]

Without both sides of the migration equation—and without the ability to distinguish intent from actual relocations—the survey cannot tell us whether reforms are producing net faculty losses, gains, or simply “churn” with no meaningful change at all.

Equally important, the survey says nothing about faculty who choose to move to Florida and other Southern states. Just as some professors may consider leaving the South, their counterparts elsewhere may be drawn to Southern institutions. The AAUP survey was designed to capture only Southern respondents, but even within its data we see hints of this dynamic. For example, while 61 Florida respondents said they had applied to an institution in another state, 86 respondents from other states applied to institutions in Florida—37 of whom (45%) cited at least one socio-political reason, most often their state’s “broad political climate.” In other words, even within data limited to just 13 Southern states, more faculty were applying to Florida institutions than Florida faculty were applying out of state. If anything, expanding the scope to all 50 states would likely reveal an even larger

pool of applicants to Florida.

Simply put, without both sides of the migration equation—and without the ability to distinguish intent from actual relocations—the survey cannot tell us whether reforms are producing net faculty losses, gains, or simply “churn” with no meaningful change at all.

AAUP SURVEY DESIGN INVITES BIASED RESPONSES

In addition to the representativeness and context problems, the survey employs biased language and primes respondents to provide answers through the lens of politics. Well-designed surveys aim to capture a full range of possible experiences and perspectives. They employ neutral language that does not push respondents toward conclusions. By contrast, several of the AAUP survey’s key questions appear leading, narrow, or politically loaded.

Consider Question 12, which asked respondents why they applied for faculty positions in other states. The response options leaned heavily toward “hot-button” issues, including tenure review, DEI and LGBTQ+ policies, abortion access, a state’s political climate, and academic freedom. While the list also included salary, cost of living, contract issues, and shared governance, it omitted many of the most common reasons academics typically change jobs, such as family circumstances, career advancement, or institutional prestige.

Of the 938 respondents who answered the question, two-thirds (66.5%) selected from the preset options, meaning the results largely reflect how the question was framed rather than the full range of factors that might actually drive faculty mobility.

Even more telling, only 14% (17% of Florida and 15% of Texas respondents) of those who said they had applied for jobs in other states gave exclusively political or socio-political reasons. The vast majority (80%) who cited politics also named at least one apolitical factor—most often “salary” (53%).

In other words, what the survey records as political motivation may often reflect secondary considerations prompted by the way the question was—priming respondents to express their political identities or recast their reasons in political terms—rather than their primary motivations for seeking academic positions in other states.

Instead of neutrally recording faculty experiences, the wording effectively guided respondents toward a negative narrative.

Nor was this the only example of leading design. Question 20 asked faculty to “*share an example of how attacks on higher education are directly impacting your work.*” The very wording

that higher education is under attack and that these “attacks” are harmful—hardly a neutral starting point. Unsurprisingly, a number of respondents pushed back. One wrote: “*This survey suffers from a huge amount of researcher demand and confirmation bias, quite disappointing.*” Another called the wording “*ambiguous,*” asking “*attacks by whom? ... if I sent you a survey that said, ‘please share an example of how removing the bloat of overpaid university administrators is improving campus life,’ would you feel confident in the impartiality of the surveyor?*” A third dismissed the survey as “*quite loaded and biased, assuming that the only attacks are from the conservative/republican side of the political spectrum.*” Others went further, describing it as “*partisan politics*” and “*not a truth-seeking exercise.*”

Instead of neutrally recording faculty experiences, the wording effectively guided respondents toward a negative narrative.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the survey’s flaws—its convenience sample, lack of meaningful benchmarks, inability to capture actual inflows and outflows, and leading question design—mean its results cannot support broad claims about faculty behavior. At most, the AAUP survey captures the views of a particular subset of respondents.

It was not appropriate to present the

results as representative of entire state workforces, nor for headlines to treat them as evidence of widespread faculty flight. Until research meeting basic methodological standards is conducted, claims of mass departures remain more speculative than real.

[1] Waagmeester, Jay. (2025, September 5). Nearly a third of Florida professors looking for work in another state. *Florida Phoenix*. <https://floridaphoenix.com/2025/09/05/nearly-a-third-of-florida-professors-looking-for-work-in-another-state/>

[2] Gutteridge, Nicholas. & Ford, Alex. (2025, September 8). Professors want to leave Texas because of tense political climate, survey says. *The Texas Tribune*. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/professors-want-leave-texas-because-204356211.html>

[3] The AAUP South Carolina chapter posted a publicly accessible link to the survey on its website. The survey was hosted on Google Forms, which now displays the notice: "The form 2025 AAUP Faculty in the South Survey is no longer accepting responses." The archived AAUP South Carolina web page hosting the link is available at: <https://www.aaup-sc.org/single-post/the-2025-aaup-faculty-in-the-south-survey-is-live>

[4] Boedy, Mathew. (2025, September 8). 2025 Faculty in the South Survey. *Academe Blog*. <https://academeblog.org/2025/09/08/2025-faculty-in-the-south-survey/>

[5] For a list of these anti-DEI states, see states coded as 'Signed into law' at: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts>

[6] By "only cited political reasons", I mean respondents who, when asked to give a reason for why they applied for positions in other states, exclusively selected at least one or more of the following preset response categories: DEI issues, LGBTQ+ issues, state's broader political climate, abortion/reproductive access, and academic freedom. Conversely, such respondents didn't select any of the following politically neutral or apolitical response categories: Tenure issues, salary, contract issues, shared governance, and cost of living. Nor did they enter a personalized response (which they had the option to do) that specified a non-political reason (e.g. wanting to live closer to family).