"Cutting Costs Means Cutting Me"

"We Need to Have a Voice"

FORCED OUT

The faces of higher education’s historic layoffs

"I Always Needed to Have a Plan"
since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, higher education has suffered its greatest job losses on record.

*The Chronicle* set out to tell the stories of those affected.

**Covid-19 Reversed Decades of Job Growth**

![Chart showing percentage change from previous February estimate.](chart.png)

*Note: Percentage-change calculations were derived from seasonally adjusted estimates of workers employed within select industries of higher education. The estimate for February 2021 is preliminary.*
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“I Used to Teach”

Jannette H. Bonamie
ESL specialist and instructor | Saginaw, Mich.

By Megan Zahneis

Jannette H. Bonamie’s morning shift as a front-desk agent at the Fairfield Inn and Suites starts at 7 a.m.

She checks guests in and out, makes sure the coffee bar and breakfast area are stocked up, helps the housekeepers with laundry, fields calls to the front desk. If a housekeeper or maintenance-crew member is unavailable, she might empty the trash or clean the public restroom.
She doesn’t tell her colleagues, or guests at the hotel, that she has a Ph.D. in educational linguistics and, until last year, was a senior specialist and instructor of English as a second language at nearby Saginaw Valley State University. Bonamie, 42, went on furlough, then was laid off, amid the pandemic.

"My Rainy Day Turned Into This Giant Hurricane"

Joy Brown
News and communications specialist | Findlay, Ohio
As told to Megan Zahneis

I was the media-relations coordinator at the University of Findlay, in Ohio, for about five years. In May 2019, I earned my master’s degree in rhetoric and writing. I thought I could leverage this to do something bigger, to explore different opportunities, both professionally and personally, shake things up a little bit and see if I can start fresh someplace different. I felt sort of stuck in my position.

So I started applying for jobs throughout the country, and Western Michigan University came calling. It was a risk because I had never even visited Kalamazoo before I interviewed there. But I decided to make the leap.

I signed a one-year contract to work for them and broke the news to my son, Owen, who was 8 years old at the time. Of course, he was pretty upset about it. We were both leaving behind almost everything that we knew and loved.

Read more...
“We Need to Have a Voice”

Valentina Espinosa
Housekeeper | Evanston, Ill.

By Scott Carlson

For 17 years, Valentina Espinosa worked a housekeeping job in a hotel owned by Northwestern University — a job farmed out to a series of third-party corporations, one of which she helped unionize to push for a living wage. Despite the challenges, the job had become a bedrock of security in her life.

“I love my co-workers,” she says in English. “I feel like they are my family, and I feel very comfortable with them.” Besides, she adds through a translator, over the years she didn’t feel confident that she could find a comparable job.
Now she may have to find a new family. In March of last year, Espinosa was laid off, as the pandemic decimated travel and the hotels that house visitors. She has been mostly out of work since then, surviving on unemployment payments.

“Cutting Costs Means Cutting Me”

Zoe Fox
Math lecturer | Chicago

By Emma Pettit
oe Fox says they realized “embarrassingly late” that they would not, in fact, be rehired at
the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Fox, whose pronouns are they, their, and them, had taught in the department of
mathematics, statistics, and computer science as a lecturer for two years. They
took pride in creating a warm classroom environment for students to learn math, which can
sometimes feel, Fox knows, like a cold subject. After the pandemic struck, other instructors
pretended that everything was normal, wrote one of Fox’s students in a spring-2020
evaluation. But Fox “helped alleviate our anxiety and stress with compassion and humor.”

Entering last fall’s semester, Fox, who was involved with the faculty union, knew that
layoffs and non-reappointments were a possibility. But, they thought, It’ll happen to my
colleagues. Not me.

So in July, when they were told, in the midst of teaching a summer course, that there was
no job after all, they were devastated. Then, Fox says, they entered the first of the five
stages of grief: denial. Surely, Fox thought, I’ll be rehired once enrollment numbers
become less murky. That happens all the time. And I’m a good teacher.

But no job emerged. In an act of desperation, Fox sent what was essentially a short cover
letter to department leaders, pleading their case, but they got no response. Eventually,
reality sank in. When that happened, they felt “something like acceptance” tinged with
anger, Fox said. They were part of a 5-percent reduction in full-time non-tenure-track
positions across the university, according to the UIC United Faculty, the faculty union.
Some, like Fox, were at the start of what they thought could have been long academic
careers.

Fox, 27, didn’t always want to teach math. Growing up in a suburb of Buffalo, N.Y., they
loathed the subject, or at least the way it was taught. There was “tons and tons” of
homework, which felt tedious and unnecessary, Fox recalls. One high-school trigonometry
teacher, Fox remembers, docked points for small things like not putting arrowheads at the
ends of axes. “I just found it immensely frustrating, and blamed math for it,” Fox says.
That changed when they attended college at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In their first week of Calculus 2, the professor presented a proof of the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus, and “it just knocked my socks off,” says Fox, who went on to major in math.

After they graduated, Fox enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Illinois but struggled with anxiety and depression, and dropped out after earning a master’s degree. They started teaching for the department as a lecturer and soon realized that they loved putting together lessons in which logic builds on itself into a temple of comprehension. What they enjoyed most was the students, who responded to Fox’s bone-dry sense of humor and unorthodox icebreakers. They would sometimes instruct students to turn to the person next to them and say, “I love you.”

“It’s this bizarre, uncomfortable thing,” Fox says, “but also it gets you to laugh, and when you’re laughing and looking at the person next to you, you’re like, ‘OK, I can work with you.’”

When Fox got the notice that they wouldn’t be reappointed, they cried. Having to teach the next day felt especially demoralizing. But they wanted to keep teaching somewhere. They applied for other academic jobs but didn’t hear back. The job market, already brutal before 2020, was not improved by a global health crisis. Fox went on unemployment insurance and got some financial assistance from the faculty union’s mutual-aid fund.

More notable than the financial anxiety was the emotional toll. “Losing your job is one of these cultural touchstones where everybody knows it sucks,” Fox says, “but you don’t actually realize how humiliating and terrifying it is until it happens to you.”

After four months of searching, Fox landed another position. They’re now a staff organizer for the university’s graduate-employees union. The pay is better, and Fox likes the work. They hope they’ll be able to return to the classroom in the future, they say, though “I don’t know how that’s ever going to happen.”
If it does, Fox will bring with them a heightened understanding of what academe protects, and what it doesn’t. Faculty members, they say, often don’t consider themselves workers, employees who are expendable. But this past year has made it clear, at least to Fox, that they are. The university, as an enterprise, is a business, they say. “Cutting costs means cutting me.”
As told to Eric Hoover

I’m 58. I was planning to retire at 60, collect my pension, and work part time. Wanted to enjoy some years making cards, planting some plants, spending time with my husband. Is my plan there now? No, they took that away from me.

I worked for Kennesaw State University. My title was administrative specialist. Basically, I was a business manager, supporting the vice president for student affairs. Assisting with budgets, paying bills for several departments. Then I was moved to Student Life, where I registered student organizations and read through their contracts to make sure they were written the right way. I enjoyed it.

In 2019, when I knew my daughter was going to be attending KSU, I went a little crazy at the campus bookstore. Spent a couple hundred dollars on KSU T-shirts, hoodies, blankets, socks. I put everything in a big box under the Christmas tree. When you work for a university, you’re kinda proud to work there.
“I Always Needed to Have a Plan”

Monika Pacholczyk
Adjunct lecturer | New York City

By Emma Pettit

“Extended agony” — that’s what Monika Pacholczyk calls the drawn-out process of learning that her career had evaporated.

A longtime adjunct lecturer at LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York, Pacholczyk was told in April 2020, as Covid-19 cases soared in New York City, that she wouldn’t be reappointed in the fall. She’d lose the job that she’d held for more than 20 years. Catastrophe.
Then she was told that some adjuncts had received that notice in error. She hoped maybe she’d been one of them. In late May she received her standard reappointment letter, buoying those hopes. But in the summer quarter she wasn’t assigned any classes. None again in the fall quarter. And none that winter. By that point, it was not a surprise to Pacholczyk, but it stung anyway. Her contract at Baruch College, another CUNY campus, where she’d taught since 2007, was also not renewed.

“It’s Hard to Have Pride During a Pandemic”

Sue Ramlo
Physics professor | Akron, Ohio
she had just finished her 26th year at the University of Akron, and had been a tenured professor for 17. She’d won teaching awards, published and presented at a steady clip, and received strong evaluations from students and colleagues.

None of that protected Sue Ramlo. On July 15, the day Akron’s Board of Trustees voted to fire 96 professors, she received a meeting invitation from her new acting dean. She knew what awaited her.

It was nothing specific to her performance, she was told. It was about money. Even before the pandemic, which decimated college budgets across the country, the University of Akron had been bleeding red. Various presidents and a revolving door of chief financial officers had tried different remedies, without success.
College was a launch pad for Daniel Yen, but not through his classroom education. Yen was among the students who land a job in the array of services, amenities, and activities that colleges offer — in the library, the cafe, the rec center. Along the way, some find a passion (or at least a purpose), fall in love with campus life, and start building a career in higher education.

Yen, who is 29, was on that path until last November, when he was laid off from his job as coordinator of rec sports at Rider University, a position he had held for only a year.
“I was really excited for my career path, and pandemic hits,” Yen says. “I took that pretty hard.”
Emma Pettit is a senior reporter at *The Chronicle* who covers all things faculty. She writes mostly about professors and the strange, funny, sometimes harmful and sometimes hopeful ways they work and live. Follow her on Twitter at @EmmaJanePettit, or email her at emma.pettit@chronicle.com.

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