



# Leaving the Institution or Leaving the Academy? Analyzing the Factors that Faculty Weigh in Actual Departure Decisions

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## Abstract

Although research has revealed many factors that predict faculty turnover, the literature is often limited by using intent to leave as a proxy for actual turnover, and further by consolidating faculty who leave institutions with faculty who leave the occupation. We resolve these limitations and advance the faculty mobility literature by studying faculty who actually left their higher education institution for both academic and non-academic jobs. Drawing on a survey of 773 departing faculty respondents, we employed structural topic modeling and logistic regression to understand whether or not academic and non-academic leavers had statistically different reasons for leaving. Structural topic modeling revealed 12 dominant reasons why faculty leave, but none of these reasons were unique to those who left academia. Regression results show that gender, tenure status, and salary increase were significant drivers of leaving the academic profession. We provide implications for future studies of faculty departure and for faculty retention.

**Keywords** Faculty mobility · Faculty departure · Occupational turnover · Structural topic modeling · Logistic regression

## Introduction

It is hard to enter higher education spaces and not encounter what some are calling “quit lit” (Bartram, 2018; Flaherty, 2015; Kendal & Waterhouse-Watson 2020; McKenzie, 2021; Pannapacker, 2021). In an academic context, “quit lit” (henceforth known as departure nar-

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ratives) refers to individuals' personal narratives for leaving academia (Kendal & Waterhouse-Watson, 2020). Departure narratives are increasingly prevalent in personal blogs (Bartram, 2018; Dreger, 2015; Laudan, 2021), media outlets (Larson, 2020; Lee, 2015), and social media platforms like Twitter. Departure narratives often provide reasons the former faculty member decided to leave academe such as department politics or limited opportunities for advancement. But most of all, there is a discernible calculus wherein an individual balances what they appreciate about the academic profession (e.g., love of research, passion for teaching and mentoring students, desire for professional autonomy), with perceived drawbacks (e.g., an increasingly precarious academic job market, isolating and imbalanced work-life environments, and reduced pay compared to industry careers in certain disciplines).

The question of who leaves academia and why is not new. The tension between the perceived benefits and drawbacks of academic careers animates an entire literature base on faculty mobility in higher education (Barnes et al., 1998; Daly & Dee, 2006; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Kim et al., 2013; Matier, 1990; O'Meara et al., 2014, 2016; Rosser, 2004; Rosser & Townsend, 2006; Ryan et al., 2012; Smart, 1990; Xu, 2008; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004). However, there is a fundamental limitation in the literature on why faculty leave. Most studies on faculty departures collapse both faculty who left their higher education institution for another institution (organizational turnover) and faculty who left their higher education institution for a different occupation (occupational turnover) without distinguishing between the two groups (see for example, Johnsrud & Rosser 2002; Kim et al., 2013; Lawrence et al., 2014; O'Meara et al., 2014; Rosser, 2004; Smart, 1990; Xu, 2008; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004). Very few studies focus on occupational turnover as a distinct construct (see for example, Barnes et al., 1998; Dorenkamp & Weib, 2018; Ryan et al., 2012; Wohrer, 2014). The distinction may be very important: there is evidence from non-academic settings that the reasons employees leave their organization differ from the reasons they leave their occupation (Blau et al., 2003; Louis, 1980; Zimmerman et al., 2020), and even a cursory review of online departure narratives shows that many individuals' reasons for leaving would reasonably occur at any postsecondary institution, suggesting that there are unique occupationally-driven forces in departure decisions.

There is a critical need for more empirical research on whether and how organizational and occupational turnover differ in higher education faculty careers. The purpose of this study is to empirically understand why scholars leave academe altogether, and compare those rationales to faculty who leave for academic careers at other postsecondary institutions. Both forms of faculty turnover are extremely costly to institutions, and can jeopardize research expertise, course offerings, and departmental service workloads (Ehrenberg et al., 1991; Kaminski & Geisler, 2012; O'Meara et al., 2014). However, understanding faculty reasons for leaving institutions and occupations may help academic leaders preemptively spot departure cues before they are acted upon. Higher education institutions interested in retaining a diverse, vibrant faculty can use this information to reform their policies and practices and become more attractive to those whom they wish to retain.

## Conceptual framework: Push and pull factors in faculty departure

There are numerous individual and organizational explanations as to why faculty leave their academic positions. These include dissatisfaction in the general sense and with work-life balance (Daly & Dee, 2006; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Rosser, 2004; Smart, 1990), limited job security and dissatisfaction with compensation (Zhou & Volkwein, 2004; O'Meara et al., 2014, 2016), productivity (Ryan et al., 2012; Smart, 1990), familial and geographic concerns (O'Meara et al., 2014), and discrimination experienced in the workplace stemming from gender, race, and partner status (Kim et al., 2013; Rabe & Rugunanan, 2012; Rothblum, 1988; Smart, 1990; Zambrana, 2018). Leveraging scholarship on organizational commitment (e.g., March & Simon, 1958; Steers 1977), Mattier (1990) was among the first to describe departure rationales in higher education as either “push,” or “pull” factors. Push factors are features of the current workplace that motivate employees to seek external opportunities, whereas pull factors are external features that attract employees and entice them to leave (Mattier, 1990). In line with Mattier (1990), subsequent departure studies over the years have aligned with the push-pull precedent (e.g., O'Meara et al., 2016; Daly & Dee, 2006; Ryan et al., 2012; Xu, 2008; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004).

There is discussion as to whether push or pull factors are more responsible for explaining why faculty leave. Mattier (1990) found that pull factors such as labor market conditions were indeed important, but were not more important than push conditions of the current workplace. Zhou & Volkwein (2004) identified very few pull factors that explained faculty departures, and concluded that push factors such as compensation and satisfaction with job security played a greater role. This may be why O'Meara and colleagues (2016) concludes that “factors such as a higher salary and a more prestigious department are not really ‘pull’ factors if faculty members are satisfied and thriving with their institutions” (p. 269). In other words, if push factors are minimal then pull factors are expected to weigh less in departure decision-making. However, these studies fail to consider the *type* of pull. Most often, the pulling organization is assumed to be another higher education institution, but pushes and pulls may operate differently when accounting for other types of occupations that have their own unique benefits and opportunities. Thus, we use this conceptual framework of push and pull in departure decision-making to frame our literature review of organizational and occupational turnover, which moves us closer toward understanding how these turnover types may differ in faculty careers.

## Guiding literature on organizational and occupational turnover

Research on organizational and occupational turnover is most prominent in the fields of management and human resources. Although a standard amount of employee turnover is routine within organizations, it still results in lost economic investments and talent, negatively impacts morale, and can strengthen turnover intentions for other employees (Blau, 2000; McElroy et al., 2001). Though different types of turnover exist, there is much more focus on organizational turnover than occupational turnover. Both types jeopardize organizations, but occupational turnover is more detrimental to industries and fields of study because that talent is permanently lost (Blau et al., 2003). There are also consequences for individuals, since occupational turnover is more difficult due to the need to overcome skill

gaps, years' worth of foregone occupational investments, and the emotions that coincide with both (Blau, 2007; McKenzie, 2021).

## Differentiating organizational and occupational turnover

Louis (1980) was among the first to categorize different turnover intentions by distinguishing interprofessional career transitions from intercompany and intracompany. Later foundational work by Blau and colleagues (2000, 2007; 2003) firmly established that each has different, albeit somewhat related, predictors. While push factors such as satisfaction and intent to leave are important drivers for both occupational and organizational turnover, the push of work exhaustion was only related to occupational departure, and concerns around job security were only found to be related to organizational departure. In a more recent study, Zimmerman and colleagues (2020) also found that employees earning higher pay, performing greater amounts of "non-core job duties," (e.g., non-teaching activities such as administrative duties, service obligations, and extracurricular activities) and those engaged in moonlighting – or holding another job alongside the primary job – were more likely to change occupations than to change organizations. These studies reveal the differences between both turnover constructs, and highlight the enduring importance of push characteristics, both of which are important for employers as they construct retention packages to retain talent and minimize search expenditures for new employees.

## Organizational and occupational turnover in faculty Careers

Turning to higher education, there are very few studies of occupational turnover in post-secondary faculty careers (e.g., for exceptions, see Barnes et al., 1998; Wohrer, 2014). In Barnes et al.'s (1998) study, the two most significant predictors of faculty intent to leave the academic profession were push-related workplace conditions: frustrations due to time commitments and a lack of sense of community at one's institution. Frustrations due to time commitment (partially measured by the variable "having insufficient time to give a piece of work the proper attention," p. 462) are consistent with Zimmerman and colleagues' (2020) non-higher education finding that employees performing greater amounts of non-core job duties were more likely to depart the profession. Together, these findings signal that faculty who are asked to engage in non-core job duties instead of what they perceive as their core work – which is often the case in academic careers regardless of institution – may be more likely to leave the profession entirely rather than stay or seek another faculty appointment elsewhere. In a qualitative study of early career researchers with varying degrees of departure intentions, Wohrer (2014) also identified community as an important driver in staying or leaving, and found that job insecurity had a powerful effect on those decisions as well.

Although there is concrete evidence that employees generally leave their organizations and occupations for different reasons, we do not know if this is true in higher education. There is concrete evidence of differences between turnover constructs in the human resources and management literatures, but are these findings consistent for faculty careers? Put otherwise, the few studies of occupational turnover in academia identify community and workload concerns, but are these concerns so different from those who leave for another

postsecondary institution? The only way to answer such a question is to compare both forms of turnover simultaneously. To our knowledge, only two studies to date have satisfied this aim (e.g., Dorenkamp & Weib 2018; Ryan et al., 2012). Ryan and colleagues (2012) investigated tenure-track faculty members' departure decisions within a large, public research university and found that perceived lack of support (i.e., community) was related to occupational turnover and not organizational turnover, and "certain aspects of the faculty job" (p. 432) – including aspects included in what Zimmerman et al., (2020) described as non-core job duties and Barnes et al., (1998) described as frustration due to time commitments – made it more likely that scholars intended to depart the academic profession. Though Dorenkamp & Weib (2018) focused on 421 postdoctoral appointees, they also identified some key differences between turnover constructs and the important role of commitment to the profession in intentions to leave academia.

## Limitations of the turnover literature

Altogether, the few higher education studies support much of what has been found in human resources and management literatures: occupational turnover and organizational turnover differ from each other, and although they share some push- and pull-related predictors, there are also unique predictors as well such as a perceived lack of community. These push and pull factors, organized by departure type, are necessary to develop a model of faculty departure that separates occupational turnover from organizational turnover. However, there are still two important limitations in this scholarship worth rectifying for future research and practice: there are inconsistent findings regarding the role of race, gender, and partner status in shaping turnover, and there is a strong reliance on intent to leave variables as proxies for actual departures in most faculty mobility studies to date.

First, there are inconsistent findings related to how faculty's individual characteristics shape occupational and/or organizational departure decisions. Multiple studies show that race, gender, and marital status are largely insignificant in predicting departure type (e.g., Barnes et al., 1998; Daly & Dee, 2006; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; O'Meara et al., 2014; Rosser, 2004; Ryan et al., 2012; Xu, 2008; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004). Yet some studies show significant differences by these variables. For instance, Kim and colleagues (2013) found that Asian faculty members were least likely to intend to stay compared to other ethnic groups, and white faculty were most likely to intend to stay. Partner status is another important characteristic, as a partner's employment status may impact one's likelihood to move, yet only two studies found that partner status impacts departure decisions (e.g., Kim et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2012). Though these studies suggest that identity does not impact departure decisions, they differ from qualitative studies that highlight how these factors shape departures (e.g., O'Meara et al., 2014; O'Meara et al., 2016; Rabe & Rungunanan, 2012; Rothblum 1988), and many online departure narratives insist that these factors played a significant role in the discrimination they faced driving their decisions. These differences may be due to the fact that quantitative studies simply identify the presence of an individual characteristic, whereas qualitative studies examine the consequences of said identity within context, such as differential treatment and discrimination. Thus, there is a significant need to reconcile just how, if at all, individual characteristics matter in departure decisions.

Second, most higher education research on organizational turnover (e.g., Daly & Dee 2006; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Kim et al., 2013; Rosser, 2004; Smart, 1990; Xu, 2008; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004) or occupational turnover (e.g., Barnes et al., 1998; Dorenkamp & Weib, 2018; Ryan et al., 2012) use intent to depart rather than actual departures. Many of these studies use prior research from management literature to justify intent to depart as a valid proxy for actual departures (e.g., Mobley 1982; Lee & Mowday, 1987), but these studies are decades old and do not account for unique features of faculty careers. For example, a national survey of postsecondary faculty found that nearly half of the 20,771 respondents had considered leaving their institution in the past year (Stolzenberg et al., 2019). Based on the numeric reality of available faculty jobs and the difficulty of finding employment outside one's profession, it is highly unlikely that half of a nationally representative sample of faculty actually left their positions. Indeed, Wohrer (2014) identified "contradictions between repeatedly declared intentions to leave academia due to the high level of insecurity and continued applications for academic jobs" (p. 469). Though many faculty members may intend to leave their careers, there are different drivers for intentions compared to actual departures (O'Meara et al., 2014).

Both of these limitations threaten how well interdisciplinary scholarship on employee departure maps onto the higher education faculty departure terrain. In this study, we use actual data on faculty departures, alongside faculty individual characteristics and push and pull variables guided by the higher education, management, and human resources literatures to understand whether or not the reasons why faculty engage in occupational turnover differ from the reasons they engage in organizational turnover. There are two primary research questions:

1. What organizational push and pull factors most closely relate to faculty occupational or organizational turnover specifically for faculty at research universities?
2. How, if at all, is faculty departure type related to individual characteristics such as gender, race, and tenure status?

## Methods

### Data Source & Approach

We drew on data from the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education's (COACHE) Faculty Retention & Exit Study. In 2015, COACHE launched a new research-practice-partnership with research universities to standardize the data collected and stored about faculty who receive outside offers, and to identify patterns in the causes, costs, and conduct of faculty mobility. Our research team successfully petitioned COACHE to receive access to this dataset for research purposes. The COACHE project gathered information about retained faculty and voluntary departures from institutional databases. Also, COACHE created an online survey instrument for retained faculty and voluntary departures with questions regarding the search for a new position, the nature of the outside offer, the factors that weigh into a decision to depart or stay, the influence of spouses' and partners' careers, the counteroffer process, the transition to a new institution (for departures), and inequities in the experiences of faculty at every stage of this phenomenon.

Faculty must meet several eligibility criteria to be included in the Faculty Retention & Exit Study, and these factors shaped our participant sample. For the purposes of this study, “the faculty” refers to the appointment types that were eligible to take the survey, meaning either full-time, tenure-track assistant, associate, and full professors, or full-time, non-tenure-track faculty with multi-year appointments (e.g., have voting and senate rights). It is important to note that these analyses do not include part-time faculty, the majority and ever-growing segment of the U.S. professoriate (Eagan et al., 2015). Faculty must also fall into one of three primary employment types: “departures,” who were employed at the institution in the prior academic year but were no longer employed at the start of the academic year the survey was administered; “retentions,” who renegotiated the terms of their employment as a result of an outside offer; and “preemptives,” for whom some aspect of employment improved without an outside offer. In this study, we only consider those non-retiree faculty who left their institutions voluntarily (which comprises most university non-retirement departures), and not those who left after confidentially negotiating settlements nor involuntary separations such as tenure denials.

Overall, 37 institutions participated in the COACHE study from 2016 to 2019 and provided institutional and record-level data of the 2,289 faculty who left between July 2015 and June 2019. Across these institutions, 867 faculty responded to the survey, and 773 of those participants indicated their departure type (i.e., an academic or non-academic position). Departure type was the primary outcome variable for all analyses; faculty who indicated that their external opportunity was a “faculty or administrative appointment at another academic institution,” were considered academic leavers, whereas faculty who went to a “position in an established industry or private sector organization,” “position in government, NGO or policy institute,” “entrepreneurial venture (e.g., starting your own business),” or “research outside of the academy” were considered non-academic leavers. Thus, we focus on those faculty respondents who provided their departure type to understand what factors contributed to those differential decisions. Table 1 shows demographic statistics of our analytic sample by gender, race/ethnicity, tenure status, and institutional type. As shown in Table 1, the institutions studied by COACHE were overwhelmingly of the highest or high research activity, the environments where most faculty are socialized as graduate students both to the norms of university employment and to the academic profession (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995).

The Faculty Retention and Exit Survey instrument collects quantitative survey responses and qualitative survey comments, both of which were used for our analyses. To answer our first research question, we used both structural topic modeling and logistic regression. Though logistic regression enabled us to understand some key factors such as institutional type, it is still limited to the variables available in the survey. Therefore, we began with structural topic modeling to complement the logistic regression in order to answer our first research question, especially given the wealth of qualitative survey comments and their potential in addressing the range of topics in the literature. To do so, we qualitatively assessed more than 700 individual responses on factors that faculty weighed in their decisions to stay or leave their institution. Preliminary scans of these data indeed yielded consistent themes found in the literature, such as workplace dissatisfaction, difficulty accessing resources, and a desire to advance in one’s career – areas not captured in the quantitative survey items or constructs. We mapped these data alongside the primary covariate departure type, among others, to understand if certain narratives were more frequently associ-

**Table 1** Faculty Demographics

	Institutional Records of Faculty Leav- ers (N=2,289)	COACHE Survey Respondents of Faculty Leavers (n=867)	Faculty Leav- ers who indicated Departure Type (n=773)
<b>Gender</b>	830 (36.2%)	389 (44.8%)	347
Women	1,159 (50.6%)	449 (51.7%)	(44.8%)
Men	300 (12.8%)	29 (2.5%)	403
Not Available			(52.1%) 23 (2.0%)
<b>Race</b>	721 (31.5%)	269 (31.0%)	245
Faculty of Color*	1233 (53.9%)	563 (65.0%)	(31.7%)
White	335 (14.6%)	35 (4.0%)	498
Not Available			(64.4%) 30 (3.8%)
<b>Tenure Status</b>	977 (42.6%)	430 (49.6%)	388
Untenured or non-ten- ure-track / Tenured	814 (35.5%)	363 (41.8%)	(50.1%)
Not Available	498 (21.7%)	74 (8.5%)	352 (45.5%) 33 (4.2%)
<b>Institutional Type</b>	35 (94.5%)	35 (94.5%)	35
Highest or High Research University / Other	2 (4.5%)	2 (4.5%)	(94.5%) 2 (4.5%)

\*The Faculty of Color group includes (1) American Indian or Native Alaskan, (2) Asian or Asian-American, (3) Black or African-American, (4) Hispanic or Latino, (5) Multiracial, (6) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and (7) Middle Eastern or North African

ated with certain covariates (e.g., whether leaving due to “difficulty accessing resources” was more commonly associated with leaving for academic or non-academic careers). To answer our second research question on individual characteristics such as race and gender, we used logistic regression since these were variables already included in the survey. Next, we describe the analytic approaches in greater detail.

### Structural topic modeling

Structural topic modeling allows researchers to quantitatively assess, analyze, and summarize the language located within a corpus of text documents (Roberts et al., 2014, 2018). In this study, the documents included within the corpus are qualitative responses to a survey item which asked, “Think back to the time you received the outside offer, but before any counteroffer was (or was not) made. At that time, what factors were weighing most heavily on your consideration whether to stay at [INSTITUTION] or to accept the outside offer?” Our analysis only focused on respondents who indicated that they left, which enabled us to identify the factors that prompted non-academic departures and academic departures.

Employing a structural topic modeling approach not only identifies prominent themes in textual data similar to other qualitative techniques, but also facilitates inquiry into relationships between topical prevalence (e.g., responses that indicate that salary was a driving factor in their decision) against key covariates. The key covariate of interest was departure type, a binary variable of either leaving for a position at an academic or non-academic organization, but we were also interested in race, gender, and tenure status. Thus, we were able to determine whether a key covariate such as departure type was related to the likelihood of a topic being mentioned in the text documented by particular participants (e.g., people

who mentioned a lack of support were more likely to depart for non-academic careers than academic careers).

Our analysis began with a careful review of the dataset, comprised of documents ( $d$ , survey responses), with an overall vocabulary  $v$  and set number of topics included in the overall topic model  $K$ . After cleaning and preparing the dataset, we organized the data for our structural topic models. We prepared the corpus by removing punctuation, links, numbers, and stopwords which might not provide any nuance or insight into the content of the text documents (and & the, for example, or the @ symbol; Benoit et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2018). After preparing the corpus of text documents, we trimmed the dataset to include the 25% most occurring facets across the topics. While Roberts and colleagues (2018) recommend trimming to a smaller percentage (such as 5% or 10%), comparison between the 5% and 25% models indicates that the 25% model is a better fit for this data in terms of semantic coherence, though trimming at this scale still limited noise in the data and allowed us to isolate topics with higher degrees of prevalence and semantic coherence. Next, we removed empty documents (shells whose contents had been removed through the data preparation steps) and ran a  $K$  estimation to determine the optimal number of topics with which to run models.

Topic number optimization is crucial for structural topic modeling as, though models utilize the data fed to them by the researcher, it is imperative to assess the desired range of topics to try to fit (i.e., for a smaller sample of text documents on a specific topic, 20 topics may be more coherent than 75). We used the *stm* R package's (Roberts et al., 2018) built-in feature to estimate this optimal number of topics. Using this package feature, we selected a topic number  $K$  by minimizing topic redundancy, maximizing semantic coherence, and emphasizing topic uniqueness (Grimmer, 2010; Grimmer & Stewart, 2013; Mimno et al., 2011; Taddy, 2012; Wallach et al., 2009). We estimated our optimum  $K$  value on  $K$ s of 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, and 40 and reviewed the held-out likelihood, residuals, semantic coherence, and lower bound of each model with topics  $K$  before identifying 20 topics as the optimal number for our model.

After identifying 20 as our  $K$  value, we employed a series of logistic-normal generalized linear models (Eq. 1) based on individual covariates  $X_d$  (gender, race, tenure status, institutional type, and departure type) over 75 iterations (Roberts et al., 2018).

$$\theta_d | X_d \gamma, \Sigma \sim \text{LogisticNormal}(\mu = X_d \gamma, \Sigma) \quad (1)$$

where  $X_d$  is a 1-by- $p$  vector,  $\gamma$  is a  $p$ -by- $K-1$  matrix of coefficients and  $\Sigma$  is a  $K-1$  by  $K-1$  covariance matrix. This generated a document-specific topic distribution with covariate controls that we subsequently used for the analyses that follow.

We ran a series of structural topic models, progressively including all covariates. The initial full-sample model ( $n=773$ ) of all faculty departure narratives was run with no covariates to generate the most accurate topics possible. We subsequently included covariates gender, race, tenure status, institutional type, and departure type (academic versus non-academic), adding each covariate individually and rerunning the model to ensure that the topics did not materially change. We also recognize that our sample was skewed towards academic departures (723 versus 54 non-academic departures) and so, in the interest of identifying whether departure type influenced qualitative responses and, thus, topic prevalence, we ran a reduced model which included all non-academic departures ( $n=54$ ) and a random sample

of academic departures ( $n=54$ ). The structural topic model that resulted was not statistically different from the larger sample and featured nearly identical topics as the larger model, albeit with reduced topic prevalence (consistent with the smaller scale of the text corpus). As an additional step, we created a matched sample of academic departures to non-academic departures using propensity score matching and matched respondents on institutional type, gender, race, and tenure status. Unfortunately, low variability across the matched variables (only gender and tenure status were statistically different among the groups) resulted in a poorly matched sample. As a result, we did not run a structural topic model on the reduced corpus created from this sample.

After finalizing our model ( $n=773$ ), we qualitatively coded the 20 statistically prevalent ( $p<0.001$ ) topics and compared our respective codes to ensure intercoder reliability for each topic ( $\alpha=0.95$ ; disagreement on and subsequent removal of one topic). We then reduced the topics from 20 to 12 to reduce redundancy and maximize topic coherence and assigned each topic a label. The results of these analyses are described in the [findings](#) section below.

### Logistic regression

In addition to running structural topic models on the qualitative survey responses, we employed logistic regression on the sample ( $n=773$ ) to identify whether any faculty characteristic variables predicted our primary dependent variable departure type, measured by either leaving for an academic or non-academic career. Keeping with the variables we employed in the structural topic models and guided by the literature, we included gender (coded as women versus men), race (coded as faculty of color versus white), tenure status (coded as untenured or not on the tenure track versus tenured), institutional type (R1 and other), and salary change as a percentage difference (e.g., going from \$100,000 to \$150,000 would be a 50% increase). We entered all variables together in one block against the dependent variable, departure type.

We used Akaike information criterion and Pseudo R-squared to determine model fit. The best-fit model (which included all variables listed above) carried 85% of the cumulative model weights, the residual deviance was significantly lower than the null deviance, and the final model had a Pseudo R-squared of 0.07. The low amount of variance explained is best borne out by the structural topic models, which reveal a diverse rationale for faculty departure. The results of both approaches are presented below.

### Findings

The results of the structural topic model on all departures are presented in Table 2. Across the 12 topics that were retained, 3 were statistically significantly associated with one of the covariates. This meant that the other 9 topics were not statistically significantly associated with any of the covariates, including departure type. Using the primary covariate of interest “departure type” as an example, if a topic was not significantly associated it meant that this concern was not significantly more prevalent within a particular subject, such as faculty who left for academic jobs versus non-academic jobs. Each topic, as well as relevant covariates, is detailed in the follow paragraph. Topics are ordered by prevalence, with the percentages indicating that the topic in question represented a percentage of all topics identified

**Table 2** Topic Prevalence

Topic Prevalence: Factors Weighed in Departure Decision		
1	7.70%	Lack of Support
2	7.30%	Spousal and Partner Concerns** (gender)
3	6.90%	Better Offer
4	6.30%	Career Advancement* (tenure status)
5	6.20%	Location
6	5.80%	Salary
7	5.80%	Departmental Resources
8	5.50%	Work Environment
9	5.40%	New Direction
10	5.40%	Departmental Changes
11	5%	Family*** (gender)
12	3.70%	Departmental Diversity & Discrimination

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*  $p < 0.05$

across all documents; topics are not exclusive to one another (i.e., a single document [survey response] could have been flagged for multiple topics).

The first topic, Lack of Support, represented 7.7% of all topics identified across all documents ( $n=792$ ). Faculty described a “lack of administrative support in my department, a lack of fairness in determining responsibilities, and a lack of recognition for academic achievements.” Another respondent described this Lack of Support in greater detail: “I found the process of working in higher education confusing and off-putting; for example, I received almost no training or preparation whatsoever related to third-year review other than a letter from the provost notifying me that it was time. This felt nearly predatory toward younger faculty who are balancing the heat of teaching, grading, writing, research, and committee work, all the while wondering if any of it is good enough.” Lack of Support most typically referred to something lacking within the institution, rather than external to it such as community resources. Topic 1, Lack of Support, was not significantly associated with any of the covariates.

The second topic, Spousal and Partner Concerns, represented 7.3% of all topics identified across all documents and described faculty departure as a product of the faculty member’s partner wanting to change jobs, move locations, or leave their field of employment. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “a driving factor for my departure was what was happening with my spouse’s employment. Specific to my job, though, was the factor of “whether I was ready to leave higher education” and “my partner received a job offer at another institution.” This topic was statistically more prevalent in women’s responses.

The third topic, Better Offer, represented 6.9% of topics identified across the documents. This described faculty departure as a product of the faculty member receiving an offer that was perceived as too good to pass up. This topic was best typified by a faculty member who reported being “increasingly disenchanted with my work-life balance and an industry job could resolve that.” Though this example highlights somebody who left for a non-academic career, the Better Offer topic was not statistically associated with departure type or any other covariate, meaning that faculty who left for academic positions similarly sought better offers.

The fourth topic, Career Advancement, was distinctly different than Better Offer. This represented 6.3% of all topics identified across all documents and described faculty departure driven by a desire for career advancement. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “I did not feel there was support for upward mobility within my department” and “I was offered a promotion elsewhere.” This differs from Better Offer since those comments could also constitute a lateral relocation, whereas Career Advancement was primarily about “upward mobility” described by this faculty member. In contrast to Better Offer, Career Advancement was statistically more prevalent in untenured or non-tenure-track faculty members’ responses.

The fifth topic, Location, represented 6.2% of all topics identified across the documents, describing geographical location as a factor in faculty departure narratives. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “I may not have stayed, but I would have considered it if my school had said to me that I could relocate to [other system campuses in urban areas] and do my job from those campuses or remote,” and “my choice was driven by my career path, location, and the work environment.” This topic was not statistically associated with any of the covariates.

The sixth and seventh topics, Salary and Departmental Resources respectively, each constituted 5.8% of all topics that emerged across all documents. Salary referred to comments made by faculty who described their departure as a product of salary woes, while Departmental Resources was primarily about the difficulty of procuring departmental resources or a dissatisfaction with said resources, such as internal funding, course buyouts, and support for tenure and promotion. For a Salary example, one faculty member described how they “did not see a path to promotion, and [their] new job was more than a 50% pay increase.” Concerning Departmental Resources, this was best characterized by comments such as “Getting funding was a nightmare. I was tired of submitting grant applications only to have them rejected. I did not intend to have my career be failed grant writing, so I left for a different type of job.” Neither topic was statistically significantly related to departure type or any other covariate.

The eighth topic, Work Environment, represented 5.5% of all topics identified across all documents and described faculty departure as a result of a negative workplace environment. This topic was best described by comments such as “We have poor leadership and interdepartmental competitiveness and spitefulness. Our leadership is unwilling to embrace advancement from within” and “Anyone trying to improve themselves or the organization will be squashed.” This topic was not statistically associated with any covariate.

The ninth topic, New Direction, represented 5.4% of all topics identified across all documents and described faculty departure as the result of being presented with an opportunity. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “I was nominated [for a political appointment]. As an American citizen, I felt obliged to agree.” This differed from topics such as Better Opportunity and Career Advancement since it related to any type of external opportunity in general, regardless of whether it was perceived as “better” or constituted an upward career change. This topic was not statistically associated with any covariate.

The tenth topic, Department Changes, also represented 5.4% of all topics identified across all documents and described faculty departure as a result of departmental changes or the departure of other faculty members. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “Extension, part of [home university], was going under a lot of changes and I no longer

**Table 3** Logistic Regression

	Logistic Regression: Departure Type	
	Coefficient	Odds Ratio
race	0.503	1.654
gender	-0.755	0.469*
tenure	-0.782	0.457***
salary offer	1.072	2.92**
institutional type	0.395	1.48

\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.01 \* p<0.05

liked the direction of the organization” and “the colleagues I liked left, so I left.” This topic was not associated with any covariates.

The eleventh topic, Family, represented 5% of all topics identified across documents and described faculty departure as a product of prioritizing family. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “I had a very terrible experience with health care in [this city] when my [child] was born. Moving to an area with better pediatric health care options was a first-class consideration”, “I wanted my kids to be in a better school district”, and “We moved to be closer to my family.” Though closely related to “Spousal and Partner Concerns,” Family was a unique topic because it dealt with any general concern regarding one’s family, whereas Spousal and Partner Concerns was related to the classic “two-body problem.” Family was statistically more prevalent in women’s responses as compared to men, but was unrelated to departure type, race, and tenure status.

The twelfth and final topic, Departmental Diversity & Discrimination, represented 3.7% of all topics identified across all documents and described faculty departure involving factors such as either a lack of departmental diversity or explicit discrimination. This topic was best characterized by comments such as “gender-based discrimination and hostile work environment issues are ignored by university administration or not taken seriously resulting in damage to personal and professional careers of numerous faculty. The opportunity to leave was not one I sought but was offered and entertained to escape the discriminatory/retaliatory nature of my current workplace”, “I wasn’t sad to leave my department, but I needed to find community”, and “I was being sexually harassed by the chair of my department. They were found guilty, and sanctions were imposed but they remained my supervisor.” This topic was not statistically associated with any covariate.

### Logistic regression

The results of the logistic regression are presented in Table 3. Initial coefficients, as well as Odds Ratios, are presented. Due to limitations in the data, race was coded as either being white or faculty of color, while gender was coded as either being a man or a woman. Tenure status was coded as untenured or non-tenure-track versus tenured, salary offer as decrease or no change/increase, and institutional type as either R1 or other.

The logistic regression focused on determining whether there were any individual-level predictors of departure type among our sample of leavers (n=792, pseudo-R-squared=0.07) and found three statistically significant relationships. Given the relatively low explanatory power of this model, driven by the comparatively small sample of non-academic leavers and the incredibly diverse reasons for departure revealed by the topic model, the presence of statistically significant predictors of departure type is compelling and compliments the topic model results. In an earlier model, we accounted for respondent’s disciplinary background

(i.e., humanities, social science, STEM, or other) informed by previous literature (e.g., Xu 2008), but this did not significantly improve the model fit or reveal statistically significant findings, so we opted not to include in the final model.

The first predictor of leaving for a non-academic job was gender, with women more than 50% less likely to leave for non-academic employment than men. The second predictor of leaving for a non-academic job was tenure status, with tenured faculty more than 50% less likely to leave for industry than untenured faculty. The final predictor was salary offer, with faculty members receiving a raise or comparable salary on departure more than 3 times more likely to leave for non-academic jobs than those who did not have an offer that included a salary increase or comparable salary.

## Discussion

The increasing prevalence of departure narratives in academic spaces warrants an investigation into the factors that drive scholars away from academe. Though there is a wealth of research on why faculty intend to leave their institutions, there is significantly less information from actual departures available on where they are employed next. Informed by scholarship on organizational turnover, occupational turnover, and faculty mobility, we used both qualitative and quantitative data from the COACHE Faculty Retention & Exit Study to identify what factors explain why faculty choose to leave academic institutions *and* academic careers entirely. In this [discussion](#) section, we place our results alongside these literatures to examine which push and pull factors are most operative in explaining organizational and occupational departures. We conclude by examining what these results mean for research on faculty departures and for faculty retention in universities.

### Organizational factors & departure type

In regards to our first research question, the results from our structural topic modeling indicate no differences between faculty who engage in occupational turnover versus organizational turnover. Instead, there seems to be much more convergence than divergence between faculty who leave the occupation and those who leave their institution for another higher education institution. This situates our findings in much closer proximity to prior research on faculty departures that also show strong overlap (e.g., Dorenkamp & Weib 2018; Ryan et al., 2012) opposed to the management and human resources literatures. Results from the structural topic model suggest that faculty leave for a similar number of reasons regardless of departure types. We found notable push factors also described in the literature, such as a perceived lack of support from colleagues and administrators (Ryan et al., 2012) and dissatisfaction with departmental resources and the work environment (O'Meara et al., 2014, 2016; Rosser, 2004). There were several pull factors that impacted all departure types, such as spousal and familial concerns (Kim et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2012), more enticing offers (e.g., Better Offer and Career Advancement topics; O'Meara et al., 2016), and location (O'Meara et al., 2014).

Contrary to public opinion yet similar to prior research, we did not find that salary was the most prevalent topic that explained why faculty left. This does not mean that salary is unimportant. From our logistic regression, we found that faculty who received a raise or

comparable salary from the external organization were statistically significantly more likely to leave for careers outside higher education compared to their peers. Put alongside the structural topic modeling results, we found a bevy of pull factors associated with departures overall, which differs from the push-centric literature. Some may interpret these results as implying that external opportunities are more compelling than anything home institutions could satisfy. However, the most prevalent topic across all departure rationales was a lack of support, which administrators, academic leaders, and faculty colleagues can directly address in their own units. This corroborates research by O'Meara et al., (2014) that shows that faculty are not exclusively led by external factors, but often have unmet expectations and negative experiences with their current university that drive them to seek external employment.

Based on the management and human resources literatures, we were surprised that there were no push or pull factors specifically related to departure type. Previous studies illustrate how a lack of community and role balance are two pressing concerns that push scholars out of faculty occupations (e.g., Barnes et al., 1998; Ryan et al., 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2020). Even though these variables did not emerge as independent topics in the structural modeling analyses, they were still captured in the current list of topics, and were consistent for both types of departure. That is, we found that a lack of community and role balance were prevalent reasons for leaving both institutions and occupations. Though we could not test the effects of moonlighting or work exhaustion, we recommend future research examine these constructs in future departure studies to understand their role in understanding occupational turnover.

### **Individual characteristics & departure type**

In regards to our second research question, we found mixed evidence regarding the relationship between individual factors such as race, gender, and tenure status and departure type. Most notably, logistic regression results showed that both women faculty and tenured faculty were more than 50% less likely to leave for non-academic careers compared to men and their untenured counterparts. The finding related to tenure status stands to reason: faculty who achieve tenure have very secure employment that may make non-academic careers less attractive. Faculty members who have not yet achieved tenure or are not on the tenure track may find that they still have time to pursue an alternative career track before reaching the tenure milestone. An unknown subset of these faculty may also perceive there to be “writing on the wall” concerning their prospects for tenure, and subsequently leave before that process begins (O'Meara et al., 2014, 2016). From the qualitative responses, several participants who left for a non-academic position explained that getting funding was a significant source of stress for them, which may explain our regression's results that untenured faculty were more likely to leave academe.

The finding that women faculty were 50% less likely to leave for non-academic careers compared to men has several possible explanations that need to be examined in further research. On the one hand it suggests that among women faculty who actually leave faculty positions, there is a hope that other higher education institutions hold better opportunities for their careers than do non-academic options. We found in our structural topic modeling that women were more likely to cite partner and familial concerns as the reasons for their departure, which has been a longstanding topic in higher education (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2000). Stated otherwise, women faculty were more likely than men to cite a partner's deci-

sion to change jobs or move locations, and prioritize other family members such as children and other dependents. Thus, women faculty who leave may be the ones most interested in creating better situations for their families and those better situations were often found at other higher education institutions. There have also been many concerted efforts over the last two decades to retain women in faculty careers and academic research, especially in STEM disciplines (Austin & Laursen, 2020; Stewart & Valian, 2018). It may be the case that recent efforts to retain women in these occupations are showing signs of success, or that these decisions are far more individual and agentic in the sense that women seek to persist in academia despite hurdles and roadblocks (O'Meara, 2015).

## Study limitations

It is necessary to highlight that our study had a few limitations, which impact how results should be interpreted to advance practice and research in this important area. First, similar to other studies using secondary data, we were limited by the variables available in the COACHE Faculty Retention & Exit Survey dataset. There were a few variables from the literature that would have been ideal to test in our logistic regression, such as moonlighting and engaging in non-core job duties (Zimmerman et al., 2020), work exhaustion (Blau, 2007), and perceived lack of community (Barnes et al., 1998; Wohrer, 2014). There were no variables for moonlighting and work exhaustion, while the closest variables for perceived lack of community (i.e., collegiality within my department) and engaging in non-core job duties (i.e., division of my time between research, teaching, and service) had significant amounts of missing data beyond the threshold for conducting imputation analyses. It may have been the case that these variables would have improved the low Pseudo R-squared of 0.07 to better explain differences in faculty departure type. However, there was some evidence of engaging in non-core job duties, work exhaustion, and perceived lack of community in our structural topic modeling, and none of these factors were significantly associated with departing for non-academic careers, which partially justifies their exclusion from the logistic regression. We also recognize that our larger sample size may have made minor differences in variables that were available appear statistically significant, while still contributing relatively little explanatory power resulting in the low Pseudo R-squared statistic. Overall, we encourage future research and higher education state systems exploring departure with larger samples to continue to explore potential differences in departure type, and look for them in qualitative exit interviews and studies.

Like all survey research, this study may also be vulnerable to various types of non-response bias (Rogelberg et al., 2003). The survey's 37.8% response rate for departures produced, as illustrated in Table 1, proportions of respondents on key variables that approximate their proportions in the COACHE study's total population of departures. Demographic data were to some extent missing for independent variables such as gender (12.8% missing) and tenure status (21.7% missing) in the population database, but were supplemented to a great extent by data collected in the survey. Because there was no discernible pattern in which institutions failed to provide such data (reasons for their noncompliance included resource constraints, legal statute restricting the use of employees' demographic data, and inability to "link databases" to produce the dataset requested by COACHE), demographic data missing from the population were predominantly missing at random. The response patterns described in Table 1 suggest that women, white faculty, and untenured or non-tenure

track faculty may be somewhat overrepresented in the respondent group compared to the census of former faculty; these demographic response patterns appear in studies of current college faculty, too (Mathews, 2013).

Any pernicious effects of nonresponse bias could emerge in the form of active nonresponse – the deliberate choice by subjects not to take the survey – which could be attributed to fears about one’s responses being exposed and subsequent retaliation. However, studies have shown active nonresponse to be a small fraction of total nonresponse and to defy any blanket generalizations about positive, neutral, and negative attitudes held by nonrespondents towards their organizations (Mathews, 2013; Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Among faculty like those in this study, the survey response decision has been attributed to general satisfaction (positive), “busyness” (neutral), and only some due to concerns about confidentiality (negative) (Mathews, 2013).

Finally, the percentage of faculty who left for non-academic careers was significantly smaller than those who left for academic positions. We attempted to compensate for this reality by running both our structural topic models and logistic regression analyses on reduced randomized samples of non-academic and academic leavers and reduced matched samples of non-academic and academic leavers, but these altered analytic samples did not result in significant changes to our models. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the dearth of research using actual faculty departures to disaggregate different types of departure, the relatively small sample of leavers remains both statistically and conceptually significant.

## Summary & Contributions

In sum, we see four primary contributions of this work to the study of faculty careers and turnover. The first contribution is that data on actual departure yields different results from those that use data on theoretical departures. This builds on O’Meara et al.,’s (2014) study, who showed that faculty who intended to leave cited prestige and pay reasons, but faculty who actually left primarily did so due to poor work environments. This point directly feeds into the second contribution: using actual faculty departure data shows that occupational turnover and organizational turnover are not as distinct constructs in the professoriate compared to other career types and sectors. This differs from extant management literature but aligns well with prior higher education studies on the topic (e.g., Dorenkamp & Weib 2018; Ryan et al., 2012).

Third, the low proportion of occupational departures in our study suggests that the frequency of this phenomenon may be overstated at research universities, though not every faculty member who left participated in the COACHE study (see Table 1). If we accept that research institutions may in fact be less occupationally porous than other career types in different sectors, there may be some ways in which non-academic workplaces could gain retention strategies from higher education. These three contributions together suggest that many leavers want the same new features from their next workplace, and many more try to get them at another higher education institution, perhaps due to lengthy socialization processes and/or other factors.

The final contribution of this study is that gender and tenure-status are very durable themes for both types of actual turnover, and still have somewhat of a unique role in occupational turnover as well. Our findings on women faculty show that they are more likely to consider familial and spousal concerns, and may assess that other higher education institu-

tions are more likely to satisfy those concerns among other reasons for persisting in academe. This finding contradicts repeated studies that show no relationship between gender and departure (e.g., Barnes et al., 1998; Daly & Dee, 2006; Xu, 2008; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004). This also highlights the enduring importance of using data on actual faculty turnover rather than intentions. In what follows, we use these results to make several recommendations for future research and practice.

### Implications for future research

We see multiple avenues for furthering research on faculty departures in higher education. As previously mentioned, our study illustrates the value of high-quality data in understanding faculty departure trends because previous studies have been limited by the difficulty in tracking faculty who have left the institution. Only from the ranks of those who have actually left can scholars learn with precision how, and how effectively an institution's stakeholders receive and respond to imminent departures.

For future studies, we encourage researchers to partner with colleges, universities, state systems and consortia to mount systematic, comparative, and longitudinal examinations of organization and occupational turnover. In the course of our research, we discovered that many institutions already conduct exit surveys or interviews or aggregate institutional data about separations and retentions, such as the components of a faculty member's outside offer as captured in an offer letter. Although departure data are scattered in institutional research databases, in offices of human resources, in reports by faculty affairs administrators, and in the hanging file folders of associate deans, they do exist, are attainable, and can be compiled for timely and robust analyses. Researchers can help colleges and universities follow universal standards for data collection that benefit both researchers', practitioners', and the public's understanding of the privileges and challenges of academic careers.

Second, it is clear that we need much more scholarship on the factors that prompt women, and especially women of color, to leave organizations and occupations. We see a need for understanding how different push and pull factors operate in their departure decisions. Perhaps equally important is understanding why men respondents *were not* just as likely to leave as a result of partner and familial concerns. These concerns should be the work of all individuals in the academy, and when we rely on women exclusively to factor these myriad considerations into their departure decisions, we set them up for impossible standards. Men are also underserved by sexist cultural scripts that might limit them from something like taking parental leave or requesting partner career accommodations in an outside offer (Culpepper, 2021).

Lastly, there were important variables from the management and human resources scholarship that we were unable to include in the current study, such as moonlighting and work exhaustion. We can conceive why they would be important in such work: a faculty member with significant consulting would reasonably leave academe if they make more money in their consulting role, and someone who is exhausted by their work may leave the profession entirely rather than seek exhaustion at another research university. Though we did see some evidence of work exhaustion in our study, this was more so exhaustion related to failed grant acquisition, and we expect to see a reasonable amount of exhaustion in any career type. We encourage future scholars to consider a wide range of interdisciplinary variables in furthering this work.

## Implications for practice

There are several important implications for practice worth noting. First, it is common for administrators, academic leaders, and even faculty colleagues to believe that departing faculty are being “poached” by other organizations for better opportunities (O’Meara et al., 2014). Indeed, we found that there are numerous external factors that departing faculty consider when making their decisions. However, we found that the most prevalent factor across hundreds of departure narratives was internal – that is, within the discretionary control of the home institution – and other internal factors such as departmental resources, work environment, and discrimination too. Even a scan of online departure narratives reveals that faculty who leave have many concerns about their institutional conditions, and may even leave without a job in hand because the inequities are so extreme (Bartram, 2018; Larson, 2020). We suggest that academic leaders first look within their own departments, and conduct routine checks with their faculty about what can be improved to prevent departures (Stewart & Valian, 2018). Due to the relatively low number of departures from a research university each year, routine data collection about faculty separation and retention actions are neither onerous nor invasive.

Additionally, we found that women faculty were more likely to cite familial and spousal concerns in their departure decisions, whether for another higher education institution or non-academic job. This finding leads to two important practical implications. First, when academic leaders think of their “competition,” they most often think of peer institutions that attract similarly-qualified faculty. But given that the nature of work is rapidly changing, with greater levels of employee mobility (Crumley-Effinger & Torres-Olave, 2021) and non-standardized employment arrangements (e.g., more remote work, flexible hours, unlimited paid time off, etc.), administrators across disciplines could reform policies to recognize that they are competing with different types of workplaces that may be changing more rapidly than higher education institutions. We recommend that leaders survey industry careers in their geographic region for spousal hire and child care policies, and ensure that their policies are as competitive as possible to retain more faculty members with families.

Relatedly, a COACHE pilot study found that institutions have a “home field advantage” for retaining dual-career couples (Benson et al., 2016). That is, retentions were almost twice as likely as departures when a spouse was employed at the same institution. This was especially true of women faculty: 48% of women compared to 21% of men rated spousal employment as a primary factor in deciding whether to stay or leave. It would be wise for universities to create measures that ensure their employees, especially women faculty, are satisfied with their spouse’s employment conditions. Some universities such as Virginia Tech and UMass Amherst are implementing such checks with their faculty periodically beyond the time of hire to mitigate the chance that spousal concerns could spur a departure. If institutions reframe leaders’ mindsets about faculty families and partners not as a “two body problem” but as their home field advantage, they might find preemptive actions that improve their chances of retaining faculty.

## Conclusion

The growing number of online departure narratives compelled us to review research from management and human resources to understand if there were any differences between occupational turnover and organizational turnover in faculty careers. Using both qualitative and quantitative data from COACHE's Faculty Retention & Exit Study, we found a significant amount of overlap between occupational turnover and organizational turnover, and a few key variables that impact occupational turnover. The primary contributions of this study are that using data from actual faculty leavers shows divergent findings from previous studies, especially related to the important work that still needs to be done in retaining women faculty members. We implore institutional leaders to take action to understand the causes, cost, and conduct of faculty departures when presented with opportunities to retain faculty. These findings help us begin to understand where and how occupational and organizational turnover differ, and where faculty identities are implicated in those differences.

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