

# Faculty retirements stir change at schools

## Most colleges here feel little impact from national aging trend

By NATE DOUGHERTY

Janet Glocker keeps stacks of index cards bound by rubber bands to help her remember the professors who have joined Monroe Community College in the last few years. Each stack represents a year, and each card has the name and information about a professor who joined the staff that year.

Like many colleges that opened or experienced rapid growth in the 1960s, MCC has faced a wave of retirements in recent years that has brought significant turnover to the school's faculty. For many schools, this has brought financial burdens in the form of post-retirement benefits and recruitment. But it also has freed schools of some of its highest-paid faculty and allowed them to bring in a fresh crop of new, energized professors.

The U.S. Department of Education found in 2003 that 66.1 percent of faculty members at community colleges were ages 45 to 64, higher than in any other type of higher-education institution. The percentage of faculty over 50 at all colleges more than doubled from 1969 to 2005, rising from 22.5 to 54 percent.

One reason is the 1993 reversal of an exemption to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, which had allowed universities to set a mandated retirement age. Combined with the growth of school faculties during the 1960s when the baby boomer generation began to enter the work force, the conditions created large groups of professors poised to retire around the same time.

Finger Lakes Community College fits the profile. Opened in 1967, the school underwent a hiring boom in its first 10 to 20 years. Roughly eight years ago, administrators began to anticipate the number of professors who would soon be nearing retirement age and developed a plan to help with the transition, including retirement incentives negotiated in a labor contract.

The incentives, combined with strategic hiring plans, have helped the college control the flow of professors leaving and joining the faculty, officials said.

Grace Loomis, FLCC human resources officer, said the college has passed its peak of retirements and expects only a handful in coming years. Despite losing the experience of the departing faculty, some of whom had been with the school since its opening, FLCC officials are excited about the new professors who have joined, Loomis said.

The college hired mostly local professors in past decades. But in the last five years, Loomis estimates, 65 percent have come from out of state. Learning from professors who have lived and taught in different states and countries gives students a wider array of experiences from which to draw, she said.

"Now that many community colleges are having this big turnover, it's like a big infusion of cultural change coming in,"

two mentors—one from within the hire's department and one from outside. After the first year, groups of professors are kept together in cohorts to maintain connections outside their departments.

Retired professors also are called on during this process.

"Our retiring faculty members are still on our e-mail system, and I've referred current members to retired members when they have questions or need help in some areas," Glocker said. "Individual departments also have gatherings and parties that retired members come to in order to stay connected, like a kind of social glue."

Not every school is feeling the effects of shrinking faculties. Officials at the University of Rochester said the number of professors at the school has remained steady in recent years.

St. John Fisher College is at the other end of the retirement curve—but seeing the same benefits from an influx of professors. With recent expansions, including pharmacy and nursing schools, the college has boosted the number of professors dramatically in the last five years—from 130 in 2003 to close to 300 today.

Ron Ambrosetti, St. John Fisher provost, said the age distribution of current professors is split evenly, so there is no retirement push expected anytime soon. The school's hiring plan allows it to anticipate retirements and make rehiring decisions accordingly, allowing for controlled, steady growth.

"We're always looking a few years out, and if there is a retirement or resignation we know about it in advance," Ambrosetti said. "Then we can pretty much anticipate if there would be a replacement or not or if we would even hire two professors."

Ambrosetti said a wave of retirements is more of a problem at schools that have been largely static since periods of growth decades ago. St. John Fisher has not reached a plateau in the growth of enrollment or professors, so its strategic hiring plans can account for the time when more professors are retiring than joining the faculty.

To help plan for that time, the school offers retirement incentives that allow professors to ease out of the faculty. During a three-year bridge, faculty can work half- or one-third-time, giving the school time to plan replacements. In Ambrosetti's five years at the school, only three faculty members have opted for the bridge and only six have retired in total.

"The nice thing is that it gives a state of retirement but we can still retain their experience," Ambrosetti said.

Despite the work that goes into hiring new professors, faculty turnover ushers in an exciting new period for colleges, FLCC's Loomis said.

"With all these new opportunities for the colleges to bring in new staff, it's like another reawakening on campuses. It's an exciting time for colleges—community colleges especially—when you're starting to go through this."

natedougherty@rbj.net | 585-546-8303