

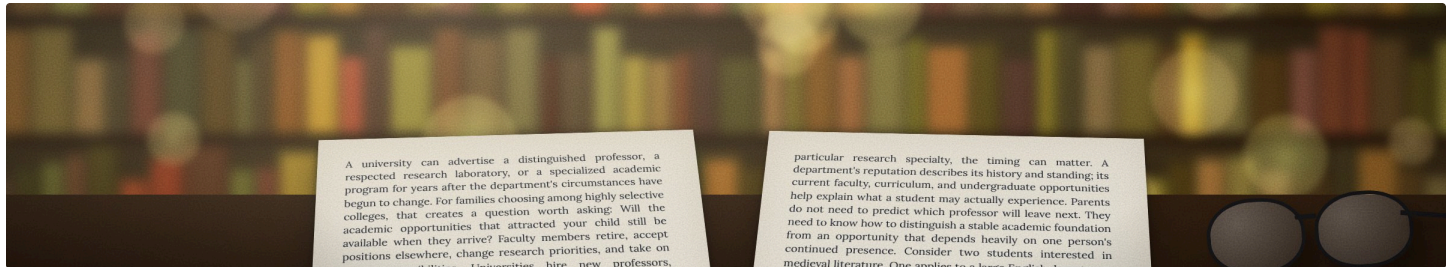
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

Faculty Retirement and Hiring Trends: How Campus Turnover Changes Major Requirements



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October 20, 2026



A university can advertise a distinguished professor, a respected research laboratory, or a specialized academic program for years after the department's circumstances have begun to change. For families choosing among highly selective colleges, that creates a question worth asking: Will the academic opportunities that attracted your child still be available when they arrive?

Faculty members retire, accept positions elsewhere, change research priorities, and take on new responsibilities. Universities hire new professors, introduce courses, reorganize programs, and revise degree requirements. These changes are normal parts of academic life. But when a student's interests depend on a relatively small department or a particular research specialty, the timing can matter.

A department's reputation describes its history and standing; its current faculty, curriculum, and undergraduate opportunities help explain what a student may actually experience.

Parents do not need to predict which professor will leave next. They need to know how to distinguish a stable academic foundation from an opportunity that depends heavily on one person's continued presence.

WHY ONE PROFESSOR'S DEPARTURE CAN MATTER MORE IN SOME DEPARTMENTS

Consider two students interested in medieval literature.

One applies to a large English department with several faculty members studying medieval texts, multiple relevant courses, and a broad selection of historical and literary approaches. The other is interested in a small program where one professor teaches the principal advanced seminar in a particular language or research area.

Both departments may be academically strong. However, the second student's plans may depend more heavily on the availability of one instructor.

If that professor retires, the university may recruit a successor with similar interests. It may also redistribute the teaching, offer the course less frequently, or adjust the curriculum. None of these outcomes is inevitable, but each could affect the student's ability to pursue a particular topic.

The same issue can arise in specialized areas of engineering, languages, philosophy, music, and the sciences. A department may have broad strength in a discipline while offering limited undergraduate instruction in a narrow specialty.

Parents should therefore distinguish between the strength of an entire department and the availability of the particular courses or mentoring opportunities their child hopes to use.

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A faculty member's research can be an excellent reason to investigate a university. But a professor's presence on a website does not establish that the professor teaches undergraduates, supervises first-year students, accepts undergraduate research assistants, or will remain available throughout the student's degree.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PROFESSOR'S REPUTATION AND AN UNDERGRADUATE OPPORTUNITY

Consider a student interested in computational neuroscience. A university website highlights a professor whose laboratory uses mathematical models to investigate neural systems. The student plans to mention that work in a college essay and hopes to participate in the laboratory's research.

Before building an application around this opportunity, the family should investigate several questions.

Does the professor currently work at the university? Does the laboratory describe opportunities for undergraduate participation? Are students expected to complete prerequisite coursework before joining? Does the department have other faculty working on related questions?

The last question is particularly important. A student may be interested in a professor's specific research method, but the underlying academic interest may be supported by several other faculty members or courses.

If the professor leaves, the student's broader interest may remain well supported even if the original research opportunity changes.

The goal is not to avoid mentioning individual professors. It is to understand what their work represents within the wider academic environment.

WHAT COURSE CATALOGS REVEAL THAT RANKINGS DO NOT

University rankings rarely answer the questions families need to resolve at the department level. Course catalogs and actual class schedules can provide more practical information.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's official course catalog, for example, identifies the subjects available in its mathematics curriculum and specifies when individual subjects are offered. Its entry for Mathematics

Lecture Series, subject 18.095, lists availability during the independent activities period, while Mathematics Internship, subject 18.098, lists fall, independent activities period, and summer availability. The catalog also marks some subjects as not offered in a given academic year.¹

This illustrates an important distinction: a university can retain a course in its catalog even when that course is not scheduled for a particular year.

For a prospective student, that difference can affect academic planning. A specialized elective that appears in a catalog may not be available every semester, and a course offered infrequently may be difficult to fit around prerequisites or other degree requirements.

Families should examine both the official degree requirements and the schedules for recent semesters. They should also ask whether a course is regularly offered, rotates among years, or depends on a particular instructor.

At Princeton, the Office of the Registrar directs undergraduates to academic advisers and departmental directors when planning course selection. The university also warns that dropping departmental courses can put graduation at risk in certain circumstances.²³ These policies reinforce the practical importance of checking requirements and planning course sequences carefully.

A course that is unavailable for one semester is not necessarily a warning sign. The concern is whether its absence creates a recurring obstacle to completing the intended academic plan.

HOW TO RESEARCH FACULTY TURNOVER WITHOUT GUESSING

Families can investigate a department systematically without relying on rumors or drawing conclusions from a professor's age, title, or research interests.

Start with the department's current faculty directory. Confirm that the professors whose work interests your child are still listed, and look for recent official announcements about appointments, retirements, departures, or changes in academic responsibilities.

Next, compare the department's current faculty with its recent course offerings. If a professor who taught a relevant advanced course has departed, check whether the course is still being offered and whether another instructor has taken responsibility for it.

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Then examine the department's broader coverage. If your child is interested in a particular area of chemistry, for example, are there several faculty members whose work relates to that interest, or does the opportunity appear to depend on one laboratory?

Finally, contact the department when an important question remains unanswered. An undergraduate program director or departmental adviser may be able to explain whether a course is expected to continue, how often it is offered, and what alternatives students can pursue.

Families should not expect departments to guarantee that every course or research opportunity will remain unchanged for four years. Academic schedules and faculty responsibilities can change. The objective is to understand the current situation and identify reasonable alternatives.

WHY NEW FACULTY HIRES MATTER, TOO

Faculty turnover can also create new opportunities.

A department that hires a professor in an emerging specialty may introduce new courses, establish a laboratory, or develop additional research opportunities. A new appointment can expand the range of subjects students can explore.

Harvard University's Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Faculty, for example, publishes lists of newly appointed faculty. Its 2026–2027 cohort includes appointments across fields such as psychology, government, history, economics, and mathematics.⁴

These announcements provide a useful starting point for families researching a department's current direction. However, a new hire should not automatically be treated as a future undergraduate opportunity.

A professor may initially focus on establishing a research group, developing graduate courses, or fulfilling other responsibilities. The existence of a new laboratory does not establish that undergraduates can immediately join it.

Students should look for evidence of actual undergraduate access, such as research programs, faculty guidance arrangements, or explicit information about how students apply to work with faculty.

The distinction matters when a college essay names a recent appointment as a reason for applying. The student should understand the professor's work and be able to

explain the intellectual connection without claiming access that has not been established.

WHAT PARENTS SHOULD CHECK BEFORE BUILDING A COLLEGE LIST

For families targeting highly selective universities, a useful department review should answer five questions.

1. Are the essential courses available? Identify required courses, specialized electives, prerequisites, and the frequency with which important classes are offered.
2. Is the academic specialty supported by more than one person? Several relevant faculty members can provide a broader range of perspectives and potential alternatives, although the number of professors alone does not determine departmental quality.
3. Can undergraduates access the opportunities being advertised? Check research eligibility, course enrollment restrictions, prerequisites, and the process for obtaining faculty supervision.
4. Has the department changed recently? Review official faculty announcements and curriculum updates. Treat a departure as a reason to investigate, not proof that the program has weakened.
5. What happens if the student's interests change? A strong academic plan should leave room for adjacent specialties, related courses, and alternative research opportunities.

These questions are especially useful when comparing programs with similar names. Two universities may both offer neuroscience, environmental science, or political science, yet differ in the courses available, the specialties represented among faculty, and the ways undergraduates can pursue research.

The purpose is to compare real academic opportunities rather than assume that a higher overall ranking guarantees a better fit.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS FAMILIES EVALUATE THE DEPARTMENT BEHIND THE NAME

Researching a university's reputation is relatively easy. Determining whether its current academic structure supports a student's particular interests requires a more deliberate process.

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Scholar Coach helps families move from general impressions to specific questions that can be investigated and verified.

First, we identify the student's actual academic

priorities. We examine the subjects, research questions, coursework, and experiences that have shaped the student's interests. A student drawn to artificial intelligence in medicine, for example, may need to investigate faculty working in machine learning, biomedical engineering, and computational biology rather than rely on a single laboratory as the foundation of the college choice.

Second, we map those interests to the department's

current offerings. We examine official faculty profiles, degree requirements, course catalogs, recent schedules, and published undergraduate research opportunities. This helps distinguish a department's broad strengths from the specific courses and experiences relevant to the student.

Third, we identify dependencies and alternatives. If an intended research opportunity appears closely tied to one professor, we investigate whether other faculty members, courses, or related departments support the same academic interest. If a specialized course is offered infrequently, we identify the scheduling questions that need clarification.

Fourth, we help families verify uncertain details. When public information does not establish whether a professor supervises undergraduates, whether a course will continue, or whether a new laboratory accepts first-year students, we identify the appropriate department or program contact. We distinguish confirmed information from assumptions rather than treating an appealing website description as a guarantee.

Finally, we use the findings to inform college selection and application writing. The research can help families compare academic fit across schools and help students explain why a program interests them. When a student mentions a professor or laboratory in an application essay, the reference should be current, accurate, and connected to a genuine intellectual interest.

This process gives parents a concrete basis for comparing programs and helps students avoid building their academic plans around opportunities they have not verified. It also

leaves room for an important reality: universities change, and no responsible adviser can promise that a specific professor, course, or research position will remain available throughout a student's degree.

**CHOOSE A DEPARTMENT FOR ITS STRENGTH,
NOT A SNAPSHOT OF ITS PAST**

Faculty retirements and new appointments are normal features of university life. Neither automatically signals a decline nor guarantees improvement.

The important question is whether a department continues to offer the academic foundation, relevant coursework, and realistic opportunities that make it a suitable choice for a particular student.

A professor's research may introduce a student to a field worth pursuing. A course may reveal an unexpected academic interest. A new faculty appointment may open a direction that did not exist when the student first researched the university. These possibilities are reasons to investigate departments carefully, not reasons to treat every change as a threat.

Before choosing a college because of a celebrated professor or specialized laboratory, ask one more question: If that particular opportunity changes, will the department still give your child a meaningful way to pursue the subject?

That is the difference between selecting a university for its reputation and understanding the academic environment in which your child will actually study.

SOURCES

¹ Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mathematics (Course 18) — MIT Course Catalog:

<https://catalog.mit.edu/subjects/18/>

² Princeton University, Office of the Registrar, Undergraduate Course Selection:

<https://registrar.princeton.edu/student-and-alumni-services/course-selection/undergraduate-course-selection>

³ Princeton University, Office of the Registrar, Adding or Dropping Courses: <https://registrar.princeton.edu/student-and-alumni-services/course-selection/adding-or-dropping-courses>

⁴ Harvard University, Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Faculty, New Ladder Faculty, 2026–2027:

<https://faculty.harvard.edu/2026-2027-new-ladder-faculty>

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