At UT-Houston we have been able to keep turnover in technical positions to a minimum by offering flexible work schedules, training, and advancement into technical roles that other employers did not offer. Furthermore, salaries are competitive, and benefits are excellent. IT management (me among them) is stable, competent, honest, and conscientious. Leaving always entails the risk of ending up somewhere not quite as professional.

However, as the market for specialists heats up, like networking and client/server computing, employees are leaving for 20 percent increases without much regard for the other benefits of working here. Salary programs do not generally accommodate 20 percent salary increases nor react quickly to the marketplace, again making it difficult to keep people.

In general, employees with several years of experience at UT-H who have worked elsewhere are staying because of the pluses listed above. They know that they will catch up salary-wise, and they will benefit in the long run.

Rick L. Miller
Assistant Vice President of Information Services
rmiller@admin4.hsc.uth.tmc.edu

Retaining skilled staff involves a mix of variables, a fair degree of luck, and a symbiotic workplace and worker. The information technology department at Lewis & Clark College has been successful in continued attempts to achieve such a symbiosis, though we’ve also lost some excellent talent in the past few years for reasons rooted in the first two recipe ingredients.

Higher education can present an environment that nurtures both the professional and personal goals of its work force, and our experience has been that there are many talented individuals in the mid-‘90s who are willing to trade the high prioritization of compensation for a quasi-ownership in relation to their workplace. Our approach has been to avoid a hierarchical staffing structure while mixing and matching staff according to expertise on permanent and/or ad hoc subgroups in order to arrive at a set of road maps created with as collective a voice as possible. We have realized some very creative solutions, and the staff has been able to gain experience in many areas often peripheral to their specific job function. The bottom line is that if an organization can be about people to the same extent that it is defined by its goals, there will exist a tendency for those involved to remain involved.

Peter Greco
Director, Information Systems
greco@lclark.edu

At small colleges such as Carroll College in Wisconsin, when you lose a staff member, you may lose more than 10 percent of your total staff. This can be a critical problem. However, I think the problem is more one of managing turnover than of simply retaining technical staff. It includes hiring good technical people, keeping them long enough—although not necessarily forever—and minimizing the stress of turnover. Here are some suggestions based on my experience.

1. Sell the job to applicants, but be honest. Ask the applicant what she or he wants from the job and find a way to provide this. If it’s impossible, then it’s not a good fit, and the employee will be unhappy or will leave, even if from your standpoint he or she is doing a good job.

2. If you can’t offer salaries that are competitive with the corporate world, be sure to point out things like tuition benefits, more liberal vacation policies, or a casual dress code, that can balance slightly lower salaries.

3. Cast a wide net for good employees. Do not limit your search even implicitly by age, social class, appearance, or degrees. Keep an open mind.

4. Turnover is easier to handle if it is anticipated. Keep channels of communication open. Let employees know you don’t expect them to stay forever and want to help them with their next career move. This will give you more time to prepare for turnover.

5. Give a bonus to employees who take up the slack when someone leaves and has not yet been replaced. This can be a very cost-effective way to make transition periods smoother.

6. Use fixed-term appointments such as two-year internships to help control turnover at the entry level, especially in areas of high burnout such as supervising student workers and computer lab support.

Janet Price
Chief Information Officer
jprice@carroll1.cc.edu

Five Colleges, Incorporated—which is the consortium arm for Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst—launched in 1996 a three-pronged initiative to improve recruitment and retention of technical staff.

Due to the difficulty of hiring staff with technical specialties such as Oracle programming or UNIX systems management, we have decided to use a combination of in-house and outsourced training to develop those key skills in staff we already have. We also hope to foster a peer-support network among staff who go to classes together. Systematic training and peer networking will allow us to hire, in many cases, less
experienced workers with excellent learning potential and to develop them quickly. Although this investment in training is likely to increase the ability of these workers to leave for higher-salaried jobs in the commercial sector, we believe we will nevertheless benefit from better productivity and improve staff morale and retention.

A new, grant-funded position has been created at Hampshire College to coordinate IT staff training at the five colleges and to develop a shared pool of knowledge resources (e.g., online documentation, FAQs, Web links) to assist frontline support staff. The diversity of systems and applications on campus, we’ve discovered, places unusually high stress on support staff. Building a better knowledge base to draw on may help them cope more successfully with the demands on their expertise.

We are also committed to creating forums where staff engaged in similar work at the member institutions can get together, share information, and become acquainted. Knowing whom to call for specialized advice is one of the most frequent requests from technical staff. The forum, we believe, will decrease feelings of isolation and frustration and improve retention and recruitment.

Thomas A. Warger
Assistant Coordinator for Information Systems
twarger@amherst.edu

During the past two years, I have chaired several searches for professional support positions in our Academic Computing department at Parkland College (Champaign, IL). We have encountered difficulties attracting a sufficient number of applicants of quality for the intermediate and advanced positions in networking.

It is clear that we are competing at a disadvantage with corporate employers who typically pay more for equivalent positions. The skills required to manage an enterprise network are the same whether the site is on a college campus or in a corporate “power tower.”

Parkland College has responded to the issue by examining our salary structure and by increasing our investments in staff training and professional development.

We strive to create a workplace environment where employees are able to learn and grow as fast as they wish. Some days it seems as if we are running a talent development agency for the corporate raiders who keep dangling juicy carrots under the noses of our crew!

People who can design and manage top-notch information systems do not work exclusively for money. If they did, many more would leave education for the more lucrative paychecks in business.

Our folks are motivated by the need for recognition, for a reasonable degree of freedom in their work, and most of all by their appetite for hard fun as part of a team that cares about its profession.

At the same time, it’s clear that schools will have to become more competitive with salaries, or we will have a tough time keeping our best and brightest.

Michael Miller
Dean, Academic Technologies
mmiller@parkland.cc.il.us

Here is how we are dealing with the issue at Santa Clara University, where we face considerable competition from corporations who pay considerably more than the University does.

There are two ways to decrease employee turnover and to give each employee a sense of purpose and a sense of significance.

Management must develop a compelling vision of where the organization is heading and let each staff member know his or her place within that vision. Each employee should have and know his meaningful role within the organization. A significant part of a meaningful role is to be challenged. Staff members should be encouraged to work at their highest level and also be given the resources to improve their capabilities.

To give each employee a sense of significance, management should develop a culture where every member of the organization is valued and treated with respect. Managers should be trained to value and encourage individual initiative and creativity. Staff members should be rewarded for a job well done, and be corrected promptly and positively when a task is not performed well.

Staff members should be given tasks which are within their capabilities, have the tools (resources, training, and management support) to perform these tasks, and be rewarded when a task is completed properly. Employees should be given a high degree of autonomy and authority to go with the responsibility to perform their tasks. The sense of place provides employees with motivation to perform their tasks well, and the sense of significance provides staff with the tools and support they need to complete the job. When used together, purpose and significance are mutually re-enforcing, building a stronger and stronger commitment to an organization.

Jim Scanlon
Director, Information Technology
jscanlon@mailer.scu.edu

Recruitment and retention of technical staff continues to be a problem at Portland Community College (Oregon). The technology that we man-
We also try to equip the staff with up-to-date tools and allow them to ‘play’ with new technology as often as feasible.

Ray Grant
Director, Information Technology Services
rgrant@pcc.edu

Is your institution using or planning Web-based applications for student services? What are the primary issues you have encountered in implementing or planning such systems?

Please send your response, along with your name, title, e-mail address, phone and fax numbers by electronic mail to eharris@cause.org; by fax to 303-440-0461, or by regular mail to Elizabeth Harris, CAUSE/EFFECT Managing Editor, CAUSE, Suite 302E, 4840 Pearl East Circle, Boulder, CO 80301.