Trends and Issues
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How Do Faculty and Staff Select between Defined Benefit and Defined Contribution Retirement Plans?

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Introduction

This study examined how faculty and staff in the University System of Georgia (USG) made the decision between a defined benefit plan, Teachers Retirement System (TRS), and a defined contribution plan, Optional Retirement Plan (ORP). The quantitative analysis included more than 14,000 employees and sought to learn which personal and employment characteristics were associated with choosing a defined benefit versus a defined contribution plan. The qualitative research provided context for the quantitative findings through in-depth interviews of 12 tenure-eligible faculty who work at a USG institution. Those interviews focused on why faculty selected their retirement plans and general questions about financial management and retirement readiness. The quantitative results identified several variables as significant with retirement plan selection, such as age, citizenship status, faculty rank, starting salary, race and educational attainment. The qualitative study reinforced the notion that employees must evaluate a myriad of issues when selecting a plan to balance different kinds of risk. For tenured faculty, this choice was most commonly reflected as one between the lower financial risk of a defined benefit plan against the need for portability because they may leave their current institution.

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Setting and data description

The data for the quantitative portion of this study come from the University System of Georgia (USG) which, at the time of the study, comprised 30 public higher education institutions and more than 40,000 employees. USG offers all benefit-eligible employees[1] a choice of either a defined benefit plan, the Teachers Retirement System (TRS),[2] or a defined contribution plan, the Optional Retirement Plan (ORP), as their primary retirement plan. The vesting period for TRS is 10 years, while vesting for employer contributions in the ORP is immediate. Faculty were first offered a choice in retirement plans in 1991 and all other employees were extended this option beginning in 2009. New employees have 60 days from their hire date to select one of the plans and the decision is irrevocable. TRS is the default option. Additional details about the two plans are provided in Table 1.

The quantitative analysis included benefit-eligible employees hired after 2009 and still working for the USG during the 2015-2016 academic year; this corresponds to years when a retirement choice was available to all benefits-eligible employees. Variables used in the analysis include personal characteristics, such as gender, race, date of birth, marital status, and citizenship, as well as work-related characteristics, such as hire date, current salary, position at time of hire, educational attainment, institution employed, and the retirement plan selected. Since salary at time of hire was not available, it was estimated by deflating salary in the Fall 2015 by three percent for each year of employment. For those in TRS, it is not known whether an employee selected the plan or was defaulted into it. The dataset consists of 3,853 tenure-eligible faculty and 10,418 other benefit-eligible employees. Tables 2 and 3 provide descriptive characteristics of employees in the dataset.

In the qualitative research, 12 tenure-eligible faculty from the University of Georgia[3] were interviewed in-depth between April and June 2017. Eleven had been hired within the last two years[4]. The focus on recent hires presumed these individuals would well remember their reasons for selecting their retirement plan (TRS vs. ORP). The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and followed a semi-structured protocol. Interviews were recorded with permission of the faculty member and later transcribed.

Empirical analysis and findings

The control variables included in the quantitative analysis were based on theory and prior research regarding employee choice for retirement plans. Tenure-eligible faculty and other benefit-eligible employees were analyzed separately.

Tables 2 and 3 show the descriptive statistics of select variables for the two groups. Thirty-seven percent of tenure-eligible faculty were enrolled in TRS. More than three-fourths of the faculty hired were at the assistant professor level. Mirroring this junior faculty status, 35 percent of faculty were younger than 35 when hired and an additional 35 percent were between the ages of 35 and 44. Thus, seven out of ten faculty in this dataset had many expected years of work life ahead of them. Slightly more than 79 percent of the tenure-eligible faculty were U.S. citizens.

The other benefit-eligible USG employees had slightly different characteristics than the tenure-eligible faculty. They were more likely to be enrolled in TRS (58%). Over 45 percent were between age 25 and 34 when hired, and thus could expect decades of work-life ahead of them. Only 9 percent of the other benefit-eligible employees were over age 54 when hired. The other benefit-eligible

[1] To be eligible for retirement benefits, an employee must work at least 50 percent time in a “regular” position. https://hr.uga.edu/employees/benefits/

[2] The Teachers Retirement System includes all benefit-eligible employees from all public educational systems: primary school systems, technical colleges and the USG.

[3] One of the USG’s institutions. All the interviewees were included in the quantitative dataset.

[4] The 12th faculty member was hired by UGA in 2013.

employees were more likely to be U.S. citizens (88%). These employees were well educated, with 73 percent having at least a four-year degree.

Three models were estimated for the two groups. The dependent variable for all the models is whether an employee elected to enroll in the ORP and the control variables are those described above and clustered into groups: personal characteristics, occupational characteristics, institutional characteristics and the set of indicators for year of hire at USG. For tenure-eligible faculty, the first model only controlled for personal characteristics. The second model added occupational characteristics, and the third model included control variables for institution and year of hire. For other benefit-eligible employees, the second model differs slightly from the one developed for tenure-eligible faculty. Instead of controlling for faculty rank, the second model includes variables for educational attainment and position-held.

For tenure-eligible faculty, there was considerable consistency across the three models in the estimated effect of each control variable (see Table 4). Because the third model controlled for institution of hire, this consistency indicates that type of institution and geographic location were not factors in retirement plan selection. Male faculty were more likely than female faculty to choose the ORP, consistent with the findings of Clark, et al., 2006, and Brown & Weisbenner, 2014. Black faculty and those who identified themselves as "Other Race," i.e., not white, black, Asian or Hispanic, were less likely than white faculty to choose the ORP. U.S. citizens were less likely than non-citizens to choose ORP. Those hired at "middle age" were less likely than older or younger faculty to enroll in the ORP, as well; this finding is consistent with the view of these workers as less mobile than younger ones and yet still able to benefit from a defined benefit (DB) plan by working a sufficient number of years to accrue a meaningful benefit. Consistent with previous research, faculty hired at higher salaries were more likely to select ORP than TRS.

The results revealed that full professors were more likely than comparable associate professors to enroll in the TRS plan. The negligible difference in choices between assistant and associate professors is surprising given that assistant professors tend to be more mobile and have the employment uncertainty that comes with being on the tenure-track. The 10-year vesting requirement in TRS means that there is a fair chance that an assistant professor will not be employed at USG long enough to vest, and could thus forfeit retirement benefits by choosing TRS instead of ORP. It would be helpful to know how many assistant professors in TRS were defaulted into the plan, as well as their confidence in earning tenure. If a new faculty member feels secure in attaining tenure, such as planning to "go up" early, they may feel more comfortable in selecting a defined benefit plan.

For the other benefit eligible employees, those who chose ORP shared some similar characteristics with those tenure-eligible faculty who did so (see Table 5). Male employees and those with estimated higher starting salaries were more likely to choose ORP. Furthermore, other benefit-eligible black employees favored TRS, as did those who were middle aged when hired.

There were differences between the two groups, as well. Other benefit-eligible employees who identified as Asian[5] were significantly more likely to enroll in ORP. Married other benefit-eligible employees were less likely to choose ORP, while marital status did not seem to matter among tenure-eligible faculty. Among other benefit-eligible employees, there was a positive relationship between educational attainment and enrollment rates in ORP. Those in service positions had a lower preference for the ORP plan, while those in teaching/non-tenured faculty positions had greater preference for ORP.

Qualitative findings

Table 6 summarizes characteristics of the 12 UGA faculty interviewed for the qualitative portion of this study. Seven of the interviewees were enrolled in TRS and the remaining five were in ORP. The interviewees were a relatively diverse group. They consisted of seven men and five women. Five had minority status (black, Asian

[5] For the tenure-eligible faculty dataset, the Asian race variable was not significant.

or Latino), and four were international faculty. Of the 12 faculty, eight were at the assistant professor level when interviewed and half were employed in a social science or a humanities program. All the interviewees had at least one source of retirement income beyond the primary UGA retirement plan, such as from previous employment, a supplemental defined contribution (DC) plan, or a spouse's retirement plan.

All interviewees perceived that they had sufficient information to properly choose a plan. In addition to reviewing retirement information on the university's website and talking with representatives from the Human Resources department, interviewees spoke with friends, colleagues and neighbors to learn more about the plans and which might be a better fit for their situations. All the interviewees except one felt they had sufficient time to make their selection, as well. The one faculty member who did not was also the sole interviewee who defaulted into TRS.

The core theme across the interviews was risk aversion. What differed between the faculty members who selected TRS and those who chose ORP were the risks and uncertainties that they were trying to mitigate. Those who selected ORP were concerned that they would not be with the university long enough to vest in TRS. Reasons for potentially leaving UGA within the 10-year vesting window included not earning tenure, receiving a better opportunity at another university and simply wanting to leave Athens. In other words, faculty who selected ORP wanted to avoid the risk of not vesting. Among the 12, faculty of all ranks chose TRS, but only those joining UGA as assistant professors chose ORP. The respondents who opted for ORP framed their decisions around why they did not choose TRS rather than why they preferred ORP. A few interviewees discussed reviewing the university's contribution to both plans and while satisfied that the employer ORP contribution was sufficient or even generous, they noticed it was less than the contribution for TRS.

The longer the vesting schedule in a DB plan, the greater the risk of not vesting, particularly for tenure-eligible faculty who must leave their universities if they do not earn tenure. The uncertainty of tenure and its impact on plan choice is reflected by those who chose ORP versus TRS. This finding is consistent with the quantitative finding that assistant professors and full professors are more likely to join TRS. The two assistant professor interviewees who chose TRS[6] felt confident they would earn tenure and planned to stay in Athens long term.

Four of the interviewees were not U.S. citizens. Of these, the two that chose ORP cited uncertainty about remaining in the United States long term as a reason. Among the other two, one defaulted into TRS and now believes she should have chosen OPR because she may go back to her home country one day. The fourth international faculty member, who was hired at the associate rank, was more concerned with the security of the defined benefit plan. He felt that by moving from his home country, he had already overcome so much social risk that the uncertainty of earning tenure was small.

For those that chose TRS, the perceived financial security of a defined benefit plan was paramount in their decision making. These interviewees discussed wanting a secure form of retirement income. In particular, they preferred not having to shoulder investment or longevity risk. Several had defined contribution (DC) plans from previous employers and wanted to balance that coverage with a DB plan. In all instances, these faculty planned to stay at the university long term, and a few specifically mentioned they would stay in Athens until retirement. Therefore, the need for portability was deemed relatively unimportant.

When it came to investing, the interviewees generally considered themselves to be somewhat risk averse or to be a conservative investor, regardless of their financial knowledge. Only one interviewee had a moderate attitude toward risk and was "OK" with fluctuations in the market. For those in ORP or with other DC plans beyond their primary UGA plan (i.e., supplemental plans or ones from previous employment), their investment approaches were generally passive, such as relying on target-date funds or recommendations from financial advisors. This attitude is

[6] Excluding the one that defaulted into the system.

somewhat surprising because one of the benefits of DC plans is the ability for an individual to take more control of his or her investments.

Maybe as important as the common themes highlighted in the interviews were the areas of differences. The interviewees' views of their own retirement readiness ranged from uncomfortable to fairly secure. For younger faculty, they were concerned but acknowledged it was a long way off. One interviewee had reached 40 and was concerned that her DC plan balances were still relatively small, while another faculty member in the ORP plan joked that she and her husband would never be able to retire. As discussed by one interviewee, academicians are in school longer than the general public and, hence, have less time to work and save prior to reaching the traditional retirement age of the mid-60s.

Summary and future questions

The qualitative portion of the study improves our understanding of risk assessment by faculty members. The interviewees reframed the issue of plan choice from wanting portability (a positive viewpoint) to one of the mitigating risks associated with achieving tenure and relocation generally. The interviews reinforced the notion that plan selection encompasses a myriad of social and economic considerations for present and future situations that make forecasting and understanding why an individual chooses a retirement plan difficult.

Future research may want to compare plan choices in two different retirement systems where one has a long vesting period and selection is irrevocable, like USG, against one where employees are given the opportunity to switch plans and the vesting time is shorter, like the State Teachers Retirement System (STRS) of Ohio. Employees in STRS of Ohio vest in the system after five years and, prior to vesting, have a one-time opportunity to switch between a defined benefit, defined contribution or hybrid plan. By comparing choices among similar employees with very different levels of portability/vesting risk, researchers may better understand the role of tenure and the need for portability in plan choice.

This study's findings demonstrate that retirement choice is far from a cut and dry decision; it involves complex deliberation and considerations. For academic faculty, the need for portability may be heightened due to questions of achieving tenure and the need to find new employment if denied tenure, particularly at research-focused universities such as UGA, with ambitious tenure requirements. These professional challenges are further compounded when the vesting period for a DB plan exceeds the tenure-achievement timeline. Finally, faculty can be a nomadic group, moving to different states–or, for international faculty, a different country–for a better professional opportunity.

Tables and figures

Table 1. Overview of USG retirement plans in 2015

Plan Attribute	Teachers Retirement System (TRS)	Optional Retirement Plan (ORP)
Type of plan	Defined benefit	Defined contribution
Benefit at retirement	Based on formula: 2 highest income years x yrs service x 2%, plus annual COLA	Based on contributions and return on investments
Vesting	10 years of service credit	Immediate
Contribution rates	Employee: 6.00% Employer: 14.27%	Employee: 6.00% Employer: 9.24%
Normal retirement age	60 with 10 years of service or any age with 30 years of service	N/A for retirement benefits
Payout for early USG departure (<10 yrs)	Accumulated employee contributions plus interest only	All employee and employer contributions
Risk to employer	High, must ensure adequate funding for future payouts	No risk after employer contributions are made

Notes: Human Resources, University of Georgia. Description of plans is effective July 1, 2015.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for USG–Tenure-eligible faculty

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Enrolled in TRS	0.373	0.484	0	1
Enrolled in ORP	0.627	0.484	0	1
Male	0.569	0.495	0	1
White	0.685	0.464	0	1
Black	0.098	0.298	0	1
Asian	0.164	0.370	0	1
Hispanic	0.042	0.200	0	1
Other Race	0.010	0.101	0	1
U.S. Citizen	0.793	0.405	0	1
Age Hire: 25-34	0.348	0.476	0	1
Age Hire: 35-44	0.353	0.478	0	1
Age Hire: 45-54	0.181	0.385	0	1
Age Hire: 55-64	0.105	0.307	0	1
Age Hire: 65+	0.013	0.113	0	1
Married	0.653	0.476	0	1
Single	0.301	0.459	0	1
Other Marital Status	0.046	0.210	0	1
Management Position	0.083	0.275	0	1
Starting Salary (Log)	11.220	0.473	9.728	13.358
Hired Assistant Professor	0.774	0.419	0	1
Hired Associate Professor	0.116	0.320	0	1
Hired Full Professor	0.110	0.313	0	1
Hired 2009	0.101	0.302	0	1
Hired 2010	0.105	0.306	0	1
Hired 2011	0.148	0.355	0	1
Hired 2012	0.153	0.360	0	1
Hired 2013	0.165	0.371	0	1
Hired 2014	0.164	0.371	0	1
Hired 2015	0.164	0.370	0	1

Notes: Data include all faculty employed at a University System of Georgia (USG) institution in Fall 2015 and hired in years 2009 through 2015 at the assistant, associate or full professor ranks (n=3,853). Data are not shown for the 30 dichotomous variables for each institution.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for USG–Other employees

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Enrolled in TRS	0.579	0.494	0	1
Enrolled in ORP	0.421	0.494	0	1
Male	0.452	0.498	0	1
White	0.650	0.477	0	1
Black	0.203	0.402	0	1
Asian	0.084	0.277	0	1
Hispanic	0.026	0.160	0	1
Other Race	0.009	0.093	0	1
U.S. Citizen	0.878	0.327	0	1
Age Hire: 25-34	0.456	0.498	0	1
Age Hire: 35-44	0.278	0.448	0	1
Age Hire: 45-54	0.181	0.385	0	1
Age Hire: 55-64	0.079	0.269	0	1
Age Hire: 65+	0.006	0.080	0	1
Married	0.583	0.493	0	1
Single	0.383	0.486	0	1
Other Marital Status	0.034	0.182	0	1
Service Position	0.076	0.265	0	1
Management Position	0.175	0.380	0	1
Teaching Position	0.218	0.413	0	1
All Other Positions	0.531	0.499	0	1
Starting Salary (Log)	10.836	0.421	9.169	13.583
Hired 2009	0.076	0.265	0	1
Hired 2010	0.102	0.302	0	1
Hired 2011	0.122	0.327	0	1
Hired 2012	0.145	0.353	0	1
Hired 2013	0.158	0.365	0	1
Hired 2014	0.194	0.395	0	1
Hired 2015	0.203	0.402	0	1
Highest Degree Unknown	0.149	0.356	0	1
Highest Degree HS	0.013	0.114	0	1
Highest Degree 2-Year	0.049	0.215	0	1
Highest Degree 4-Year	0.201	0.401	0	1
Highest Degree Graduate	0.526	0.499	0	1

Notes: Data include all non-faculty employed at a University System of Georgia (USG) institution in Fall 2015 and hired in years 2009 through 2015 (n=10,418). Data are not shown for the 30 dichotomous variables for each institution.

Table 4. Choosing defined contribution retirement plan–Tenure-eligible faculty

Variable	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3
Male	0.049**	0.032*	0.022
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Black	-0.129***	-0.123***	-0.134***
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.026)
Asian	0.078***	0.055*	0.023
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Hispanic	-0.030	-0.034	-0.045
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.037)
Other Race	-0.162*	-0.155*	-0.121+
	(0.074)	(0.074)	(0.073)
U.S. Citizen	-0.007	-0.015	-0.057**
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.022)
Age Hire: 35-44	-0.018	-0.024	-0.018
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.018)
Age Hire: 45-54	-0.044*	-0.070**	-0.066**
	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.024)
Age Hire: 55-64	0.066*	0.037	0.052+
	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Age Hire: 65+	0.124	0.116	0.108
	(0.076)	(0.076)	(0.075)
Married	-0.018	-0.034*	-0.039*
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Other Marital Status	-0.001	0.002	-0.021
	(0.039)	(0.038)	(0.038)
Management Position	-----	0.035	0.054
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Hired Assistant Professor	-----	-0.033	-0.033
		(0.027)	(0.027)
Hired Full Professor	-----	-0.083*	-0.078*
		(0.037)	(0.036)
Starting Salary (Log)	-----	0.130***	0.123***
		(0.021)	(0.026)
Hired 2010	-----	-----	-0.049
			(0.034)

Hired 2011	-----	-----	-0.051
			(0.032)
Hired 2012	-----	-----	-0.127***
			(0.031)
Hired 2013	-----	-----	-0.082**
			(0.031)
Hired 2014	-----	-----	-0.108***
			(0.031)
Hired 2015	-----	-----	-0.104***
			(0.031)
Control for Institution?	No	No	Yes
Pseudo R2	0.02	0.03	0.08
Chi-Square	81.15***	135.50***	383.58***

Notes: Data include faculty hired in 2009 or later at the rank of assistant, associate or full professor and employed at a University System of Georgia institution in Fall 2015. Coefficients are shown as marginal effects. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Reference category for race is white. Reference category for age at time of hire is 25-34. Reference category for marital status is single. Reference category for rank at time of hire is associate professor. Reference category for year of hire is 1991-95. + p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001.

Table 5. Choosing defined benefit retirement plan–Other employees

Variable	(1) Model 1	(2) Model 2	(3) Model 3
Male	0.056***	0.037***	0.033***
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Black	-0.121***	-0.118***	-0.118***
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Asian	0.260***	0.214***	0.186***
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Hispanic	0.012	0.019	0.007
	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Other Race	-0.026	-0.024	0.023
	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.049)
U.S. Citizen	0.080***	-0.002	-0.008
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Age Hire: 35-44	-0.041***	-0.060***	-0.047***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Age Hire: 45-54	-0.070***	-0.095***	-0.082***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Age Hire: 55-64	0.124***	0.079***	0.100***
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Age Hire: 65+	0.247***	0.174**	0.197***
	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.059)
Married	-0.023*	-0.034***	-0.023*
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Other Marital Status	-0.011	-0.014	-0.010
	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Education: Unknown	-----	-0.130***	0.084**
		(0.017)	(0.026)
Education: High School	-----	-0.186***	-0.168***
		(0.051)	(0.050)
Education: Two-Year	-----	-0.163***	-0.161***
		(0.026)	(0.026)
Education: Graduate	-----	0.106***	0.102***
		(0.011)	(0.011)
Service Position	-----	-0.045*	-0.050**
		(0.020)	(0.019)
Management Position	-----	-0.059***	-0.035*
		(0.014)	(0.014)

Teaching Position	-----	-0.018	0.051***
		(0.013)	(0.014)
Starting Salary (Log)	-----	0.147***	0.126***
		(0.013)	(0.014)
Hired 2010	-----	-----	0.024
			(0.022)
Hired 2011	-----	-----	0.015
			(0.021)
Hired 2012	-----	-----	0.015
			(0.020)
Hired 2013	-----	-----	0.043*
			(0.020)
Hired 2014	-----	-----	0.054**
			(0.020)
Hired 2015	-----	-----	0.092***
			(0.019)
Control for Institution?	No	No	Yes
Pseudo R2	0.04	0.09	0.12
Chi-Square	573.17***	1240.45***	1632.18***

Notes: Data include non-faculty hired in 2009 or later and employed at a USG institution in Fall 2015 (n=10,418). Coefficients are marginal effects. Standard errors are in parentheses. Reference category for race is white. Reference category for age at time of hire is 25-34. Reference category for marital status is single. Reference category for rank at time of hire is associate. Reference category for year of hire is 2009. Reference category for education is bachelor's degree. Reference category for position is "All Other Positions." *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Table 6. Characteristics of tenure-eligible faculty interviewed

	Number	Percent
Member of Defined Benefit Plan (TRS)	7	58%
Rank: Assistant Professor	8	67%
Rank: Associate Professor Rank	3	25%
Rank: Professor	1	8%
Gender: Male	7	58%
Racial Status: Minority[1]	5	42%
Citizenship: United States	8	67%
Field: Social Science	6	50%
Field Business	3	25%
Field: Science	2	17%
Field: Administration	1	8%

1. Interviewees included two black, two Asian and one Hispanic

About the authors

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Erik C. Ness is associate professor of higher education and graduate coordinator in the Institute of Higher Education. His research and teaching focus on higher education politics and policy. His current research projects examine research utilization—the extent to which policymakers rely on research evidence to craft policy—in the adoption and implementation of various state higher education policy initiatives.