



PLACE

Vassar Professors Sue Over Gender Pay Gap, Claiming Discrimination Against Women on the Faculty

By *Megan Zahneis*

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What's New

Five female professors at Vassar College [are suing](#) the institution, accusing it of paying them less than their male colleagues and of systemic gender-based discrimination. Another 35 female faculty members at the historic women's college [signed on](#) in support of the lawsuit, which seeks class-action status in a New York district court.

The Details

The lawsuit claims that a gender pay gap has existed for full professors at Vassar for two decades and has widened over time, citing [Chronicle data](#). In the 2021-22 academic year, female full professors were paid 10 percent less than their male colleagues, the lawsuit states. Seventeen years earlier, that difference was smaller, the suit says.

And though female faculty members have raised concerns about unequal pay for more than a decade, the lawsuit alleges, Vassar made salary data more opaque over time, including refusing to release raw data. A 2020 pay-equity study resulted in only some female faculty members receiving a one-time bonus, the lawsuit alleges, and said the administration's response to complaints "boiled down to: men make more money because men are better or, if not, Vassar has decided it is acceptable to pay men more for the same job."

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Vassar’s evaluation and promotion processes are also stacked against women, the plaintiffs say. Becoming a full professor “requires department support and peer reviews that fundamentally favor men over comparable women and ensure that women take longer to advance,” despite men and women doing comparable amounts of work, the suit alleges. And women at all ranks are given lower merit ratings in annual reviews, which Vassar is aware of but has not acted to correct, the plaintiffs say.

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Vassar did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Backdrop

The Vassar suit is the latest in a [wave of academic pay-equity lawsuits](#). In 2021, Syracuse University settled a lawsuit with five female faculty members for \$3.7 million. The year before, Princeton University [paid out](#) nearly \$1.2 million to 106 female full professors, and Northern Michigan University [gave](#) \$1.46 million to four

female professors. A quartet of Rutgers University professors seek repayment in another [ongoing case](#). Vassar’s status as a historic women’s institution that “as a part of its values has expressed the importance of equity between women and men” makes this particular suit noteworthy, said Melvina Ford, the national legal director at Equal Rights Advocates, which is serving as co-counsel for the plaintiffs in the Vassar case.

The Stakes

The rise in pay-equity lawsuits across academe stems from a realization from several state governments that the federal Equal Pay Act, which was passed in 1963, wasn’t doing enough to ensure pay equity, Ford said. “New York has gone further than the federal Equal Pay Act and said that you must pay men and women equally for substantially similar work. They’ve also really tightened up the the defenses that employers can raise in these cases.”

As one of the first cases to be brought since that state law was amended in 2019, the Vassar case could set precedent in New York, Ford said; she hopes it will prompt other academic institutions across the nation to resolve their own pay disparities.

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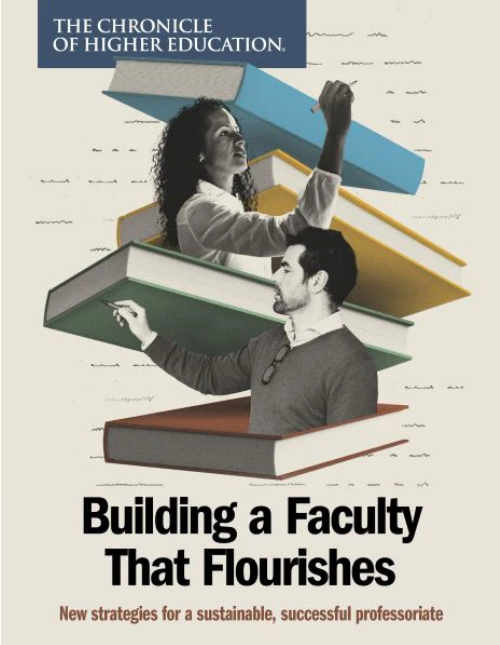
THE WORKPLACE

GENDER

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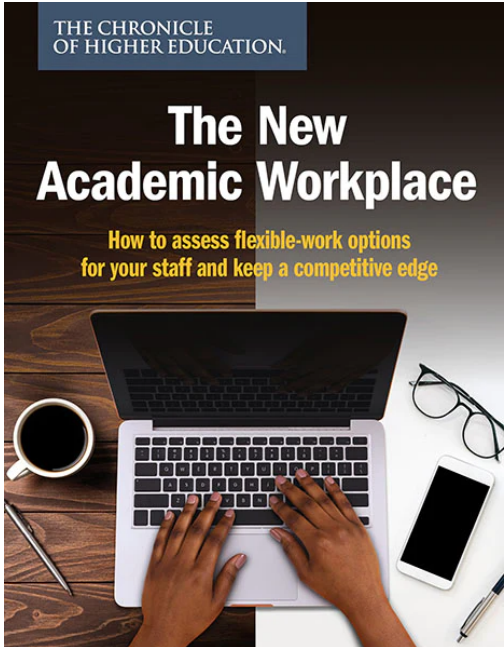
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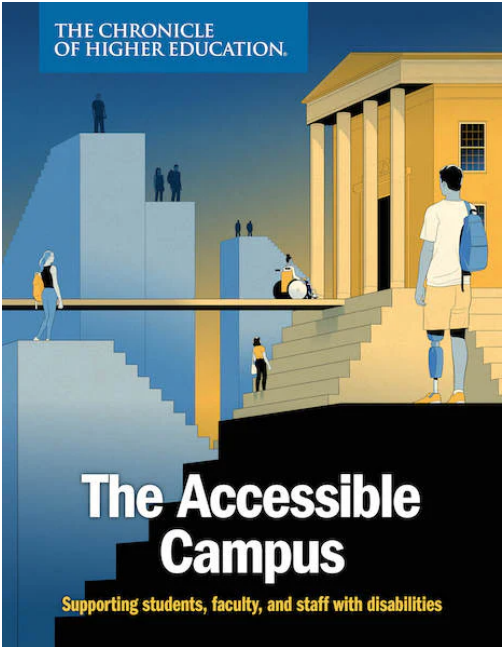
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