

Large-Scale Faculty Hiring and Anchor Mission Transformation

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Abstract

Anchor mission frameworks capture urban-serving universities' commitments to deepen their public impact and engage in their regions, but may not fully recognize the power of faculty to contribute to these place-based results. In this case study, we look closely at Kean University's recent journey—a rapid transformation from a teaching-focused master's institution to an R2-designated urban research university—through the lens of a large-scale faculty hiring initiative from 2021 to 2025. Using institutional data and a qualitative survey of newly hired faculty, we explore how this influx of new colleagues has shaped research productivity, shifted campus culture, and influenced how faculty connect with the university's community-focused values. We found not only a dramatic rise in scholarly output and external funding, but also a strong sense of purpose among new hires, who widely see their work as accelerating Kean's impact through community engagement, research, and innovation. At the same time, many faculty described challenges: heavy workloads, limited infrastructure, and moments where the university's ambitions and daily practices did not always align. Kean's experience offers practical lessons for other public, urban universities seeking to balance research growth with authentic community engagement. We highlight the value of open hiring practices, robust faculty development, and coordinated systems that can sustain mission-driven transformation at scale. The study connects faculty hiring as an institutional strategy to the evolving role of colleges and universities as anchor institutions impacting their local contexts.

Keywords: anchor mission, urban universities, faculty hiring, institutional transformation, community engagement, R2 universities

Introduction

Urban-serving institutions have long shaped the social, economic, and civic lives of their communities. In recent years, though, we have seen higher education leaders and policymakers set even clearer expectations for what our institutions mean to our communities by embracing an “anchor mission”—a commitment that centers place-based responsibility, especially to low-income communities and communities of color (Anderson & Zuckerman, 2022). Colleges and universities are leveraging their economic, academic, and civic influence in pursuit of shared prosperity and public well-being for the places and people they serve, and these places in turn influence priorities in the academy. Such is the bidirectional “power of place”, reflected in the 2025 CUMU conference theme.

Alongside anchor mission development, many public institutions are also seeking to elevate their research profile, often aspiring to advance in Carnegie designation status (Winders, 2025). These dual imperatives—expanding community impact while increasing research productivity—can create both synergies and tensions. Research capacity can deepen place-based work, but it can also compete with high teaching loads and community-engaged responsibilities, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Hodges, 2024).

Kean University, a public institution in New Jersey, offers an unusual case of how these forces intersect. Prior to 2020, Kean operated as a master’s-level, teaching-focused university with modest research infrastructure and episodic community partnerships. Following a presidential transition in 2020, the university articulated an ambitious vision: to become an R2 urban research university and a fully realized anchor institution for the region. Central to this strategy was a large-scale faculty hiring initiative that brought more than 150 new tenure-track faculty members to campus between 2021 and 2025, fundamentally reshaping the institution’s scholarly capacity and culture.

This article examines Kean’s large-scale hiring initiative as a lever for anchor mission transformation. Specifically, we investigate four questions using descriptive institutional data and a qualitative analysis of survey responses provided by newly hired faculty: (a) How did large-scale hiring alter Kean’s research productivity and scholarly outputs? (b) How did newly hired faculty conceptualize and align with the anchor mission to serve the place(s) the university serves? (c) What cultural shifts emerged on campus as a result of the hiring initiative? and (d) What challenges and opportunities arose in the transformation process?

We situate our findings about the case of Kean’s experience within contemporary scholarship on anchor institutions, urban, public universities, and faculty hiring by extending recent work in *Metropolitan Universities* that documents anchor mission strategies and community-engaged research infrastructures (Conteh, 2024; Garton, 2021; Smarr & Navye, 2023) to the

underexplored role of tenure-track hiring as an engine for mission-aligned change (Kezar & Maxey, 2015).

Enacting the Anchor Mission in Higher Education

In the last decade, higher education scholars and practitioners have increasingly distinguished between simply being an anchor institution by geographic default and intentionally adopting an anchor mission. Garton's (2021) synthesis of anchor institution scholarship reviews decades of university urban development literature, presenting a typology of anchor initiatives based on the forms of capital they leverage: financial, physical, intellectual, and human. This typology signals the breadth of anchor work when it becomes intentional, from transforming local hiring and procurement practices to revitalizing neighborhoods, forging research partnerships, and strengthening educational pipelines.

Other scholars have contributed to our understanding of how the anchor mission is enacted by attempting to measure how higher education institutions are operationalizing it. Sladek's (2017) *Higher Education's Anchor Mission* report introduced the Anchor Dashboard, a framework for tracking place-based engagement across dimensions such as local hiring, purchasing, community building, and education. Subsequent studies have used the Anchor Dashboard to help institutions understand and benchmark their local impact, emphasizing that anchor strategies must attend not only to economic metrics but also to equity and quality-of-life outcomes for nearby residents (DiBenedetto et al., 2021).

The Healthcare Anchor Network and the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) furthered this work in *Higher Education's Anchor Mission: A Sharpened Imperative & A Framework for Action* (Anderson & Zuckerman, 2022). That report calls on colleges and universities to align their core business functions—employment, procurement, investment—and their academic missions with the needs of local communities, particularly historically marginalized groups. The report stresses that anchor efforts must be comprehensive and cross-divisional rather than isolated projects residing in a single center or office.

Conteh (2024) notes how higher education institutions and their host cities co-evolve, arguing that universities must balance regional economic roles with responsibilities for democratic engagement and social justice. However, anchor strategies can become overly focused on one dimension—often real estate or economic development—at the expense of reciprocal partnerships, co-created research, and community-engaged learning experiences for students. These last areas are notably situated in the domain of faculty work.

The Role of Faculty in Anchor Mission Activities

Recognizing that faculty are central actors in anchor work, recent issues of *Metropolitan Universities* have examined institutional supports for community-engaged research and teaching. Smarr and Navye (2023) highlight how urban and metropolitan universities leverage faculty expertise to address complex social challenges, but note that such work often remains under-resourced and inadequately recognized in promotion and tenure systems. DiBenedetto et al. (2021) similarly argue that institutions can create postsecondary value for community members and partners, but only if faculty are supported in building reciprocal relationships and integrating community needs into curriculum and research agendas.

Studies of anchor dashboards and institutional metrics also underscore faculty contributions. The Anchor Dashboard Learning Cohort reported that progress on anchor mission commitments often depends on faculty-led initiatives in areas such as civic engagement, K–16 pipelines, and applied research (Sladek, 2017). Yet, as previously noted, these initiatives can be difficult to scale without structural mechanisms—such as course releases, seed grants, and recognition in evaluation systems—that incentivize and sustain faculty engagement (Anderson & Zuckerman, 2022).

Hodges’ (2024) case study of Rutgers-Newark under the Nancy Cantor presidency significantly highlights the reinforcing ways institutions both attract and retain faculty with an interest in being part of institutions that have strong anchor missions, as well as how these institutions build capacity for executing on their mission because of the very presence of such faculty.

Many community-engaged scholars who had arrived at Rutgers-Newark within the last few years spoke clearly about the institution’s and Nancy’s reputation for supporting publicly engaged scholarship as a major attraction for them to move to RU-N. A number of these scholars had transferred from other prestigious research universities...they also each compared their experiences at their previous urban universities and pointed to unique and deeply valued attributes of RU-N. This included a larger, unified vision that went across administrators, deans, and faculty; deep trusting local relationships that had been nurtured, and in some cases repaired, such as with Newark Public Schools; unique centers and spaces that brought community and university together in novel and powerful ways, such as Express Newark; a rare collective focus on publicly-engaged scholarship as advancing an anchor institution identity; and recognition of the role of a university as a large anchor institution and how it respectfully and intentionally managed its resources as a purchaser, employer, and real estate developer. Perhaps most significantly, it included an appreciation for not having to constantly explain or justify one’s community-engaged or publicly-engaged work (p. 103).

Sgoutas-Emch et al. (2024) examined the relationship between faculty motivations for community engagement and institutional aspirations for engagement. The authors argue that universities are aligning faculty systems with broader institutional community engagement

identities; in other words, the “power of place” extends to university decisions around faculty hiring, just as much as faculty hires have the power to shape place through their community-engaged teaching and scholarly contributions.

Tenure-Track Hiring as an Engine for Institutional Change

Studies that track faculty hiring practices in higher education clearly indicate how institutions are impacted—positively and negatively—by programs of hiring. For instance, there are many studies pointing to the increase in hiring of contingent faculty and the connection between that and a weakening of faculty governance. The Delphi Project, in particular, has drawn attention to the changing composition of the professoriate (notably the growth of contingent, non-tenure-track faculty) and argued that hiring decisions threaten institutions’ capacity to fulfill their complex missions, negatively impacting teaching quality, student success, and community engagement (Kezar & Maxey, 2015).

Other studies show the positive institutional impact of proactive hiring practices; for example, both Carter et al. (2025) and Herman (2024) found that cluster hiring for diverse faculty recruitment contributes to institutional innovation, faculty retention, student success, broader perspectives in research, and improved campus climate. By redesigning search processes — broadening applicant pools, reducing bias, and training search committees — institutions can produce more diverse faculty hires, thereby altering department composition and long-term climate. These efforts show that hiring is not merely a staffing decision — but a site for embedding institutional commitments (e.g., equity, access, representation) into faculty composition and by extension into curricula, pedagogy, and institutional culture. This and other recent scholarship suggest that tenure-track hiring is increasingly moving away from localized departmental staffing decisions toward broader institutional strategy. For example, at the institutional level, faculty hiring can be a mechanism through which institutions compete for prestige, research productivity, grant funding, and rankings to advance research competitiveness and prestige (Anft, 2025; Sá, 2008). Similarly, Curran et al. (2020) found that cluster hiring initiatives were associated with increased collaboration, publication productivity, and research impact. Their national study suggested that universities use strategic tenure-track hiring to strengthen institutional visibility and competitiveness in emerging fields.

Especially relevant to this study, recent research suggests that universities pursuing anchor institution missions or Carnegie community engagement classifications are seeking faculty whose scholarship, teaching, and partnerships align with civic engagement, regional impact, and public-facing institutional priorities. For instance, Ward et al. (2024) examine why community-engaged scholars choose to join and remain at particular universities. They found that faculty recruitment and retention were strongly connected to alignment between institutional mission, community engagement values, and faculty identity. The authors argue that institutions

increasingly compete for faculty through publicly articulated civic and community-engagement commitments. This perspective aligns closely with literature on “anchor institutions” and strategic organizational change. Faculty hiring is used to build capacity in areas tied to public mission, Carnegie classifications, community engagement goals, and societal impact agendas.

Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of this Study

While scholars have documented how institutions adopt anchor missions and build partnership infrastructures, such as strategic planning, creation of centers, seed grants, and collaborative initiatives (Hodges, 2024), and others have examined trends in faculty hiring (Jaquette & Curs, 2023), few studies have explored large-scale tenure-track hiring as a deliberate strategy for advancing an anchor mission at a metropolitan university. Despite robust scholarly and policy-focused attention to faculty diversity and inclusive hiring, there remains a conspicuous gap: very little of this work conceptualizes tenure-track hiring explicitly as an engine for anchor-mission or community-engaged institutional transformation. In other words, the literature on anchor institutions rarely — if ever — (1) treats faculty hiring decisions (especially tenure/tenure-track lines) as central levers for embedding mission-aligned scholarship, community engagement, or regional partnerships; (2) explores how institutions allocate tenure-track lines according to anchor-mission priorities, or (3) examines downstream effects of mission-aligned hiring on curricula, community partnerships, student outcomes, or institutional identity.

This absence represents a significant conceptual and practical gap — one that matters because tenure-track faculty shape research agendas, teaching programs, institutional memory, community engagement, and more. If institutions want to use hiring as a strategic tool to further anchor public-good or mission-aligned goals, more explicit conceptual and empirical work is needed.

Kean University’s case sits squarely at the intersection of advancing the anchor mission and tenure-track faculty hiring as a means to impact that mission. Unlike many institutions that have leaned toward contingent hiring in the post-pandemic period (Riffe, 2025), Kean undertook an aggressive tenure-track hiring initiative explicitly linked to its aspirations as an R2 urban research university and anchor institution. By examining how this hiring wave has reshaped research productivity, faculty culture, and mission alignment, this study contributes new knowledge about the role of faculty hiring in anchor mission implementation. It offers practical insights for leaders at universities pursuing similar transformations.

Institutional Context

Kean University is a regional public research university founded in 1855 and located in New Jersey, about 15 miles from New York City and 7 miles from Newark. First established as a

normal school (the first public post-secondary institution of its kind in New Jersey), Kean has since grown into a comprehensive university serving over 16,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Kean is a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and enrolls a substantial number of first-generation college students. Academically, Kean offers a broad array of programs: over 50 undergraduate majors, dozens of graduate programs — including several doctoral tracks — spanning business, liberal arts, sciences, education, health professions, and architecture and design. In addition to its main New Jersey campuses, it offers a virtual campus (online), satellite campuses (e.g., “Kean Ocean”), and, uniquely, it is the only public American university with a full campus in China, Wenzhou–Kean University, giving students international exposure and opportunities. In the summer of 2026, Kean will acquire New Jersey City University (NJCU), further expanding its presence in northeastern New Jersey.

Prior to 2021, Kean University was classified as a master ’s-level institution with a large graduate program and a strong focus on teaching and professional preparation. Research was not supported through infrastructure, workload policies, or start-up packages. External partnerships existed in areas such as teacher education and health professions, but they were often decentralized and not framed as part of a comprehensive anchor strategy.

A presidential transition in July 2020 marked a turning point. In his inaugural address, Dr. Lamont Repollet articulated an integrated vision of Kean as an R2 urban research university and an anchor institution committed to the social and economic well-being of the region. Strategic priorities included: (a) building a culture of inquiry and evidence-informed decision-making; (b) leveraging existing physical assets, including a campus in China and substantial new construction; (c) expanding and coordinating community partnerships; and (d) aligning faculty roles and supports with heightened expectations for research and public impact.

Central to this vision was an aggressive tenure-track hiring strategy. From 2021 to 2025, Kean hired more than 150 new tenure-track faculty, none with tenure and most at the assistant professor rank, on a base of approximately 268 full-time faculty members in 2020–2021. Figure 1 shows the number of new faculty hired from 2000 to 2025. The peak hiring year was 2022, when forty-two new faculty members were hired.

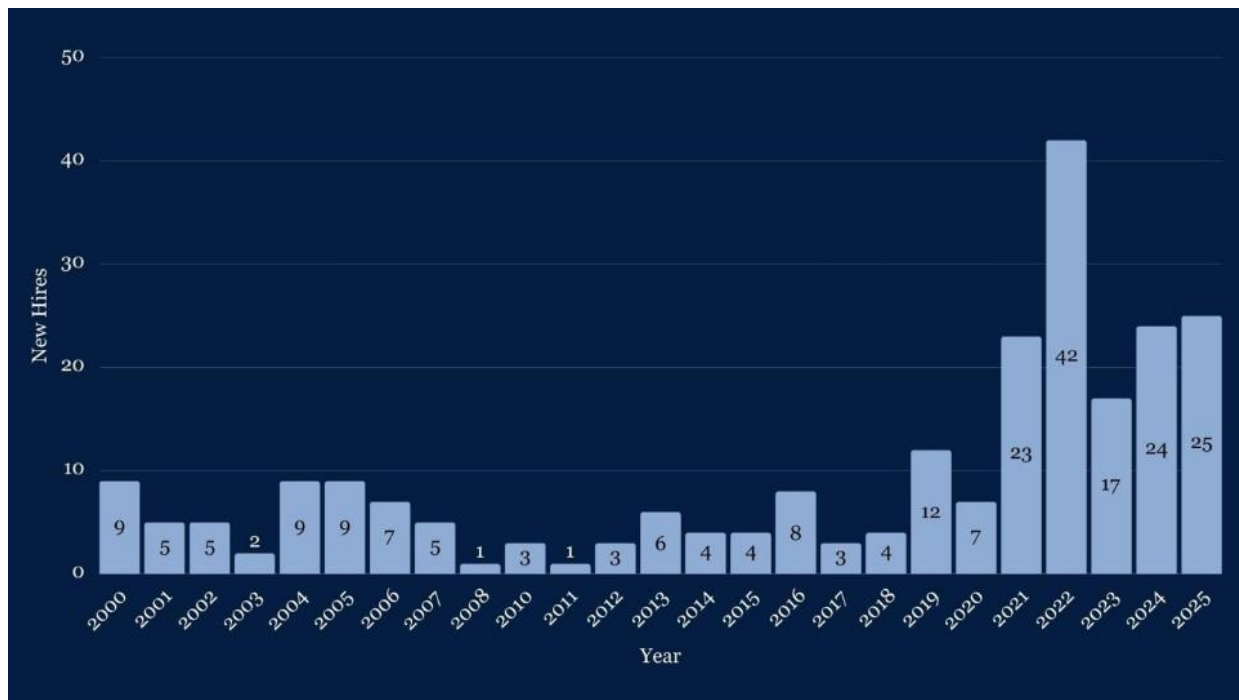


FIGURE 1. Massive hiring initiative (2021-2025).

Offer packages typically include a 25 percent workload reduction for research in the early years, as well as start-up funding, lab space where appropriate, and graduate assistant support. This approach sharply contrasted with national trends in which many institutions paused searches, shifted toward non-tenure-track appointments, or remained cautious in rehiring after pandemic-related cuts.

The hiring initiative occurred alongside other structural changes: introduction of a post-doc program to recruit underrepresented faculty into the academy (Equity in Action Fellows), reorganization of colleges, introduction of external review for tenure and promotion, and the creation of an Associate Provost for Faculty Development to coordinate professional learning, mentoring, and recognition. Collectively, these moves were intended to align personnel systems, organizational structures, and institutional culture with Kean's emerging identity as a research-active anchor institution.

Methods

This mixed-method study combines descriptive quantitative analysis and qualitative thematic analysis by drawing from two primary data sources: (a) institutional metrics on hiring, publications, and extramural funding compiled by the Office of the Provost; and (b) a Large-Scale Hiring and the Anchor Mission survey for faculty hired between 2021 and 2025 (n=150) that invited faculty to reflect on how the institutional anchor mission tied to their decisions to come to Kean and to their faculty roles. Together, these data provide insight into both the

measurable outputs of the hiring initiative and the lived experiences of faculty who joined the institution during this period of transformation.

Survey Design and Participants

A survey was carried out to understand the faculty perspectives on recruitment and the evolving culture of the Kean institution, particularly in relation to the university's role as an anchor institution and institutional transformation. A Microsoft Forms survey was distributed and conducted electronically via email in the spring of 2025 to all tenure-track faculty hired since 2021 (n=150). Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the faculty who acted as the sample were relevant to the study. The response rate was about 50% (n=72); they were collected anonymously to encourage participation and discourage bias.

Items included Likert-scale questions about alignment with the university's anchor mission, perceived contributions to public impact, and the extent to which anchor commitments influenced their decision to apply. Open-ended questions invited respondents to define the term "anchor mission" in their own words, describe how large-scale hiring had affected campus culture, explain how they saw themselves shaping the institution's trajectory toward public impact, and identify challenges they faced in adapting to the mission and culture.

Data Analysis

Open-ended responses were analyzed using inductive thematic coding. The approach included, firstly, identifying recurring keywords, phrases, and ideas using word cloud analysis separately for each open-ended question response. Secondly, we created a separate coding table for each question to track the presence of these recurring concepts across responses. Thirdly, themes were formed by grouping similar codes based on similarity, repetition, and relevance. The initial coding schema was developed based on a subset of responses, focusing on recurrent concepts such as *community engagement*, *core mission*, *institutional identity*, *research expectations*, and *structural barriers*. Codes (keywords/ideas) were refined iteratively, and themes were quantified by calculating the frequency counts of coded responses that reflected each theme. Although all responses were reviewed and coded, the reported findings emphasize the most frequent and significant themes. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate each theme while preserving the respondents' anonymity. Based on the coded responses, the reported percentages reflect the proportion of respondents whose answers aligned with the identified theme. Closed-ended questions, such as Likert-scale responses, were also presented in the form of percentages for consistency.

Institutional Metrics

Institutional data on publications and extramural funding were drawn from internal databases and annual reports. Scopus-indexed publications were tracked over time, disaggregated by year and journal quality (e.g., proportion of outputs in Q1 and Q2 journals). Extramural support was similarly tracked annually, distinguishing research-specific awards from other forms of external funding. Hiring data were compiled from human resources records and included counts of new tenure-track hires by year and rank.

Limitations

As a single-institution case study, this research does not claim statistical generalizability. The survey is limited to faculty hired during a specific period at one university and may not capture the perspectives of longer-serving faculty, staff, students, or community partners. The demographic subgroup data, such as college affiliation, discipline, and faculty rank, were not collected, which limited further subgroup analysis. Additionally, the data are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal; they capture perceptions at a particular stage of the institution's transformation, not changes over time. Nonetheless, the combination of institutional metrics and rich qualitative data provides a nuanced picture of how large-scale hiring intersects with anchor mission implementation.

Findings

In quantitative measures, new hires have radically changed the identity of the university, and in qualitative terms, have a clear sense of how the anchor mission has drawn them to stay.

Dramatic Changes in Research Outputs and Funding

The most visible impact of the hiring initiative is evident in institutional research outputs. Prior to 2021, Kean averaged roughly 32 Scopus-indexed publications per year across all disciplines. Following the influx of new tenure-track faculty, annual publications quickly increased to an average of more than 310 between 2021 and 2024, and more than 450 publications in 2025. Figure 2 shows scholarly activities from fall 2020 to winter 2024.

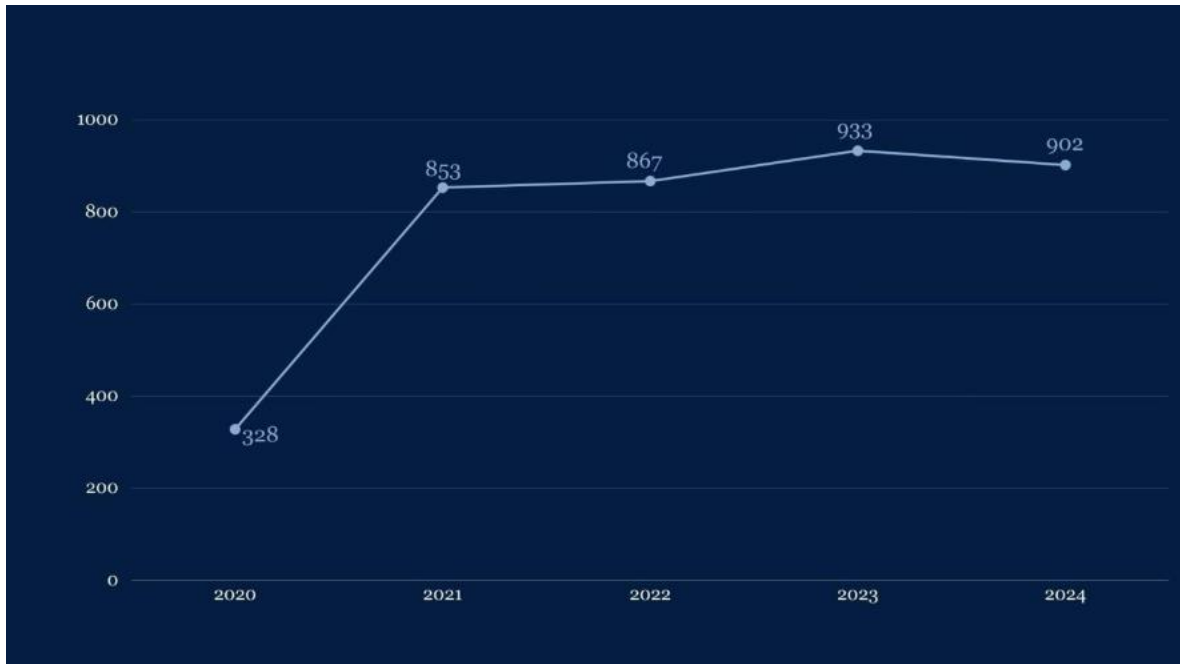


FIGURE 2. Pace of publication (2020-2024).

More than half of these publications appear in Q1 and Q2 journals, indicating not only greater volume but also enhanced quality relative to disciplinary benchmarks.

Figure 3 shows a comparison of the number of faculty with more than one article in Q1 and with more than one article in Q2 journals (SCImago) as of 2025. As shown in the graphs, assistant professors have the highest number of publications in Q1 and Q2 journals.

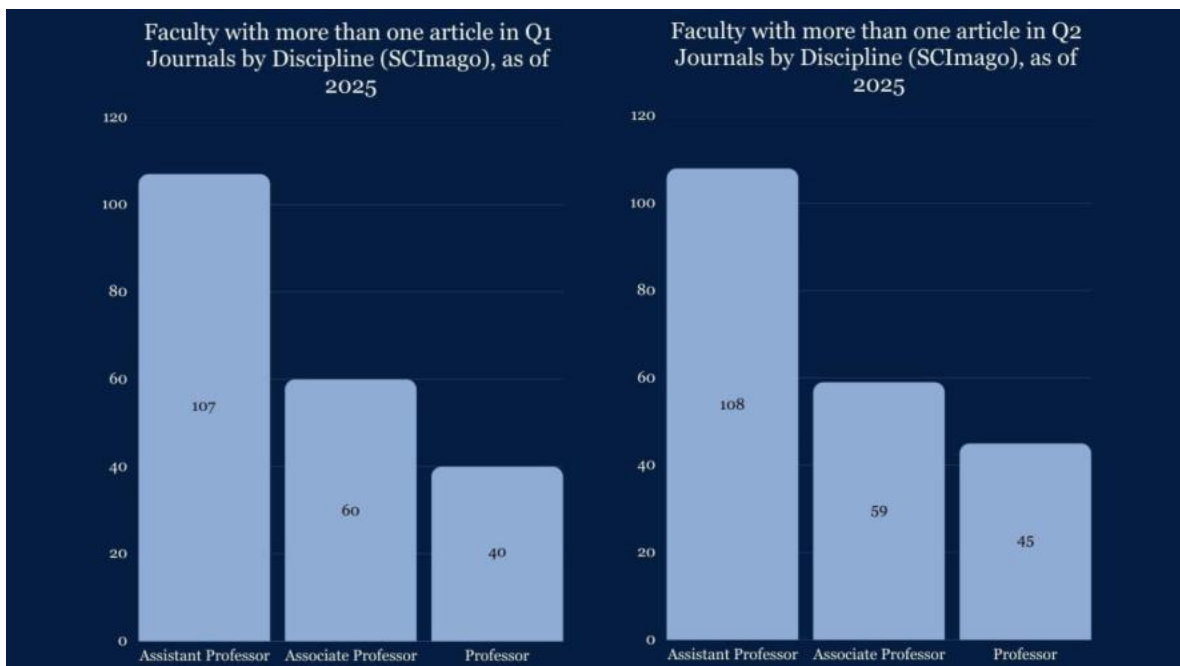


FIGURE 3. Quality of publications, as of 2025.

Extramural funding followed a similar trajectory. Total external support grew from under \$1 million in 2020–2021 to more than \$19 million in 2024–2025, including approximately \$17 million earmarked for research-specific awards (see Figure 4).

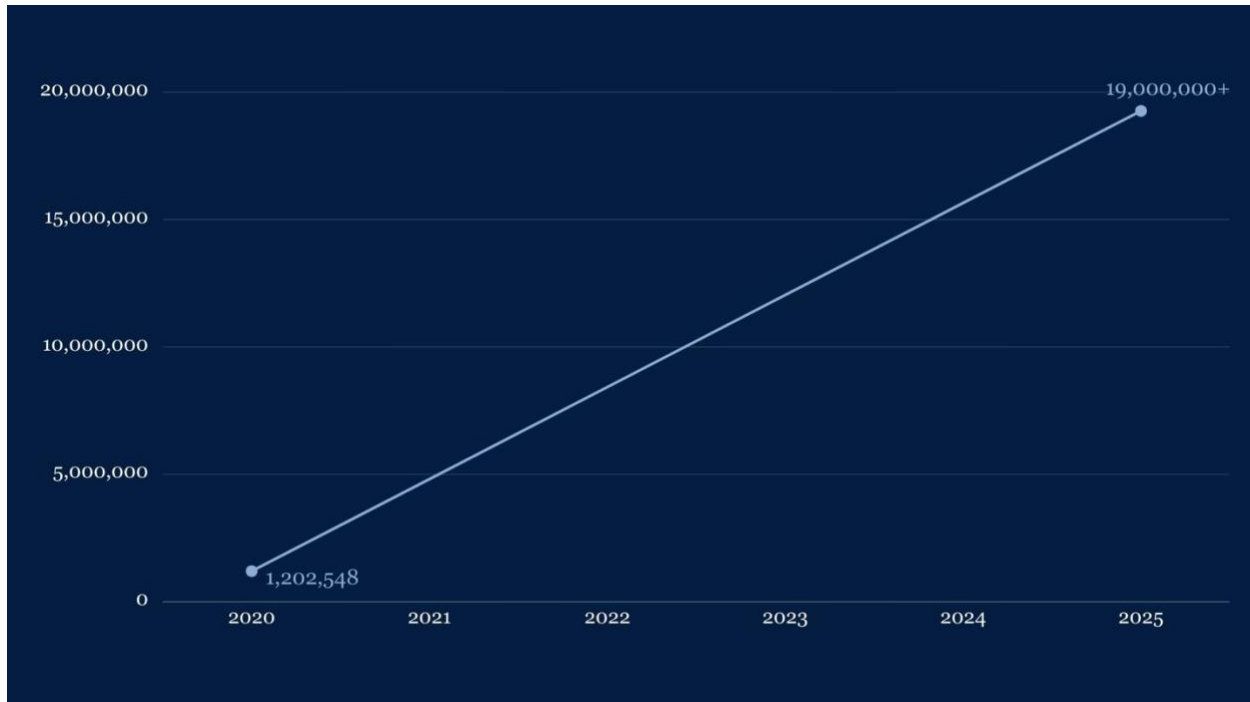


FIGURE 4. Extramural support (2020-2025).

Faculty Conceptions of the Anchor Mission

To begin, faculty were asked to consider the question, *In your own words, how do you define the term ‘anchor mission’ as it relates to higher education?* Faculty responses clustered into three primary themes. The majority, 26% of the faculty, referenced “Community Engagement”. These responses emphasized community engagement, describing the anchor mission as a commitment to using institutional resources, expertise, and long-term presence to support local communities through partnerships, programs, and shared problem-solving. Examples of faculty responses that reflected this theme:

- *"It's when a university uses its resources, influence, and long-term presence to support the social and economic well-being of its local community, like creating jobs or partnering with local organizations."*
- *"The university's commitment to use its resources, influence, and presence to strengthen the communities it serves. It means going beyond teaching and research to actively promote social, economic, and cultural well-being in partnership with the public."*

- *"I see an 'anchor mission' as one that ensures university initiatives align with community needs, and that the community-at-large is engaged in and benefits from the university and its programs."*

Second, 14 percent of responses framed the anchor mission as the institution's core mission, a central organizing principle that connects disparate units and activities under a common purpose. Examples of faculty responses that reflected this theme:

- *"The one mission that ties together the university as a whole, across all colleges, departments, majors but the execution may look different based on area of specialty - however end goal is the same."*
- *"The mission that drives all actions the University undertakes."*
- *"The foundation of the particular University; the core values of the University; the pillars of the faculty positions and roles."*

Finally, another 14 percent highlighted identity and values, portraying the anchor mission as an expression of who the university is and aspires to be. Examples of faculty responses that reflected this theme:

- *"An anchor mission offers a centralized message about the goals, ambitions, and hopes of the university with regards to its service to the broader world at large. It should incorporate the shared perspectives of students, faculty, and community members who engage with the university. Moreover, it should be forward-looking, articulating a shared set of values and goals for the future of higher education."*
- *"The main purpose of an institution - what makes them who they are."*

Faculty were then asked, *"To what degree do you feel your work contributes to the institution's anchor mission (public/community impact)?"* The majority, 53%, said "a great deal," 44% said "to some extent," and only 3% said "not at all." In response to the question: *"Which of the following do you associate most closely with an institution's anchor mission?"* the most frequently selected options were strengthening ties with the local community (19%) and building partnerships with schools, organizations, and industries (19%). These were followed by expanding community-engaged learning and scholarship (17%), preparing students for civic engagement and social impact careers (16%), supporting regional economic development (15%), and advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (14%).

Perceived Cultural Impacts of Large-Scale Hiring

Faculty perceptions of how large-scale hiring affected campus culture were generally positive but nuanced. Three themes emerged.

Fresh Ideas and Energy

About 24 percent of coded responses described an influx of fresh ideas, energy, and perspectives associated with the new faculty cohort. Respondents noted that the hiring wave brought diverse

disciplinary expertise, new pedagogical approaches, and a renewed sense of momentum around teaching and research. Many linked this energy directly to the university's aspirations as an R2 institution and anchor, suggesting that new hires saw themselves as co-authors of Kean's evolving identity. For example:

- *"It brought fresh energy, ideas, and perspectives to campus!!! It's created more collaboration across departments, encouraged innovation in both teaching and research, and made the community feel more dynamic and forward-looking."*
- *"The large-scale hiring introduced fresh perspectives, diverse expertise, and new energy into the academic environment. This infusion of talent has fostered greater opportunities for collaboration across disciplines, enriched the learning experiences for students, and enhanced the university's capacity to engage in innovative research and teaching practices."*
- *"I believe that with a surge in new faculty hires, there is a wave of energy and excitement on campus which positively impacts culture."*

Collaboration and Cross-Disciplinary Work

A second theme, present in 16 percent of responses, emphasized increased collaboration. Faculty described expanded opportunities for cross-departmental projects, interdisciplinary grant proposals, and community-engaged initiatives that linked multiple colleges. Some respondents highlighted that the presence of more research-active colleagues created a critical mass that made collaboration easier and more attractive, particularly when paired with institutional encouragement to pursue public-impact projects. For instance:

- *"Brought in faculty with expertise to address community needs through discipline related research. Collaborated with students in handout of the classroom to learn the process of scholarship."*
- *"Facilitate lots new ideas and collaborations."*
- *"New faculty complement this institution, their departments, faculty, students and community in the areas of expertise that informs their scholarship and contribution. This appears in their supportive role around enhancing current structures and processes or even developing ones that were not in existence."*

Research Culture and Expectations

A third theme, evident in 12 percent of responses, focused on a shifting research culture. New hires reported heightened expectations for publishing in high-quality journals and securing external funding, alongside increased support in the form of start-up resources and course releases. While the 2025 standards for achieving designation as an R2 institution are clear -- \$5,000,000 or more in research spending and 20 or more research doctorates awarded each year -- faculty showed a more fluid and varied understanding of R2 status. For many, particularly in disciplines far less likely to receive substantial extramural research funding, being a "research

university” was defined by scholarship and scholarly publication rather than by grant support. Several respondents described a sense of “R2 momentum,” noting that research conversations and scholarly activities had become more visible and valued across campus. At the same time, some faculty expressed concern that the rapid escalation of expectations could create pressure for untenured colleagues if not matched by sustainable supports. For example:

- *"From my perspective as a fourth-year faculty member, the large-scale hiring of new faculty whose tenure and promotion are tied to research has impacted the campus culture in a variety of ways... New faculty bring new ideas and teaching practices... In terms of tenure and promotion, similarly, there has been a radical shift, where faculty are both expected to produce research and are now supported in doing so."*
- *"I think it has reignited a focus on research."*
- *"There is certainly excitement and drive to help usher Kean into its new R2 chapter. Lots of focus on grants and Q1/Q2 journal publication."*

Faculty Contributions to Public Impact

To the survey question, “How do you see new faculty shaping the institution’s trajectory toward public impact?”, nearly 30 percent of coded responses discussed community engagement and partnerships explicitly, describing efforts to co-design projects with local schools, community-based organizations, and municipal agencies. Faculty described bringing students into these partnerships through service-learning, internships, and research assistantships, thereby linking student learning outcomes to regional needs. For instance:

- *"New faculty bring fresh perspectives and often a strong commitment to community engaged scholarship. By building research agendas around real-world problems and co-creating solutions with community partners, we have the potential to directly influence the institution’s role as a driver of social change and public good."*
- *"Within our fields and specialties. By making connections to related fields for research. Continuing to expand our network of local schools and community colleges—recruitment—involving the students by taking a sophomore or junior along with a faculty member to high school programs during recruitment work... Continuing to develop and advance community engagement via program/college specific events. Local is global—when things are done with specificity in response to a local need, the results can have larger regional and global impacts."*

A second cluster of responses (about 18 percent) emphasized research and publishing as vehicles for public impact. Faculty noted that they were producing scholarship that addressed pressing social and economic issues in the region, disseminating findings through both academic and public channels, and positioning Kean as a visible contributor to local and national conversations.

- *"Recently hired faculty are more likely to be publishing or presenting research that connects them and the university to the public. This is especially true for those who are*

able to receive a course release that allows them the time to research at a similar pace to other R2 institutions."

- *"With a significant emphasis on research and publishing, new faculty will lead efforts to ensure their research is widely disseminated, supports public engagement, and makes a meaningful impact in the community."*
- *"I believe the influx of new faculty brings tremendous potential to expand the institution's public impact by introducing innovative ideas, research agendas, and community partnerships. As a relatively new faculty member myself, I welcome this change and the opportunities it creates."*

A third theme (approximately 15 percent) highlighted innovation, with faculty describing new programs, courses, and initiatives designed to connect academic work with real-world challenges. These patterns align with literature emphasizing faculty as key drivers of anchor mission realization through community-engaged teaching and scholarship.

Challenges in Adapting to Mission and Culture

Despite the positive energy surrounding Kean's transformation, respondents identified several challenges. Three themes stood out in responses to the question, *"What is one challenge you faced adapting to the institution's mission and culture?"*

Structural and Institutional Barriers

The most frequently cited challenge (22 percent of coded responses) was structural or institutional barriers. Faculty pointed to limited support staff, complex administrative processes, and difficulties accessing funding or logistical support for community-engaged projects. Some noted that expectations for outreach and partnership had increased faster than the infrastructure necessary to sustain such work.

Teaching and Research Load

A second challenge (13 percent of responses) involved balancing teaching, research, and service. Faculty expressed a strong desire to conduct high-quality research and community-engaged scholarship but described feeling stretched by heavy teaching and service commitments. Even with course reductions in the early years, some respondents worried that long-term workload expectations might not be compatible with R2-level research productivity and robust anchor engagement.

Alignment of Support with Expectations

A third theme (11 percent of responses) focused on perceived misalignment between the university's stated ambitions and the support available to faculty. A number of respondents

reported that certain promises made during recruitment—such as specific teaching loads, funding levels, or mentoring structures—had not fully materialized or had taken longer than expected to implement. These experiences generated feelings of uncertainty and, in some cases, skepticism about whether the institution would sustain its commitments over time.

Discussion

The findings from Kean University illustrate both the potential and the complexity of using large-scale tenure-track hiring as an engine for anchor mission transformation. The faculty conceptions of the anchor mission patterns echo broader anchor scholarship that defines the anchor mission as a holistic, values-driven commitment to place and equity. Faculty at Kean commonly described the anchor mission as requiring the university to move beyond traditional teaching and research toward deeper, reciprocal engagement with local communities, seen in other universities' anchor mission frameworks. This hiring initiative clearly contributed to dramatic increases in research productivity and extramural funding, aligning with the institution's R2 aspirations and enhancing its capacity to address regional challenges through scholarship.

While it may be an unusual set of experiences, with so many universities downsizing or even closing, Kean's experience demonstrates that faculty hiring can rapidly shift an institution's scholarly capacity and identity. By recruiting faculty who are both research-active and committed to public impact, the university accelerated progress toward anchor goals that might otherwise have taken decades. This finding complements Garton's (2021) typology of anchor initiatives by highlighting tenure-track hiring as a critical, yet often under-discussed, form of human capital investment in anchor strategies.

Furthermore, the data suggest that new faculty internalized and embraced the anchor mission. Most respondents articulated definitions of anchor mission that aligned with contemporary frameworks emphasizing community engagement, equity, and institutional responsibility to place (Sladek, 2017). Many also saw themselves as active agents in advancing public impact, whether through partnerships, applied research, or innovative pedagogy. This level of alignment is noteworthy, given scholarship cautioning that institutional rhetoric about engagement does not always translate into faculty practice.

At the same time, the challenges documented in the survey reveal tensions that are consistent with broader critiques of anchor mission implementation. Collectively, the challenges of Kean's transformation mirror concerns raised in broader literature on anchor mission implementation and academic labor, which caution that ambitious visions can falter if not matched by robust, coherent institutional supports (Hodges, 2024). Hodges (2024) and others warn that universities can espouse ambitious commitments to equity and engagement without fully resourcing the staff,

time, and structures needed to realize those commitments. Kean's new faculty similarly described structural barriers, heavy teaching and service loads, and gaps between recruitment promises and lived realities. These concerns do not negate the institution's progress but highlight the importance of pacing change and investing in enabling conditions, as well as explaining the improvements in process and support already realized or underway.

Another mission/resource misalignment is the timescale. Leadership looks at a multiyear trajectory with institutional evolution occurring en route. Junior faculty, on a much more exacting tenure clock, will be more inclined to focus on present practices and resources. It therefore becomes incumbent on leadership not only to accelerate the support necessary to sustain community engagement and research output but also to telegraph an understanding of the challenges faculty face as structures are being built and to emphasize momentum. Celebrations of success become important not only for the achievements themselves, but as evidence that the environment is already sustaining positive outcomes. In the case of Kean, the senior leadership (President, Provost, other Cabinet members, and Deans) emphatically and consistently emphasizes the mission and values of the university, thereby reinforcing for prospective and new hires the value of their scholarship, teaching, and service to the region. This is an essential contextual ingredient that plays a backstage role in the findings.

In the context of national trends toward contingent hiring and constrained budgets, Kean's decision to invest heavily in tenure-track lines is both bold and countercyclical. This strategy offers significant advantages for anchor work, as tenure-track faculty typically have greater stability and capacity to sustain long-term partnerships and research agendas. At the same time, such investments create expectations that institutions will provide the resources, recognition, and supportive policies necessary for faculty to thrive. When those expectations are not fully met—or carefully bracketed—the risk is disillusionment or burnout among exactly the faculty on whom the anchor mission depends.

Implications for Anchor-Mission Driven Universities

For leaders at urban public universities, Kean's case suggests several implications. First, tenure-track hiring can be a powerful mechanism to align institutional talent with anchor mission and research aspirations. However, it must be accompanied by parallel investments in community-engaged infrastructure, research development, and faculty support systems. Second, transparent communication about workload, resources, and timelines is essential for building and maintaining trust with new hires, particularly in contexts of rapid change. Third, ongoing assessment—using tools such as the Anchor Dashboard and other metrics—can help institutions identify gaps between mission and practice and adjust strategies accordingly. Third, beyond communication, faculty need to see that reappointment, tenure, and promotion outcomes reward people who serve the stated agenda(s). If the administration talks an anchor game but rewards

only journal publication, it will be impossible to build faith or satisfaction in the model. As with the example at Rutgers-Newark shared earlier, a successful campus will attract, reward, and retain faculty committed to the vision. Finally, this case underscores that anchor mission work is not merely a set of projects or programs; it is a cultural orientation that must permeate hiring, promotion and tenure, budgeting, and external relations. Faculty hiring can jump-start this cultural shift, but sustaining it requires continuous, collaborative effort across all levels of the institution.

Critically, these interventions must bring the whole faculty into the new vision, not just the new arrivals. Recognizing that senior faculty were not hired with the same supports or expectations, it is vital to provide them with pathways for engagement and to celebrate their contributions to the cultural pivot. In this respect, the pairing of the research and anchor imperatives serves the important purpose of providing faculty who may not be able to sustain a research agenda with meaningful pathways of participation through community-engaged learning, contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning, and otherwise seeing their own impact on the changes underway.

Recommendations

As seen in the literature and in our case, universities can and are using faculty recruitment and retention to reinforce institutional civic identity. Thus, the “power of place” can even reach and influence hiring decisions, and these decisions will further advance the power of community engagement for the university. We posit the following in the years to come:

- Community-engaged scholarship will become integrated into institutional branding and strategic planning.
- Anchor institution models will increasingly require faculty whose work connects to local/regional impact.
- Faculty reward systems (promotion, tenure, hiring criteria) will continue to become tools for organizational mission alignment.
- Place-based engagement will be increasingly linked to institutional legitimacy and public trust.

In short, faculty systems are central to institutional transformation toward public-impact models. Based on Kean University’s experience and the broader literature, we offer the following recommendations for metropolitan universities seeking to leverage faculty hiring in support of an anchor mission.

1. Integrate Anchor Commitments into Hiring from the Outset

Job postings, search processes, and interview questions should explicitly reference the institution’s anchor mission and expectations for community-engaged scholarship, teaching, and

service. Doing so signals to candidates that anchor work is central, not peripheral, to faculty roles.

2. Align Workload Policies with Research and Engagement Expectations

If institutions expect faculty to produce R2-level scholarship and meaningful community-engaged work, teaching and service loads must be structured accordingly. Course releases, strategic use of graduate assistants, and clear guidelines for recognizing engagement in workload calculations are essential for avoiding unsustainable demands. If those supports cannot be made available all at once, make sure that the communication plan clearly articulates what to expect on what schedule.

3. Build Robust Infrastructure for Community-Engaged Scholarship

Universities should invest in staff, centers, and partnership brokers who can support faculty in developing and sustaining reciprocal relationships with community organizations. Seed grants, small internal awards, and assistance with logistics can lower barriers to initiating and maintaining community-engaged projects.

4. Ensure Transparency and Follow-Through

As Kean's faculty responses indicate, perceived discrepancies between recruitment messaging and on-the-ground realities can erode trust. Institutions should communicate clearly about which supports are guaranteed, which are aspirational, and which timelines are realistic. When circumstances change, leaders should explain why and involve faculty in revising plans.

5. Use Data to Inform Continuous Improvement

Anchor mission frameworks, such as the Anchor Dashboard, provide tools for tracking progress on local hiring, procurement, partnerships, and educational outcomes. Integrating these metrics with internal data on faculty hiring, research productivity, and student success can help institutions assess the impact of strategic hiring and adjust course as needed.

6. Foster Cross-Cohort and Cross-Role Dialogue

Given that large-scale hiring can create distinct faculty cohorts—those hired under earlier missions and those hired under new expectations—intentional dialogue and collaborative structures are critical. Faculty learning communities, mentoring networks that span ranks and disciplines, and co-designed anchor initiatives can bridge differences and build shared ownership of the institution's evolving mission.

Conclusion

Kean University's large-scale faculty hiring initiative demonstrates how investments in tenure-track talent can catalyze rapid progress toward both research elevation and anchor mission realization. Within a few years, the university substantially increased its scholarly output and extramural funding while attracting faculty who strongly identify with its commitments to community engagement and public impact. Here, we see how faculty hiring both contributed to and benefited from the university's commitment to place. At the same time, the case highlights the challenges of aligning expectations, infrastructure, and culture in a period of accelerated change.

For universities grappling with similar ambitions, Kean's experience offers both inspiration and caution. Large-scale hiring can be a powerful lever for transformation, but only when paired with transparent communication, robust support systems, and ongoing attention to equity and sustainability. As the anchor mission movement continues to evolve, further research across multiple institutions will be essential to deepen understanding of how faculty hiring, academic labor, and community engagement intersect in shaping the future of urban-serving higher education. The existing literature provides a strong foundation for understanding faculty hiring as a mechanism for institutional change — particularly in terms of equity, representation, and inclusive pedagogy. Yet the specific framing of tenure-track hiring as a strategic engine for mission-aligned change — especially for anchor-mission universities committed to public impact — will benefit from future study.

Future research should consider at least the following questions:

- How are institutions designing mission-aligned hiring plans intentionally to support anchor or public-good goals?
- How are evaluation criteria and search processes structured to embed expectations of community-engaged scholarship or public-impact research?
- What are the downstream effects (on curricula, community partnerships, student success, local communities) of such mission-aligned hires over time?

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