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Today's News

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Housing Market Woes Both Help and Harm Campus Recruiting

By KATE MOSER

With a house languishing in the real-estate doldrums of southwestern Ohio, Edward F. Leonard III and his family have lived apart since he took over as president of Bethany College, in Kansas, nearly a year ago. Their situation is like that of many faculty members and administrators frustrated by housing prices across the country.

"We got tired of being a long-distance family," Mr. Leonard said last week by cellphone as he drove caravan-style with his wife and young son. They were in two cars packed with belongings they would unload at the college's guesthouse, where they will live until they plot their next move.

Existing-home sales dropped 15.9 percent from a year ago, the National Association of Realtors announced in June, and sales of new single-family houses were down 40 percent in that period, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Nationwide, the value of many homes has also plummeted.

That real-estate slowdown has proved a challenge for faculty members, administrators, and recruits unwilling or unable to sell their houses during a market slide whose bottom economists can only guess at. Still, the buyer's market yields a silver lining at many colleges—a slight reprieve for first-time home buyers.

Easier to Recruit?

For some institutions, the collapsing real-estate market would be a great recruitment tool—if their state economies weren't also ailing.

"For the openings that we've had, there are more attractive prices than they've seen in the last couple years," said David B. Ashley, president of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

Nevada has seen the steepest drop in house prices of any state in the past year, 27 percent. That decline led one professor of animation who had taken a new post at Louisiana State University at Shreveport to return to his old job in Las Vegas after two months because the value of his house there kept dropping and he couldn't sell it.

But lower prices have been advantageous for first-time home buyers at other institutions.

A few weeks after Robert J. Alexander arrived in Northern California last month, he picked up keys to his first home—a 1928 bungalow, recently renovated, in a desirable neighborhood just south of the campus of the University of the Pacific, in Stockton, where he is the new associate provost for enrollment. Mr. Alexander had been renting in New Orleans, where he was an assistant vice president for enrollment management at Tulane University, so he didn't have to worry about selling property there.

The abundance of homes for sale in Stockton helped put Mr. Alexander's new house within his reach. Stockton has the highest rate of foreclosures—one in every 75 homes—among 230 of the nation's metropolitan areas, according to a June report by RealtyTrac Inc., which monitors foreclosures.