The state auditor of California last month released a report saying that the California State University system had hired managers at more than twice the rate of other employees over a nine-year period without explaining why it needed to bring on so many people.

"Campuses were often unable to justify the number of management personnel they hired," the report said, "and consequently they could not demonstrate that they are providing these services in the most cost-effective manner."

To many observers, it was just another example of administrative bloat in higher education.

But the auditor’s report also offered a glimpse at a more-nuanced set of factors that institutional leaders must think through carefully, said Robert E. Martin, who has studied how college costs are affected by an increase in administrators.

"Board members of colleges should all be asking how and why staffing patterns are changing," said Mr. Martin, a professor emeritus of economics at Centre College, in Kentucky. "They need to think about whether what’s happening is really consistent with the mission of the institution."

The answers aren’t simple. The external factors that can contribute to the burgeoning of administrative ranks at colleges would all seem to pertain to their missions or are, at the very least, difficult to simply ignore. At the core of the growth, which experts say is largely fueled by professional-staff hiring, is a set of forces that reflect the changing nature of higher education. Here are the most common ones:

**Students and their families want more out of the college experience.**

When students arrive on a campus, they’re looking for services and amenities, many of which colleges have not traditionally offered. Student services — such as help applying for a scholarship, aid in landing a job, mental-health counseling, top-notch residence halls, wellness centers, study-abroad opportunities, and orientation programs that include adventure trips — are all a given on many campuses these days. And each new service or amenity comes with the professional staff to run it.

"When one university starts offering these services, then every university says we have to start doing it," Mr. Martin said. "It’s an arms race."
Donna Desrochers, an author of the Delta Cost Project’s report on changing staff patterns in higher education, said that spending on student-services salaries was the fastest-growing salary expense at many types of institutions over a 10-year period, suggesting that many new professional jobs had been created to help students.

**Student success is a high-stakes game.**

Once students arrive on a campus, colleges want to keep them from dropping out — a task that has become the day-to-day responsibility of clusters of administrators and their staffs, who are focused on retention and graduation rates.

Many institutions have hired professional advisers to make sure students get the courses and guidance they need — work that was once largely the purview of faculty members. Enrollment-management and admissions offices say they must add new staff members to carry out the increasingly complex process of enrolling a class. Colleges’ efforts to help students who are academically unprepared have also contributed to the growth of administrative-staff jobs.

"Some students need a great deal more supervision and direction and encouragement to actually be ready to do college work," Mr. Martin said, "and colleges are providing that."

Student-success efforts can also extend beyond the classroom. Last year Vanderbilt University wanted to clearly signal its commitment to making students from a wide variety of backgrounds and identities feel as if they were an integral part of the campus. It reorganized and expanded its dean of students’ office to "better support" the institution’s "rapidly changing student body."

The result? A new unit, called the Office of Social Justice and Identity, that will ultimately include eight new staff positions, mostly program directors and coordinators.

**Colleges are hunting for new sources of money.**

With state higher-education funding in the cross hairs, public colleges and universities have turned to fund-raising professionals to solicit money from private donors and other sources to fill the gap. The argument those institutions make in defense of bulking up their offices of advancement is a common one, Mr. Martin said. "They say the more professional people we have working in fund raising, the return we get is much greater than what we spend on their salaries."
Indeed, San Diego State University told the California auditor that it had hired additional management personnel to support its first comprehensive campaign, slated to raise $500 million. It surpassed that goal — and a revised one of $750 million — to reach $800 million when the campaign ended, in April.

"There’s a large proportion of private and public universities who aren’t really in the game when it comes to raising endowment money," Mr. Martin said. "They’re growing their staff to try to catch up."

**Accountability work is a full-time job.**

Colleges must comply with a host of state and federal regulatory mandates, not to mention complex rules from organizations such as the NCAA, and compliance helps avoid exposure to potential lawsuits. So at least some of the growth in administrative staff can be traced to colleges’ efforts to respond to demands for accountability, said Ms. Desrochers, now an associate with the rpk Group, a higher-education consulting firm.

For example, the intense scrutiny from the federal government of colleges’ responses to accusations of sexual assault has provided a recent burst in hiring. Some institutions once assigned that work to the dean of students or director of diversity, making it a part-time endeavor. Now, it’s the job of a full-time Title IX coordinator (and his or her staff).

"It’s much more difficult to run an institution than ever before," Ms. Desrochers said. "Regulatory and compliance issues are part of that."

**Bureaucracy begets bureaucracy.**

A growing organization is fertile ground for an expansion of bureaucracy. That’s because hiring more people is often the clearest sign that an organization is taking some new challenge seriously.

As a result, decision makers add layers that create a gap between the bottom of the organization and the top, said Michele Zanini, managing director of the Management Lab, a think tank that helps businesses reduce bureaucracy. Managing that gap often requires the creation of rules and procedures that need to be enforced by someone — which typically results in hiring more staff members or forming more units that need coordination.

Growing organizations grapple with problems that bureaucrats tend to think can be solved by creating more bureaucracy. For example, an institution that wants to become more sustainable would probably name a chief sustainability officer and then build a staff for that person to oversee.

But in reality, said Mr. Zanini, more bureaucracy "creates another set of problems." Among them are administrators actively engaged in power plays that are designed more to expand their influence than to achieve the institution’s mission.

"If you’re a manager, your value in the world is measured by the number of people who report to you," said Benjamin Ginsberg, a professor of political-science at the Johns Hopkins University, who wrote *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

And once those hires are made, it’s almost impossible to reverse course.

"Bureaucracy never shrinks," Mr. Zanini said. "It’s really hard to unwind bureaucracy once it’s there."