

Faculty Compensation and Student Success & Retention

Presented to UNC Asheville's Faculty Welfare and Development Committee
February 24, 2022

Purpose

We face several interconnected salary issues on this campus, including cost of living (the fact that our salaries have not kept up with the cost of living in Asheville) and equity both across departments *and* within departments in the case of compression and inversion. On top of this, some departments face significantly below-market salaries, which creates additional challenges for faculty recruitment and retention and amplifies problems with student retention.

We are realistic in the sense that we know there is not an immediate or easy fix for these matters given the many system constraints and enrollment issues facing our campus. In addition, we learned recently that the Provost is conducting a salary study of his own though it is unclear to us whether this study includes all three of the issues named above (cost of living, equity, below-market salaries). Our purpose is not to be adversarial to that study (whatever form it takes) or to the administration. Rather, **we wish to (1) raise collective awareness of the gravity of the salary situation, with a particular focus on the cost of living (COL) issue**, that may lend support to the administration's efforts, **(2) request actionable steps that can provide momentum on the issue** and **(3) demonstrate specific links between faculty welfare and student success and retention**. In particular, this document highlights the ways in which real and significant declines in faculty compensation negatively affect students' experience and ultimately undermines our retention efforts.

We would also like to acknowledge the gravity of staff salary and retention issues, as they are truly urgent; staff are an essential element to our campus retention ecosystem. We simply cannot have successful student retention efforts without simultaneous focus on faculty, staff, *and* student retention. That said, this document focuses on faculty for two reasons. First, we have not been able to identify any recent action among faculty or the Faculty Senate with respect to salary concerns; this document attempts to begin that effort. Second, the administration has already expressed an awareness of the gravity of staff salary and retention issues. It is our hope that ultimately, faculty and staff salary and retention issues are better understood by the entire campus community as essential to campus welfare and specifically, to the compelling focus on student retention.

Context

We acknowledge and appreciate our University's focus on whole student success as articulated by the Provost in the updated strategic priorities. We also acknowledge and appreciate the new budget

resources allocated to support student retention and development. These priorities and resources are essential elements of our institution's long-term success. However, we also recognize that faculty well-being and resource support that enhances the quality of student-faculty interactions is fundamentally critical for student success at any university (Trolan, Archibald, & Jach, 2020).

Our collective experiences demonstrate that faculty burnout and subsequent disengagement are, indeed, impacting our students in addition to our personal well-being and that of our families. Being gradually and consistently required to do more and more with less and less places faculty at high risk for burnout and its negative sequelae (Sabagh, Hall, & Saroyan, 2018). The additional care work that many of us have taken on, especially during the pandemic, is a testament to our devotion to our students, but it often comes at the expense of our own well-being. Applying for a grant or campus opportunity, submitting a new DI application or renewal, or engaging in one of the many high-impact practices that we pride ourselves on, is prohibitively time-consuming in this new demanding work environment and therefore not feasible for many faculty. These developments translate into fewer opportunities for our students and jeopardize the quality of student-faculty interactions, student success, and finally student retention.

We are grateful that a fraction of the real income losses we have experienced in the last several years will be accommodated by the system-wide legislative salary increase for all state employees. However, several compelling reasons show a pressing need for additional and ongoing action on faculty compensation to realize the student retention and success goals entailed by our state's recent budget investments in our campus.

Description of the Crisis

Faculty have experienced effective decreases in income in recent years, and this has amounted to a crisis in the eyes of many of us. While salaries may have modestly increased over time, they have not increased at the same pace as has the cost of living. Over the past five years, inflation has increased at a significant rate nationally and regionally in ways that affect the real compensation of employees at UNCA. The national Consumer Price Index (CPI), a measure of the average change over time in the prices of goods and services, has increased 15.48% over the 5-year period from December 2016 to December 2021, 10.97% over the 3-year period from December 2018 to December 2021, and 7.04% over the 1-year period from December 2020 to December 2021. The current inflation rates are the highest the US has experienced since 1982. While economists had predicted the pandemic-induced price increases to be transitory, they have persisted. To further exacerbate the problem, inflationary rates do not affect all parts of the country evenly; the South has been experiencing particularly high levels of inflation. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the CPI in the South has increased 7.8% between January 2021 and January 2022.

The price of purchasing a home and renting in Asheville and Buncombe County has also increased at remarkable rates in the past five years. According to Redfin, a real estate firm, the median sale price for a house in Asheville increased from \$275,000 in December 2016 to \$432,000 in December 2021. Redfin reports that Asheville home prices were up 12.3% year-over-year in December of 2021. Similarly, between December 2016 and December 2021, the median sale price in Buncombe County increased from \$285,000 to \$420,000. Sale prices are up 10.8% year-over-year in the county. These increases and

growing demand for housing have also driven the rental rates in Asheville to very high levels. A recent article in the *Asheville Citizen-Times* noted that the cost of renting an apartment in Asheville increased 25 percent between 2021 and 2022, “making Asheville the most expensive city in North Carolina to rent in.”

For the real compensation of faculty to stay stable over time, salaries would need to increase with the price of housing and consumer goods, and they simply have not. It has become prohibitively expensive for most faculty to consider purchasing a house in the city or the county yet surrounding areas have also seen similar increases in the price of housing. The rental market does not provide any reprieve to faculty in this position. Faculty have received very few cost-of-living adjustments or raises in the past few years, and those that we have received, while welcome, have been well outpaced by the increase in prices, essentially amounting to a pay cut. As an example, the *real* inflation adjusted salary and benefits of an associate professor (tenured and promoted in 2020/21) in 2022 is lower than their starting salary and benefits in 2015/16.

Further, since 2018, faculty have not received any merit raises based on our performance evaluations. The lack of merit raises has also contributed to the stagnation in our wages. However, even past merit raises only partially addressed the deeper compensation issues; the top merit raise of \$1200 often failed to keep up with annual inflation rates and cost of living increases in the area. Other forms of compensation for faculty have also been limited in recent years. There have not been any professional development leaves awarded since the 2019-2020 academic year and some departments have not been able to even request PDL in over a decade due to the demand for upper-level courses and faculty shortages. In addition, faculty stipends have been eliminated or reduced for work that directly affects student success and retention, such as assessment and admission liaison efforts. As such, faculty have been working just as hard, if not harder than before, for less and less in return.

These economic trends, while widespread, are affecting UNCA faculty more acutely than they are faculty at other institutions. According to IPEDS data, the average faculty salary at UNCA actually decreased over the period from 2016/17 to 2020/21. While that can happen when senior faculty retire, it is still quite uncommon. Only one other UNC school and one other COPLAC school have seen their average faculty salary decrease during that time frame. UNC Schools overall have seen their average faculty salaries increase by 2.5% and COPLAC schools’ average faculty salaries have increased by 6.5% over that time frame.

The real income losses we have experienced and our situation relative to other institutions have implications for faculty well-being, our satisfaction with our jobs, and our ability to fully serve the students. Reports from the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (IREP) provide evidence of these effects. Below, we have highlighted notable findings from IREP’s publicly available reports:

- In Spring 2018, UNCA and the UNC system participated in Harvard’s Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) Survey, which attempts to gauge faculty satisfaction in universities and systems across the US and Canada. According to our institution’s COACHE Executive Summary from 2018 (the most recent for which IREP provides data), we, as faculty, were satisfied with many dimensions of our jobs. However, two of the areas identified as weaknesses directly relate to faculty compensation and support: “Personal & Family Policies”

and “Health and Retirement Benefits.” In both categories, we ranked among the lowest 30% of COACHE participating institutions. In fact, in terms of health and retirement benefits, we ranked below the full cohort of participating institutions, including our identified peer institutions. These benefits were also noted as a campus weakness in the 2015 COACHE survey results, indicating that this is a persisting concern for faculty.

- In addition, in Spring 2018, IREP published the Faculty Perceptions of Work Report, which recapped the results of the COACHE survey, the UNC System Employee Engagement Survey, and listening sessions that were held on campus. The report notes that there is a “clear theme of dissatisfaction related to campus resources (e.g., salary, benefits, etc.) among all three data sets” (IREP 2018, 3). Salary, benefits, support for caregivers, and cost of living are all indicated as areas of concern in the document. Further, while we, as faculty, showed commitment to the liberal arts mission and were satisfied with our work and the strength of our students, we also expressed concern with workload issues.
- The UNC System Employee Engagement results from both 2018 and 2020 are also illuminating. Per the UNC System, the data from these surveys is intended to be used to address employee engagement challenges and to “assist the UNC system in advocating for improvements to human resources policies” at the system level. In 2018, 75% of UNCA faculty responded positively to questions about overall job satisfaction, earning us a ranking of “Very Good to Excellent” from the system. In the same year, 61% of faculty responded positively to the question about compensation, benefits, and work-life balance (a rating of “Fair to Mediocre”). In just two years, the numbers fell significantly on both dimensions. According to the 2020 survey results, overall job satisfaction among UNCA faculty fell by 9 points, to 66% (earning a “Good” rating). Positive responses about compensation and benefits fell by 11 points to 50%, earning a ranking of “Warrants Attention” from the system. Perhaps most notably, the 9% drop in overall job satisfaction at UNCA was the highest among all universities in the UNC system (the mean change across institutions was a 0.86% decrease; the median a 2% decline). The 11-point drop in compensation satisfaction was the largest in the system after Appalachian State, which saw a 12% decrease (the mean and median across institutions was a 2% fall). As of 2020, UNCA was in the bottom third of all system institutions in terms of compensation/benefit satisfaction and in the bottom fifty percent in terms of job satisfaction/support. Figures 1 and 2 in the appendix provide more information on this cross-institutional comparison.

While these findings only show faculty sentiment at certain snapshots in time, they suggest some persisting challenges that UNCA faculty face. While we do not have access to systematic evidence to speak to faculty sentiment since the 2020 UNC System Employee Engagement Survey, it is reasonable to assume that these concerns have only increased in the past 1.5 – 2 years. In that time, the pandemic has posed immense challenges across the board—to students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Faculty and staff workloads have increased, including the invisible and emotional labor necessary to help our students through these trying times (while also trying to manage our own mental health and well-being concerns). We have been asked to work harder and with fewer resources, especially as many vacated positions on campus have been left open. At the same time, merit raises, professional development leave, and paid professional development opportunities have largely been abandoned. All this is occurring in the context of increased inflation and significant increases in the cost of living in an area that was already prohibitively expensive for many.

There is anecdotal evidence of the more recent toll these compensation and benefit challenges have posed for faculty. While these stories may not be universal to all faculty, they do speak to some of the experiences with which we are concerned:

- Some faculty have reported taking second jobs to supplement their incomes. These obligations, they note, potentially conflict with their UNCA work or, at the very least, decrease the amount of time they can dedicate to their teaching, scholarship, and service. The impact on our students shows up in the form of slower-than-desired responses to student queries, more frequent necessity to decline invitations to supervise undergraduate research, and inability to attend campus events that build community among faculty and students.
- Multiple faculty members have indicated that they teach summer courses to make ends meet, noting that their base salary is not enough to meet their financial needs. While on the surface this may seem a benefit for our students, the fact that faculty are not financially able to use the summer to reflect and rejuvenate means that their courses are not as frequently refreshed, new engagements with community partners must be put on hold or abandoned, summer research mentorship may be declined or shortchanged, and other negative impacts on our teaching and student engagements.
- One faculty member, a tenured professor, noted that their children qualify for the free lunch program at school. Others note that our salaries do not adequately account for the cost of childcare in the area or that a large share of their compensation is consumed by health care premiums. These situations can lead to uncomfortable and challenging conversations with students about the reality of academic life, which may impact student perceptions of the university and thus student experiences and retention.
- Faculty members report needing to move out of Asheville/Buncombe County because they cannot afford to live where they work. This is a well-documented problem; Asheville recently ranked among the 5 worst places in the country to live (for financial reasons) for those with (and without) college degrees. For those who cannot afford to live within city or county limits, the commute back and forth affects the time they have to devote to students as well as their own wellbeing. Notably, distance to campus will impact faculty energy levels and willingness to engage in evening or weekend activities which may be designed to support student retention efforts.
- A significant number of faculty have reported that they are actively on the market or considering leaving their jobs—not because of a lack of commitment to or love of the job—but due to compensation issues and overwork. While some of these faculty may ultimately leave, some may be convinced to stay with improved working conditions and compensation that would make staying in Asheville more feasible for their households. Devoting time to pursue other opportunities (e.g., completing applications, assembling job-market portfolios, interviewing) of course reduces the time faculty have to support students and thus undermines retention efforts.
- Some departments are already reporting high levels of faculty turnover due to compensation issues, which they fear could result in a loss of accreditation and failure to meet curricular needs in addition to negatively impacting morale. Turnover also has labor implications related to advising, departmental/university service, and additional “on top of everything” work such as service on search committees. This significantly impacts student engagement opportunities by limiting the time available to meet with students, to supervise or engage with a student club, or meet with research advisees. In addition, faculty turnover directly impacts students who are forced to switch advisors, sometimes multiple times during their journey toward graduation.

The negative impacts of faculty turnover have likewise been noted by graduating seniors in their exit interviews.

- Others have noted a sense of burnout due to the now *expected* nature of uncompensated labor on campus. This has led some to “check out” because they feel that they cannot keep up with the increased demands of the job, particularly in light of decreasing real income. This withdrawal and disengagement among faculty has been documented elsewhere, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Thus, while not unique to our campus, there are signs that this is a problem here, which has an effect on faculty well-being and our ability to serve and assist our students. Signs of this “tuning-out” at UNC Asheville include the many faculty that report that they are deliberately reducing their involvement in undergraduate research, independent studies, mentoring and advising, or participation in university programs such as the diversity intensive work, student organizations, etc. This disengagement is, effectively, a self-preservation mechanism and may be the only lifeline keeping faculty here. However, the impact of this disengagement is that students are not receiving the time and energy that faculty may wish to offer.
- Increases in workload and dissatisfaction with compensation also are reflected in curricular matters. Some departments report that they are in the process of or already responded to workload/compensation pressures by restructuring their curriculum. Examples include the removal of major requirements such as senior research capstone courses which faculty are increasingly unable to support. Given that undergraduate research and other high impact practices are a primary way that many UNCA faculty directly engage with students, this shift has the potential to further impact student experiences and ultimately, retention.
- At the departmental level, faculty turnover means that an increasing number of courses are taught by contingent faculty, including introductory courses necessary to draw students into a department or program. The pay-scale offered to contingent faculty does not incentivize them to acquire the institutional knowledge necessary to support student engagement and retention, or to spend time with students outside of class, both of which directly impact student experiences. This observation does not imply, however, that contingent faculty do not acquire such knowledge nor spend less time with students. To the contrary, many of them go out of their way to do so, but their efforts are not consonant with their compensation and in fact uncompensated.

Asks

Faculty welfare, a function of compensation and workload, is inextricably linked with our University’s mission of providing a first-class educational experience. Achieving our priorities of student success and retention critically depends on faculty welfare. Yet, many faculty members are experiencing the real declines in compensation as a crisis and see our mission of serving students under severe threat.

To confront this crisis, we ask for the following:

1. **The University commits to securing cost-of-living adjustments for faculty that maintain our real (accounting for inflation) salary and benefits.** This will require annual raises at least in line with the national inflation rate and ideally, with a geographically specific cost of living

adjustment (COLA). We understand that the state system typically fails to provide funding for adjustments and thus ask the administration to identify alternative pathways and sources to maintain real (adjusted for inflation) faculty compensation. As shown above, the real value of faculty compensation has declined by over 15% over the last five years (and by about 11% in just the last three years).

2. **The University develops the means to improve salaries at UNC Asheville beyond the modest goal of maintaining their real value by moving UNC Asheville to the 50th percentile among UNC system schools or COPLAC peers.** Accounting for a conservative estimate of cost-of-living, faculty salaries at UNC-Asheville rank last in the UNC-system. UNC Asheville is a founding member of COPLAC and home to the organization's central office and staff, yet salaries at UNC Asheville are ranked 19th among the 27 COPLAC schools. As a university and in terms of the quality of education we provide, we routinely consider ourselves among the best of our peers, and our compensation should reflect this status.

3. To achieve these goals, **we ask for salary studies on campus to be routinized, and that members of FWDC, Faculty Senate, and faculty across campus play a meaningful role in assisting the Provost in his efforts to improve compensation of faculty and to rethink how UNC Asheville frames conversations about faculty compensation with donors, legislators, and the general public.** We are aware of Provost Campbell's efforts to conduct a salary study at UNC Asheville, and we applaud this effort. An example of this type of initiative was recently enacted by Provost Starnes at Western Carolina University (WCU), who responded to a recent salary study conducted by WCU's Faculty Senate by creating a standing salary committee. This salary committee developed goals and methods for raising faculty salaries (specifically raising salaries to the 50th percentile of Tier 3 Schools as reported in the College and University Professional Association's salary studies), and eliminating salary inversion and compression. Though a long-term project, in the short run the Chancellor and Provost at Western were able to allocate some funding to meeting these goals in addition to the 2.5% adjustments provided by the state.

Appendix

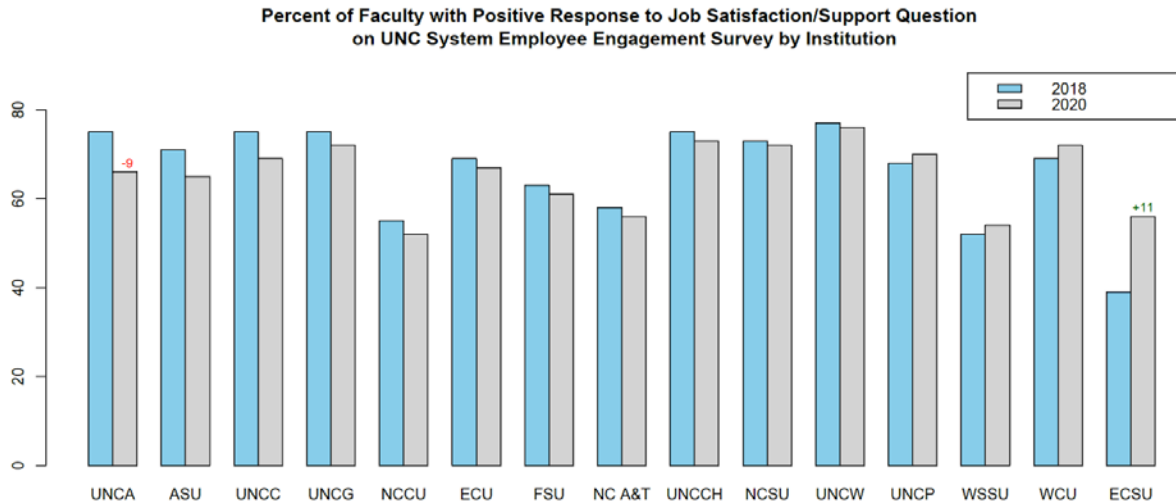


Figure 1: This plot shows faculty responses to a question about job satisfaction and support on the UNC System Employee Engagement Survey, broken down by institution and year. In particular, the bars indicate the percent of positive responses (strongly agree or agree) among faculty; blue bars indicate 2018 responses, gray 2020 responses. While UNC Asheville faculty had very high job satisfaction levels in 2018 (75 percent), that fell 9 points in 2020. This was the largest decrease among all included UNC institutions. In 2018, we were tied for 2nd in terms of job satisfaction in the system; by 2020, we were in the bottom 50 percent.

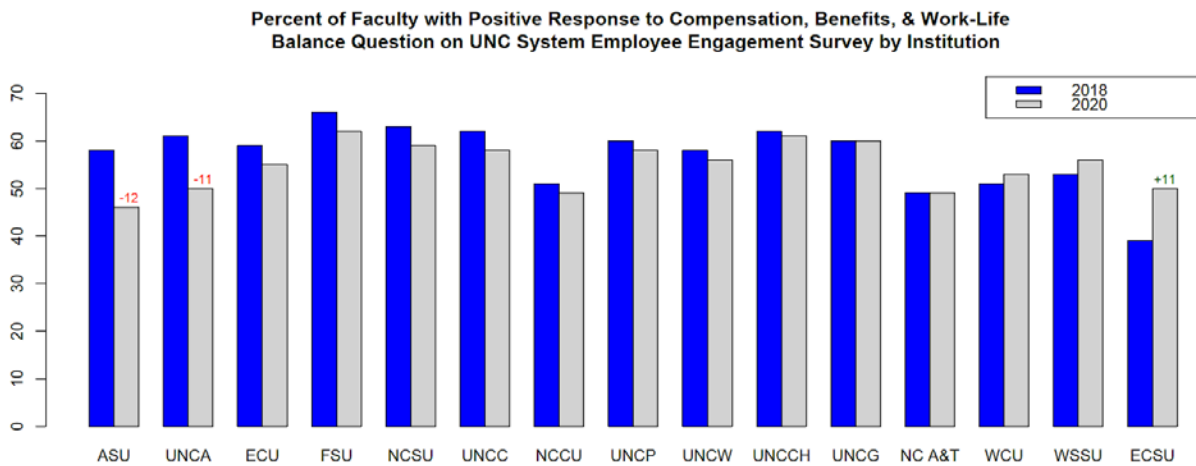


Figure 2: This plot shows faculty responses to a question about compensation, benefits, and work-life balance on the UNC System Employee Engagement Survey, broken down by institution and year. The bars indicate the percent of positive responses (strongly agree or agree) among faculty; blue bars indicate 2018 responses, gray 2020 responses. Between 2018 and 2020, UNCA positive responses fell from 61 percent to 50 percent, an 11-point decrease. We had the second largest fall; Appalachian State saw a 12-point decrease in the same period. In 2018, we were among the top third of included institutions on this dimension. In 2020, we were in the bottom third.

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