

# **Food Insecurity Among Adjunct Professors at UNC Charlotte**

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## **Executive Summary**

This project examines experiences of food insecurity among part-time, non-tenure track faculty at UNC Charlotte. Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain access to a sufficient amount of nutritious food due to a lack of resources, money and otherwise. Previous studies have identified part-time, non-tenure track faculty, hereafter referred to as adjuncts, as being at an increased risk of food insecurity. The goals of this project were to identify the factors that cause food insecurity among adjuncts and to provide the UNC Charlotte chapter of the American Association of University Professors with recommendations on how adjunct food insecurity can be prevented when possible and mitigated when not.

Project data consists of in depth interviews with ten adjuncts from a variety of academic departments. Data analysis shows that adjunct food insecurity is caused by a combination of factors, including inadequate compensation rates, single semester contracts, poor working conditions, and the effects of COVID-19. Cited by nine adjuncts, the primary cause of adjunct food insecurity was a lack of money to buy a sufficient amount of healthy food. Seven participants also identified a lack of time and energy— the result of long hours, exorbitant amounts of work, and poor working conditions— as a barrier to buying, preparing, and eating food. Furthermore, adjuncts utilized a variety of measures to avoid or lessen instances of food insecurity, such as local and federal food assistance programs, spousal income, additional jobs, gardens, budgeting, eating cheaper foods, and skipping meals.

Minimizing adjunct food insecurity requires recommendations that address these causal factors. Thus, recommendations include an equitable course selection process wherein tenure track and full-time faculty are not favored to the detriment of adjuncts; year-long contracts with a guaranteed number of courses so that adjunct positions are less precarious and allow for planning

ahead; and adequate compensation in the form of increased pay-per-course rates, free parking passes, and access to affordable benefits through the University.

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## **Background**

### **A. Food Insecurity**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food” for “one or more household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food” (USDA 2020; Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021, 4). Recognizing food insecurity as a range, low food security indicates a diet diminished in quality but relatively stable in amount, while very low food security refers to a decline in food intake (USDA 2020). Classification as food insecure does not require the household to lack food or a diverse diet all of the time. In fact, food insecurity in the U.S. is typically recurrent, not constant (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021, 13). Still, quantitative and qualitative lack of food has a number of health effects such as obesity, diabetes, malnutrition, heart disease, and a decrease in overall physical, mental, and oral health (Gundersen & Ziliak 2015; Gundersen & Ziliak 2018; Weaver & Fasel 2018).

The most recent USDA report from 2021 identified 10.5 million households as food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021). Research on food insecurity has identified a variety of factors that increase people’s risk for food insecurity, particularly socioeconomic status, debt and other financial strains, and demographic characteristics (see Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021; Gundersen & Ziliak 2018; Myers & Painter 2017; Heflin, Altman & Rodriguez 2019; Pooler et al. 2021). By extension, food insecurity rates are higher in populations that tend to fall into multiple risk categories (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021).

## **B. University Faculty**

One such population is contingent and part time university faculty, such as adjuncts<sup>1</sup> who “tend to be the least secure and worst remunerated teaching positions in higher education, with low per-course pay and few benefits” (Trevithick 2010; AAUP 2018, 2). Though COVID relief funding prevented significant cuts during the 2020-2021 fiscal year, state funding for higher education has still been cut by over \$15 billion dollars across the United States in recent years, making cheaper adjuncts an appealing alternative to tenure track professors (American Association of University Professors 2020; AAUP 2021). Today, 75 percent of faculty nationwide are adjunct and 47 percent are part time (American Federation of Teachers 2020, 1).

The risk for food insecurity among university faculty is concentrated on adjuncts, who fit multiple risk categories, such as low income, high amount of debt— student loan, medical, and housing— and time constraints (Coca et al. 2020; NCES 2018). Teaching eight courses over two semesters is standard and the average pay per course section is \$2,263. Though some adjunct faculty are able to rely on a spouse's salary or supplement their income by taking on multiple jobs, more than 60 percent of adjunct and contingent faculty make \$50,000 or less a year (AAUP 2020, 26; AFT 2020; Patton 2012; House Committee on Education and the Workforce 2014). Furthermore, the majority of adjuncts are not provided health insurance through their university employers, meaning they may rack up medical bills that they cannot afford to pay (AFT 2020; House Committee on Education and the Workforce 2014).

Adjuncts can also fall into other demographic risk groups, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, disability, poor mental health, unfavorable housing

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with how adjuncts self-described, the term ‘adjunct’ is used to refer to all part-time, non-tenure track faculty.



situation, marriage status, and whether or not they have children (Coca et al. 2020). For example, there are deep inequalities as to who is adjunct, who is tenure track, and who is neither (Gusterson 2017; Weisshaar 2017; AFT 2020; Domingo et al. 2020; Bichsel et al. 2021). Economic and educational inequalities based on race and ethnicity, and the accompanying lack of understanding as to the workings of higher education, create a career barrier that must be disproportionately overcome by people of color and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Morgan et al. 2021; O’Grady 2021).

Unsurprisingly, a recent nationwide survey found that adjunct faculty are overwhelmingly white and female, with 77.7 percent being white and 63.7 percent being female (AFT 2020, 1-2). Implicit bias, which can cause problems with health and job satisfaction, and undervalued research make it more difficult for people of color to get any kind of faculty position (AFT 2020; Domingo et al. 2020; Lacy & Rome 2017; O’Meara, Templeton & Nyunt 2018).

Still, women and faculty of color often bear the brunt of uncompensated “hidden service” activities, such as mentoring, administrative work, recruitment efforts, and course development (Domingo et al. 2020). These additional expectations are on top of an already time consuming job with a variety of duties, including teaching, preparing, grading, mentoring, and advising (Link & Bozeman 2008; House Committee on Education and the Workforce 2014). Moreover, these duties, expectations, and barriers may lead to burnout, felt more acutely in women than men, and increase the risk for depression and anxiety (Lackritz 2004; Reevy & Deason 2014; Berebitsky & Ellis 2018). Adjuncts are all the more likely to exacerbate or develop such mood disorders due to the lack of job security—most adjuncts are employed by the semester—and their low income rates (AFT 2020; Reevy & Deason 2014; Berebitsky & Ellis 2018).

Thus, the American Federation of Teachers survey showed that only 16.3 percent of households with adjuncts can afford basic amenities (AFT 2020, 4). The same survey found that 26.6 percent exhibited signs of low food insecurity, and 6.2 percent reported very low food insecurity (AFT 2020, 5). Finally, though it can continue throughout the year, food insecurity among adjuncts can have a seasonal element due to breaks in the academic year (AFT 2020).

### **C. UNC Charlotte Faculty Demographics**

UNC Charlotte is the second largest of 16 schools in the University of North Carolina System of public universities (University Communications 2020). With 1,623 paid faculty members to teach 30,146 students, UNC Charlotte has a faculty to student ratio of 19:1 as of 2020 (Office of Institutional Research 2021; Undergraduate Admissions 2021). Of the 1,623 faculty members, 835 are non-tenure track and 479 of those are part-time adjuncts (Office of Institutional Research 2021). In 2020, adjuncts taught 1,150 of 5,926 courses offered at UNC Charlotte, meaning they taught 19.4 percent of courses despite accounting for 29.5 percent of the total faculty (Office of Institutional Research 2021).

In terms of adjunct faculty demographics, 212 identify as men and 267 identify as women (Office of Institutional Research 2021). By race and ethnicity, adjuncts identified as the following: 2 as American Indian or Alaska Native (0%); 22 as Asian (4.6%); 61 as Black (12.7%); 0 as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (0%); 22 as Hispanic (4.6%); 331 as white (69.1%); 5 as two or more races (1.0%); 8 as non-resident alien (1.7%); the remaining 28 did not respond (5.8%) (Office of Institutional Research 2021).

### **D. American Association of University Professors**

The UNC Charlotte chapter of the American Association of University Professors (UNCC AAUP 2021) is an organization in part dedicated to promoting the working conditions

and economic security of UNC Charlotte faculty (UNCC AAUP 2021). Working with Dr. Nicole Peterson, my thesis committee chair and president of the UNCC AAUP, with additional input from UNCC AAUP Secretary Dr. John Cox, I worked to assess experiences of food insecurity among adjunct professors at UNC Charlotte. The findings outlined in this report will provide UNCC AAUP with guidance on how they can best tailor their efforts to increase the economic, job, and food security of adjuncts, inline with the express desires and needs of adjunct professors.

### **Methods**

As demonstrated above, adjunct faculty fall into multiple categories that put them at risk for food insecurity and there is a growing number of reports identifying elevated rates of food insecurity among them (House Committee on Education and the Workforce 2014; Jacobs, Perry & MacGillvary 2015; American Federation of Teachers 2020; Coca et al. 2020); yet there is a lack of research on how and why adjunct faculty, specifically, experience food insecurity. Working with adjunct faculty at UNC Charlotte, this research will address the following questions: *How do UNC Charlotte adjunct faculty experience food insecurity? What factors contribute to food insecurity among UNC Charlotte adjunct faculty? How do these factors relate to, entwine with, and/or exacerbate one another?*

#### **A. Recruitment and Questionnaire**

To recruit participants, I compiled a list of adjunct faculty members at UNC Charlotte, using each department's respective faculty directory webpage, identifying adjuncts as those with the titles "part-time" and-or "adjunct." I then sent out a recruitment email, using the BCC function (Appendix A). A month later, I sent a reminder email to the list of adjuncts, minus the ones who had already participated, as well as the department heads. The reminder email process

was repeated one more time a month later, for a total of three recruitment emails. If someone decided to participate, they clicked on a link, which took them to a short Google Forms questionnaire meant to determine eligibility— which limited participants to continuing adjuncts at UNC Charlotte who were over 18 years old and were not students— obtain consent, collect basic demographic information, and schedule their semi-structured interview, with the option to cancel or reschedule as desired (Appendix B).

The recruitment process yielded ten interview participants. In terms of gender two identified as male, seven identified as female, and one otherwise identified. By race and ethnicity, the recruited participants identified as the following: one as Asian, one Hispanic or Latinx, seven as white, and one as mixed. Additionally, three participants had PhDs, six had Master's degrees, and one had a Bachelor's degree.

## **B. Interviews**

Ten participants scheduled semi-structured interviews that lasted thirty minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted over Zoom. The interviews covered a broad variety of questions, allowing participants to explore their experiences as a part-time faculty member at UNC Charlotte; the effect(s) of COVID-19 on their job; and whether they themselves have experienced food insecurity while being an adjunct (Appendix B). As compensation, each participant received a \$20 prepaid Visa gift card via email upon completion of their interview.

Interview transcripts were created using otter.ai and preliminary themes were noted. After transcripts were generated and reviewed, they were transferred into individual Google Docs, one per participant. Using a combination of pre-identified themes and grounded theory coding, data was coded in Google Docs. Each identified code was assigned a color, with a key and a running list of codes kept in a separate Doc. Reviewing transcripts one by one, when a relevant passage

was found, the text color was changed to match the assigned code. For example, text coded for COVID was colored light blue, compensation was coded light green, and so on. After all transcripts were coded individually, relevant sections of text were placed in single-code Docs, organized by participant, with themes listed at the top.

### **C. Limitations of Study Methods**

Interview and questionnaire data is limited by the small sample size, which was not fully representative of the adjunct faculty population at UNC Charlotte. For one, only 20 percent of the participants identified as male, as opposed to the 44 percent of adjuncts at UNC Charlotte. Furthermore, despite efforts to do so, including an additional round of recruitment, I was not able to recruit adjuncts that identified as Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Additionally, this research was conducted from July to September, and was therefore limited by the very fact that adjuncts were either not working over the summer or busy on account of the start of the semester. Relatedly, the adjuncts that had their interviews after the start of the semester were able to speak more about current working conditions, whereas adjuncts that were interviewed over the summer had to speak about past semesters.

### **D. Ethical Considerations**

The research was reviewed and approved by the UNC Charlotte Institutional Review Board. Participants virtually signed a consent form via the Google Forms Questionnaire, which sent them a copy via email (Appendix C). Before their interviews, I reiterated what was on the consent form. I described the research; who had access to the research; how I protected the confidentiality of the information gathered; what I will do with the information gathered; and what benefit the research will have for the participant. Given the nature of the topic, there was a

slight risk that the participants would experience mild emotional discomfort, as such the participants were given the option to stop at any time. Participants gave additional verbal consent to being recorded at the start of the interview.

To maintain the safety and security of my participants, I stored the data I collected in password protected Google Drive files. Identifiers were removed from the data during the data analysis process; codes were assigned to participants and the document linking participant name to assigned code was kept in a separate, password protected Google Drive. For the interviews I conducted over Zoom, I only saved the audio files and immediately deleted the video files which contained the participants' faces. Once the audio was transcribed, the audio files were deleted, too. Interview and questionnaire data was only filed under their respective assigned codes. During the write-up phase, I referred to participants via pseudonym or generalized description. After I finished data analysis, all identifying information was deleted.

## **Analysis**

### **I. Adjunct Working Experiences**

In this section, I will present the major themes associated with adjunct working conditions and experiences at UNC Charlotte, as they relate to compensation; differential treatment between adjuncts and tenure track faculty; the emotional, social, and financial impact of adjunct work; COVID-19's exacerbation of financial concerns; and faculty retention.

#### **A. Compensation**

##### ***Wage Concerns***

In terms of compensation, low wages were a primary concern for the majority of adjuncts interviewed, with 70% decisively stating that they do not feel they receive sufficient pay for their work. One adjunct put it clearly by saying, "I do not believe that I am fairly compensated in

terms of, like, a living wage.” Another elaborated, “I don't think that [the University] fully [understands that they don't pay us enough]; that, for a lot of us, this is subsistence level. It's like a minimum wage McDonald's job.” Other responses ranged from a succinct “the little pay sucks” to a recognition that their pay has significantly increased over the past ten years; in the next breath, the same adjunct called their pay “slave wages.”

Furthermore, of the three participants that felt their pay was adequate, one made sure to clarify that the pay-per-course rate at UNC Charlotte was only decent when compared to adjunct wages at other institutions. The remaining two participants use the money from their adjunct positions to supplement the income they get at their full-time jobs, explaining that the odds of finding a better-paying part-time job is low. It is important to note that, as Participant H explained, pay-per-course rates may increase if the course in question meets departmentally set criteria, such as number of students; but that departments may cap the number of students in a course to prevent this from happening. Nonetheless, though they had strong opinions on whether or not they receive adequate wages, participants were unsure about what they would consider a fair salary.

### ***Unpaid Required Work***

Adjunct professors also spoke at length about the amount of work they have to do outside of the classroom, even though they are only paid for in-class teaching hours. As seen in Table 1, all of the interviewed adjuncts worked at least an equal amount of paid and unpaid time, and eight of the participants reported that their out-of-classroom time was more than double their classroom time.

Despite being unpaid, non-teaching duties are critical to their jobs as professors. Such duties include, but are not limited to, planning courses, preparing for lectures, staying up-to-date

on research trends, finding new resources, grading, responding to student emails, and office hours. At the beginning of the semester—before their contract starts and before they receive a paycheck— adjuncts must create or update their course syllabi and Canvas pages. Throughout the semester, grading begins to take up more time, especially in discussion and writing-heavy classes, with one adjunct explaining, “I don’t just fill out a rubric, I give feedback, and that takes a lot of time.”

	Average number of courses per semester	Number of hours in the classroom per week	Number of non-classroom working hours per week
Participant A	3 courses in the Fall and Spring, 1 per summer session	9 hours during the Fall and Spring, 3 hours per summer session	25-35 hours
Participant B	2 courses during the Fall and Spring, 1 over the summer	6 hours during the Fall and Spring, 3 hours over the summer	10-15 hours
Participant C	1 course	3 hours	15-20 hours
Participant D	2 courses including the summer	6 hours	20+ hours
Participant E	2 courses during the Fall and Spring, 3 or more over the summer	6 hours during the Fall and Spring, 3 or more over the summer	4-10 hours
Participant F	1 course	3 hours	6-7 hours
Participant G	4 courses	12 hours	10-12 hours
Participant H	4 courses	12 hours	Almost 40 hours
Participant I	3 courses	9 hours	About 30 hours
Participant J	2-4 courses	6-12 hours	15-20 hours

Table 1: Time Spent Working Outside of the Classroom

### ***Benefits***



As part-time employees, adjunct professors do not receive any benefits from the University. This lack of benefits, specifically health insurance, was stressful to the interviewed adjuncts, especially those who do not receive benefits through a spouse or other job. As one adjunct explained, “Even if the amount of pay didn't go up any, if there were benefits instead, that would be worth it. Because as it is we have to pay for those things out of the very little that we get paid.” Alternatively, another adjunct explained that, if an adjunct teaches a full, four-course load, they can be considered a full-time temporary employee and are thus eligible to purchase health insurance through the University. However, the insurance rates and deductibles are so high that it is not affordable.

### ***Parking***

Paying \$480 a year for parking was an issue raised by 66% of the adjunct faculty who work on campus. In the past, the University has given a discount to adjuncts who wanted to purchase a parking pass and also knew how to request the discount. Unfortunately, they changed the permit structure in recent years, forcing adjuncts to spend a significant chunk of their already low income on parking. In their interviews, two of the participants implored the University to pay for their parking, and one called it “insulting when I have to pay to go to work.” Another found it strange that UNC Charlotte did not pay for all employee’s parking, saying “I've worked at other universities where, on my first day of work, they said, ‘Here's your sticker, you can park anywhere you want on campus,’ and it was just because you work here. I felt like oh, yeah, I can go anywhere. Here you have to pay for that. It's ridiculous.”

### ***Office Space***

Though it was less of a pressing concern than benefits and parking, a few adjuncts took issue with the lack of sufficient office space. In many departments, adjuncts are given communal

offices, or offices to share with a few other adjuncts. A practice known as “hotelling,” adjuncts may also have a schedule that dictates when they are allowed to use the office, alternating days and times with colleagues. Participant I explained that a lack of private space prevents communication with students, saying “sometimes you need a space to meet with a student. That can be sort of a [conversation] that's very personal and you shouldn't even have the door open, much less be sitting in the lobby.”

Regardless of when they are allowed in these offices, the spaces provided are often cramped and dismal. According to Participant H, “They squeeze in three, you know? Part time, three [people in an office]; three [people] in a small room [with] no window and three seats.” Additionally, office assignments may be shuffled around with little to no warning, and “when you move to a different office, they're not even clean; you have to clean your office by yourself.” Limiting the adjuncts’ available office space is another example of the University’s disregard for the amount of work adjuncts do outside of the classroom, as it complicates access to a work-friendly environment and other necessary materials, like computers and books.

## **B. Precarity**

### ***Number of Courses per Semester, Extra Courses, and Contract Renewal***

As seen in Table 1, the average number of courses per semester ranged from one to four. While four participants choose to limit the number of courses they are willing to teach because of obligations to their other jobs, the remaining six are dependent upon how many courses their department offers them. This number varies semester to semester, and it is not uncommon for adjuncts to work for multiple departments at once in an effort to get more classes.

Adjunct contracts, which last no more than one semester at a time, are also written in a way that does not guarantee the adjunct will teach the agreed upon number of classes. Participant

G explained that contracts read something along the lines of “the [offer is] contingent upon budgetary availability and student interest,” meaning that courses can be taken away due to a lack of funding or low enrollment up until a couple of weeks into the semester.

Conversely, departments may offer additional courses to adjuncts, with one participant saying, “I might not know what I was actually really going to be teaching until sometimes like [one week] before. Because I got that reputation of like she wants [it], like she'll take it if we need somebody to cover it.” Yet, according to Participants C and J, this method of boosting one’s course load is not accessible to all adjuncts due to busy schedules, condensed timeframes, and the extra time it takes to prepare for a new class.

Adjuncts may also be asked to take on other roles for the department or University. Of the ten participants, seven were involved in one to two of the following activities: program development, committees or task forces, group research, or other student-related activities. Still, taking on additional courses or other roles for the University is not simply about the paycheck. With semester-by-semester contracts on the line, one participant illustrated the pressure they felt to agree to the work they are offered, recounting “I felt like if I didn't say yes, then I probably wouldn't have a job. Because I mean, they're going, they're developing these courses for this program that they're offering. And I teach one of the classes, well, if I say, no, that class is going to be taught by somebody else.”

Furthermore, though adjuncts are allowed to teach up to four courses a semester, one adjunct narrated the way the number of courses being offered has decreased due to institutional changes: “[The department] said [that] they were asked not to have adjuncts anymore and that the [full-time lecturers] that were teaching three classes were going to have to start teaching four; and, in that case, there wouldn't have been [classes] to go around for the full-time faculty.” In

other words, as university policies continue to shift, what little job security adjunct professors had, shrinks. Without enough courses to go around and with the aforementioned single semester contracts, adjuncts do not know if they will even have their contract renewed until a few months before each semester begins. One adjunct spoke about how the changes have made them feel “how temporary [we] are, and how disposable [we] are,” while another described the “[looming uncertainty that kind of makes it difficult to plan for the future.”

***Desire for Stability***

Table 2 shows that nine participants expressed a strong desire for a sense of stability, though ideas on what this might look like varied. Overall, sixty percent of the participants stated a desire to change the single semester contract system, and half want to switch to year-long contracts. Participant B suggested a change in pay structure to accommodate for the time spent planning their courses before the semester begins. Three participants took issue with the timeline for contract renewal, and Participants A and D tangentially referenced wanting to have a guaranteed number of courses. Interestingly, Participant I recognized that job precarity extends to faculty with multi-year contracts, saying “[I] look to these other people who are full time and [I] think, I just want that job. And then [I realized] how easily that can be taken away.” Participant I also spoke about automated emails that get sent to adjuncts throughout the semester, reminding them of their expiring contracts. To Participant I, these emails served as an unnecessary and unwanted reminder of the precariousness of their job. It is also worth mentioning that, when asked if they would like to be a full-time professor, eight of the adjuncts said yes.

	Expressed desire for stability	What stability would look like
Participant A	Yes	Year long schedule and contract
Participant B	Yes	Change in pay structure

Participant C	Yes	Know contract renewal status earlier
Participant D	Yes	Full-time, year long contract
Participant E	Yes	Year long contract
Participant F	No	N/A
Participant G	Yes	Know contract renewal status earlier
Participant H	Yes	Year long contract
Participant I	Yes	Year long contract and no more email that reminds adjuncts about their expiring contracts
Participant J	Yes	Sign the contract earlier

Table 2: Desire and Ideas for Stability

### C. Differential Treatment

*“When [tenure track] positions become available, they're usually closed to [adjuncts with Master’s degrees] because they require a PhD or they're specifically looking for a PhD and a minority, which we need; we need the minorities in all of our departments. But to be told, yes, I know, you've put in eight good years here, and you do technically fit the description of what we're looking for. We're gonna hire someone else who's never taught before to teach the classes that you're teaching now. Only we're gonna pay them more money. It is, it is frustrating.” Participant G*

Participant G’s quote illustrates the themes found in this section, such as the frustration adjuncts felt as a result of the disconnect between hiring requirements and hiring practices, and how that frustration is exacerbated by inequitable compensation; it also serves to highlight the differing experiences of adjuncts with Master’s degrees and adjuncts with PhDs, and the resulting differences in their attitudes towards adjuncting.

#### ***Hiring Barriers***

On the topic of barriers in their professional careers at UNC Charlotte, multiple adjuncts cited race and ethnicity. One adjunct of color described invasive questions about their racial and ethnic identity that they were asked during a job interview on campus. Another said that they “applied for [a] job three times, for the same position, same school, and all of the time Caucasian white males get the job.” One white participant reported a similar experience of being passed over for a white male, which was discouraging, no matter how qualified the other candidate was. As seen in the quote above, for the white participants, the push for diversity among faculty hires is not, in and of itself, the issue. The issue is that their years of teaching experience are being dismissed in the name of diversity when, at the end of the day, the position will likely go to a white man anyway. One to two participants also mentioned the following barriers to being hired by the University in passing: age, gender and sexual identity, location, immigration status, language proficiency, field, and a lack of time and resources to work on independent research.

Most importantly, though, was degree level. Participant A, who has a Master’s degree, stated “obviously, I will never be hired as a full-time instructor because I have a Master's degree. I don’t have a PhD.” The other five participants with Master’s degrees expressed variants of that thought, with some professors acknowledging that adjuncting is “as far as I can go” with their degree and others saying that they have “even less of a chance of getting full-time” because they do not have a terminal degree (Participant A; Participant G).

The three participants with PhDs, particularly the ones who are not adjuncts by choice, were no less frustrated by their circumstances, albeit for different reasons. One such adjunct traced their frustration back to the fact that, unlike adjuncts with Master’s degrees, they meet the requirements to get a full-time, tenure track job at a university, saying “We've gone to school for

10 years. Had extreme training. So, you know, it's just very disappointing, and a kick in the guts to be offered pennies.”

### ***Inequitable Pay***

No matter the degree level, adjuncts, on the whole, make significantly less than full-time and tenure track professors, but there is pay inequality within the ranks of adjuncts, too.

According to Participant E, “[we] don't make as much as if, like, [we were] an adjunct with a PhD, but [we're] doing the exact same stuff.” Adjuncts with Master's degrees, specifically, were conflicted by the discrepancy between the work that they do, which is on par with the work of full-time lecturers, and their academic qualifications.

Frustration over teaching the same classes for less pay, then, is twofold. Adjuncts with PhDs and adjuncts with Master's degrees, who have spent three to twelve years in the position, want to be appropriately compensated for the expertise that comes with their degrees and years of experience, respectively; and both are teaching some of the same classes as fully tenured professors, without any of the benefits. For example, three participants spoke about teaching important, time-intensive upper level courses that would typically be taught by tenure track professors; and while all three of participants enjoyed the intellectual stimulation and positive interactions with students that comes with these courses, it does not change that they are paid a fraction of what a tenure track professor makes to teach the same course.

### ***Course Selection***

Situations like the one detailed above are, in part, due to the course selection process, which gives priority to tenure track professors and full-time faculty and allows them to choose or at least express their preferences over the courses they will teach first; adjuncts typically choose or are offered courses based on what is left over. Depending on budgeting and other departmental

factors, adjuncts may be able to create their own courses or request a specific course, especially if it is one they have taught before. Other times, their choice on the matter is limited to accepting or declining what is offered. In some cases, the offered courses are outside of the topics they usually teach. Participant G noted that, “I have been asked to teach classes that I thought was odd that I was asked to teach,” but that “I need the paycheck. So yeah, they could ask me to teach pretty much anything. And I'll say, okay, I will teach that.”

Furthermore, by nature of both the selection process and the reliance on adjunct professors, the courses adjuncts are asked to teach are often ones considered less desirable for any number of reasons, be it the number of students, the delivery method, the amount of preparation or grading, the topic itself, or a combination thereof. Participant C, who teaches larger, writing-heavy classes that, in turn, require more grading, said that “as I'm in the thick of it grading, it does get tedious, it does get boring.” As evidenced by this quote, being an adjunct does not make these courses more desirable, but accepting courses based on desirability is not a luxury most adjuncts have. Still, during COVID, the delivery method of their courses is more important.

### ***Course Selection and COVID-19 Working Conditions***

Four of the participants gave their interviews in the early weeks of the Fall semester of 2021, and all four of these participants spoke about their current working conditions. They explained that the University is requiring a certain number of face-to-face courses per semester, many of which are the introductory or lower level lectures with more than a hundred students in them. Participant G remarked that, “For [Fall of 2021], adjuncts were told we had to teach in person. Regular faculty didn't have to do that;” Participant I elaborated by saying that “I was told there are these in person courses, do you want them? So there was no online option.” In other



words, if tenure track faculty do not feel comfortable teaching in-person, then the courses are offered to adjuncts, who may not be able to say no regardless of whether or not they are comfortable teaching under such conditions. Larger courses may come with an increase in salary, but it does not make up for the significant increase in out-of-classroom duties, the physical risk of being in an inadequately ventilated classroom with hundreds of students during a pandemic, or the costs of having to commute and park on campus. Participant G quipped, “yeah, we'd all love the college experience, but I'd really rather not die for it.”

#### **D. Financial Concerns and COVID-19**

##### ***The Shift to Online Teaching, Budget Cuts, and Reducing Classes***

The shift to online teaching due to COVID-19 brought a number of challenges to adjunct professors. For example, when departments had their budgets cut, adjunct positions were often among the first to go. One participant described the meeting where they found out about their college cutting adjunct positions:

“The pandemic budget cut meeting, right? [They] showed like pie charts of our school, the [college], there was this big gray section right there, like our budget is \$13 million. And we have to cut out a certain percentage of it, and that's 600 and something thousand. And here's this big gray piece of pie chart. \$562,000. So that's got to go. That was adjuncts. I mean, straight up, they said it in the middle of a meeting. We just have to get rid of this great piece of the pie chart.”

In turn, with the exception of the ones that actively limit the number of courses they are willing to teach, adjuncts saw a decrease in the number of courses they were offered. Despite the decrease in the number of courses, there was an increase in both the amount of work and the time it took to complete their work. The number of student emails, in particular, increased

exponentially, with Participant H saying “answering emails, that's lots of time. After COVID, it's actually doubled and tripled over.”

Unclear University and departmental guidelines did not help, as multiple adjuncts reported that they had to redo entire courses multiple times because the course delivery methods kept changing. One participant described their experience, saying “We didn't know the format of the class, it kept flip flopping. So I was told it was in person. So I prepared everything to be in-person. And then they said it was online. So I prepared for it to be online. And then I was told to add hybrid and students could choose. So I had to do that. So I created three different class structures for one class.” Finally, seven professors did not have the necessary equipment—e.g. laptops, webcams, sufficient internet, and other discipline-specific equipment— to be able to teach online and had to purchase it themselves.

### ***Commuting and Other Costs***

Yet, the shift to online teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic alleviated certain financial constraints for many adjuncts. Namely, they did not have to spend money on parking passes, transportation costs, or new clothes to wear in the classroom, nor did they have to take the time to commute to campus. Participant B, who typically drives for over an hour to get to campus, said “it's [time] and it's gas. And as gas gets more expensive, all of that eats into the budget and wait, now I have to pull that away from something so I could pay the gas for the car.” However, as the University continues to return to in-person classes, this brief financial respite will come to an end. Participant D, who sold their car during COVID, did not know how they were going to get to campus, but said that they “either need to get a new car at some point, or, like, I'm gonna have to invest in really good shoes.”

### ***Childcare***

Adjuncts also referenced how expensive caring for one or more child is in terms of food, clothing, extracurriculars, tuition, and more. Additionally, two participants with young children spoke about how COVID has significantly limited access to childcare, complicating their ability to work. One adjunct with a young child has to tailor their work schedule to match the times their family members can watch the child. Though their current predicament is exacerbated by COVID-related lockdowns, they nevertheless “would need to find another job” if they wanted to be able to afford daycare.

### **E. Emotional Impact**

Policies and processes that disproportionately put adjuncts at risk or reinforce the precarity of their job, such as the course selection process, have a negative emotional impact on adjuncts and, on the whole, participants did not feel supported by the University. In their interviews, six participants explicitly or implicitly referenced feeling disposable or expendable as a result of the way the University as an institution treats them. Participants E and G illustrated these feelings by respectively asking “why am I killing myself for a job that doesn't value me?” and “If you're not going to make your [tenure track professors] come in and do in-person classes, don't make the adjuncts do it. Are our lives more expendable because we're not tenured?” Participant I added to the theme by repeating a variant of the phrase “we're disposable” at four separate points throughout their interview.

Relatedly, adjuncts also reported feeling unseen or forgotten, both by their departments and the University. Participant D summed up the feeling by saying that “I feel invisible... like damn, nobody gives a shit.” On a University-level, adjuncts cited poor compensation; callous handling of adjunct-related budget cuts; a disregard for their safety and wellbeing; exclusion

from faculty-related University meetings, emails, and newsletters; and “an overall feeling with adjunct faculty...that is sort of second rate” as the reasons for feeling unseen (Participant J).

Due to differences in policies, departmental complaints had more variation. Participant A said that their department had a tendency to take an “out of sight, out of mind” approach to dealing with adjuncts. Two participants echoed the aforementioned sentiment of being second rate, comparing adjunct office spaces to that of graduate students and finding the spaces provided to graduate students to be nicer. Lastly, multiple adjuncts said that they were either not invited or not required to attend department meetings, which they took to mean their opinions and input do not matter. Still, the majority of participants felt supported by their departments and acknowledged chairs, department administrators, and colleagues that made efforts to improve their working conditions. These individual interventions and acts of kindness are laudable but insufficient; they do not address the systemic causes that lead to these emotional impacts, only the emotional impacts themselves. In doing so, they may inadvertently divert attention away from more systemic interventions and help to perpetuate the adjuncts’ mistreatment.

Nevertheless, three adjuncts mentioned experiencing burnout either regularly or at various points throughout their careers due to the pressure of grading and lecture preparation. Constant awareness of job precarity and a general worry about being able to pay bills were points of stress, too. One participant stated “I have anxiety, I have depression. So the stress of the job does sometimes exacerbate those.” Three other adjuncts also explicitly connected job stress to their worsening anxiety levels.

## **F. Social Impact**

In addition to emotional impacts, eight participants reported their work having an effect on their social lives. Four of the eight mentioned their job getting in the way of their home life,

particularly the time they get to spend with their romantic partners, as a result of the amount of time they spend grading, answering student emails, etc. Participant C explained that, in order to spend time with their partner, they will either try to work while they watch television together; or they will start working after their partner goes to sleep, in turn staying up until two or three o'clock in the morning. On the contrary, Participant E, who used to regularly work until the early hours of the morning, described their efforts to maintain a healthy work-life balance through setting boundaries about when they do and do not work; now, they do not answer emails past five or six, nor do they work on weekends. COVID social distancing guidelines added further complications to having a social life, as did being too tired from work, and not being able to afford going out.

### **G. Financial Impact**

In their interview, Participant G remarked “I will be in debt until I die. And then my family will be in debt.” Though the level of debt varied, ranging from a minor hindrance to a seemingly insurmountable burden, nine of the participants reported that they had accumulated at least one type, including debt from student loans, medical bills, credit card bills, housing (i.e. mortgage), car loans, veterinary bills, and dental expenses. Interestingly, only three participants had current student loan debt. Based on the responses of the other seven adjuncts, ability to have no student loans was tied to some combination of the following factors: being awarded a scholarship or funding; receiving family support; whether they were able to work while in school; decade and country in which they received their degree(s); and, to a lesser extent, job status after graduation.

### **H. Faculty Retention**

#### ***Desire to leave***

Five adjuncts, with varying levels of seriousness, expressed the desire to leave behind the stress and precarity of adjuncting. Key to this desire was a lack of hope that their situations and job conditions would change. One participant asked “if you don't have the PhD, you can't, you can't move up. And so if you can't move up, like what are you doing?” Another said that “[there doesn't even feel like there's a hope for security].”

To three, the negative parts of the adjuncting outweigh the positive and they have begun to actively look for jobs outside of academia. The same participant that would not be able to afford childcare on their current salary said the decision was based on practicality, and that “at some point, practical has to override fulfilling.” Others described continuously reaching what they thought might be a breaking point—“There's always those moments where I started thinking, Man, I gotta do something else, you know, this is just like, too stressful, or it's too much, or, you know, I can't, I can't live like this anymore”— but coming back anyway because of their love of teaching (Participant A).

### ***Ability to Leave***

However, the desire to leave is also limited by the ability to leave. At the time of their interview, only four of the participants considered adjuncting to be supplemental income; of the four, two had made the shift away from using adjuncting as their main source of income relatively recently. Participant E, who no longer uses adjunct work as a primary source of income and does not wish to, explained that “it is really tough to get out of the cycle of teaching because of having to get a job lined up in time to get out and not be in your contract.” If courses are tentatively offered and accepted mid-semester, and the adjunct teaches year-round, then there is a very narrow window of opportunity for job hunting that will not leave them backing out mere weeks before the semester. Furthermore, in the words of Participant J, “as academics, we don't

have many other alternatives.” No matter their degree level, Participant G expressed that they are “overqualified for half the stuff and underqualified for the other half.” In other words, they are not considered for jobs that require a PhD, nor are they considered for jobs that require a Bachelor’s degree.

### ***A Love of Teaching***

In spite of the frustrations, grievances, and negative impacts of their jobs, each participant displayed a deep care for their students and their jobs. Yet their care for students often manifests by way of additional work on their end, and all but a couple adjuncts mentioned the level of effort they put into grading and responding to students (see *Unpaid Required Work*). Moreover, such a deep investment in students can be stressful and multiple adjuncts reported worrying over whether they were doing right by their students, especially during the chaos of COVID when direct interactions were suddenly limited. Participant C said that what keeps them up at night is wondering “am I doing the right thing for my students? Am I giving them a proper education? Am I introducing them to the concepts that I think that they should be thinking clearly about?”

Nevertheless, five of the participants used the word “love” to describe how they felt about teaching. For example, Participant A said “I love teaching, you know, I might complain about it a lot. But I really, I really like the aha moments that my students have. And I actually really love what I do, you know, otherwise, I wouldn't have done it for this long.” Half of the participants mentioned the intellectual stimulation of teaching as being especially satisfying, and nine appreciated interacting with students and watching them grow. For adjuncts looking to leave academia, like Participant J, the potential loss of this fulfillment can be difficult to swallow. Two more adjuncts cited this love for teaching as the reason they would not consider leaving. Still, Participant E was able to find a job where they “get to do a lot of the same stuff, where I teach

people and help people and make a difference without having to bring home papers to grade.”

While their new job is also defined by precarity, they are not willing to consider a return to adjuncting as a primary source of income, implying that the extra work and stress associated with adjuncting must be a significant factor in determining adjunct retention rates.

## **II. Food Insecurity**

In this section, I discuss the causes of food insecurity among adjunct faculty, the measures participants took to avoid or mitigate food insecurity, their efforts to eat healthily, and the health outcomes of food insecurity.

### **A. Barriers to Food Access**

#### ***Lack of Money to Buy Food***

Overall, 50 percent of participants showed signs of currently experiencing food insecurity, four more were at risk of developing food insecurity, and one had high food security. Unsurprisingly, a general lack of having enough money to afford sufficient, nutritious food was the leading barrier to food security among the adjuncts as it was mentioned by nine participants. One such participant, who is at risk for food insecurity and has been food insecure in the past, said “there were a couple times where it was like, when do you get paid? Okay, you get paid on the 15th. Okay, so I'm going grocery shopping on the 15th because we barely have anything in the fridge...It was just where you're kind of like planning your trips to the grocery store based [when] you get your paycheck.” Another currently food insecure adjunct summarized by saying that “if things didn't cost so much, or if I made more money, it would be a lot easier [to buy food].”

In their interviews, participants were asked to describe what they feel is a balanced diet. All ten participants highlighted the necessity of fresh produce, especially vegetables, in their



answers. At the same time, as Participant E put it, “fruit[s] and vegetables are expensive.” Though four adjuncts deemed them a worthy expense, another four did not feel they were consistently in a position to pay that much money for items that “will spoil easily.” Another said that, previously, federal assistance programs “added farmers markets to it so that you could go on Saturday morning, and get fresh produce from local producers at a good price using your food stamps.” Regardless, knowing what constitutes a balanced diet and the ability to attain a balanced diet are not the same thing. One adjunct with high food security acknowledged “only if you have enough money ... is a healthy diet as cheap as a bad diet...when you don't have much money at a time, you can't buy apples three pounds at a time, and you're paying one apple price. It's very expensive.”

### ***Lack of Time and Energy***

In addition to money, the time and energy it takes to purchase, prepare, cook, and eat food was cited as a barrier to food security by seven participants. Particularly in regard to quality of food, multiple adjuncts spoke about being too tired, physically or mentally, after working to prepare a nutritious meal. Participant D explained that, some days, “I just didn't feel motivated to make a meal...or it was like, I can make the most basic thing like, that is all that I have the capacity for.” In the same vein, Participant E gave an example from the night before their interview, saying “I went and bought a frozen pizza because I-- a meeting at my other job ran long and I had to get home for another meeting and I ate this whole pizza.” They also elaborated on how the precarity of adjuncting can lead to a low quality diet, saying “because I'm semester to semester, because it changes like what's happening a lot of times, like my I don't ever really have a set schedule... [I don't] always feel like I have time to cook [for] myself.” An adjunct at risk for food insecurity said “having a balanced diet generally requires a lot of prep time and

shopping time and planning time. And with childcare issues and job issues, it doesn't leave enough time in the day for [it] all the time.”

### **COVID-19**

*“Since I only go to the grocery store once a week, because I'm trying to avoid people, if at all possible. You're sort of restricted in although we ran out of something, oh, well, it's just gonna have to wait a few days. Since the supply chain problems, grocery stores are out or the prices of some things [are] just going through the roof. There's really no reason for a pound of ground beef...to cost \$8.” (Participant G)*

The above quote highlights the two main ways that COVID-19 limited nine adjuncts' access to food. At the beginning of the pandemic, food shortages and spacing out grocery store visits impacted when and how adjuncts bought their food. More recently, it has been the rising prices of meat, dairy products, and produce that has complicated adjuncts' already tenuous ability to afford food.

### **B. Ways Adjuncts Avoid or Mitigate Food Insecurity**

#### ***Food Assistance Programs***

Two adjuncts used federal food assistance programs to help mitigate food insecurity. One participant, who typically is not eligible for federal assistance, received pandemic EBT (P-EBT) support because they have school-aged children. They described P-EBT as “one person, \$200 per month. Which is kind of way better than, you know, nothing, right? It's really helped.” The other adjunct, whose spouse is also an adjunct, said that “we have done food stamps several times. So because with two adjuncts, we technically fall into the poverty level. So we qualify for food stamps, and we qualify for [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)] with my [child], and that was, that was a lifesaver. It really was.” This

participant did, however, add that “WIC did not cover enough of the formula.” Furthermore, two participants looked into applying for federal food assistance but they either did not qualify or gave up because the process was so complicated. Participant C said that, while they have not applied, they think they would qualify and that “if we had food assistance, I don't think we would say no, I think we would take the food.”

Still, three adjuncts reported using local food assistance programs, like food pantries, while adjuncting at UNC Charlotte. One adjunct recounted, “if you needed help, you could show up and you got like a box. And it was mostly things that were either like, like, gone off that day, or like recently that the stores couldn't sell anymore...It's like, maybe once, once or twice that I had to do that. And, yeah, that got me through.” Access to these pantries came from workplace, family, and church connections.

### ***Support Systems***

Support systems were key to mitigating the risk or the effects of food insecurity for participants, with 90 percent relying on a partner's income to help make ends meet. Simply put, one participant said, “my husband's job [allows us] to buy groceries.” Participant I elaborated, “if it weren't for my husband, I probably would not be doing this. I often feel like it's a little bit of a drain on him, that I could be doing something that paid more...I don't think that I would've continued on and on with this if I didn't have somebody else supporting me.” For three participants, it was a more collaborative effort to pay the bills, which Participant D illustrated by saying “while my partner didn't make, I mean, they made bullshit pay too, like, the two of us were able to figure things out.” To a lesser extent, five participants cited family and friends as part of their support systems, saying that “if I get real desperate then my family would help out,

and they do, still.” Colleagues, too, helped three adjuncts by bringing lunch or snacks in for the department, which was one less meal for adjuncts to worry about.

### ***More Jobs, More Money***

Having multiple jobs, and thus increasing their income, is also a way adjuncts avoid or mitigate food insecurity. When asked whether or not they had multiple jobs, Participant I responded “Yeah, yes. Often. I mean, when I can get it from UNC Charlotte, it's better when I'm only on one campus. I have worked at, I have taught as many as six classes in a semester on three different campuses.” As seen in Figure 1, five participants currently have multiple jobs, three typically work multiple jobs but do not currently, and two only earn money by adjuncting at UNC Charlotte. Participants average 1.7 jobs each, which is significantly lower than the pre-COVID average of 2.4 jobs each; if adjuncts currently working one job are excluded, the averages increase to 2.4 jobs and 2.8 jobs, respectively. The eight participants who typically work multiple jobs average 2.75 jobs each.

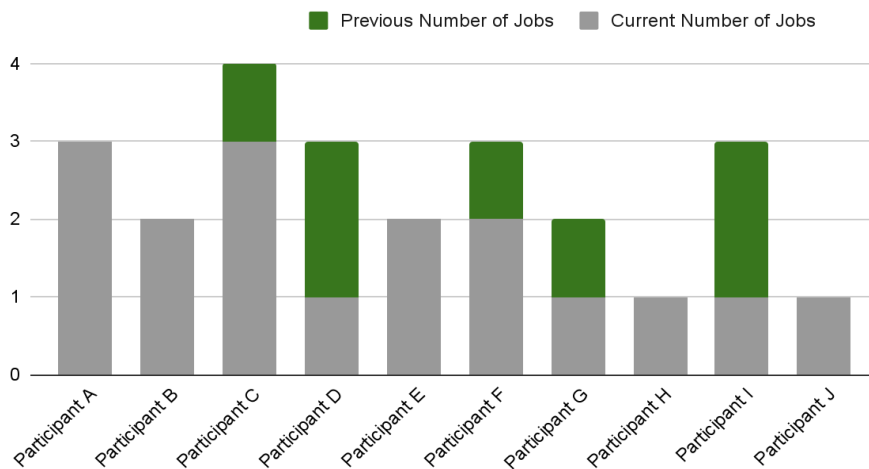
These additional jobs range from teaching courses at other higher education institutions, to working retail, to taking on additional work for the University. Two adjuncts reported targeting retail jobs because of the discount they get there or the convenience of being able to do their shopping when they clocked out. Lastly, one participant joked that, if they cannot piecemeal a sufficient paycheck together through adding courses and jobs, they can “[donate] plasma. Like, I can always give blood.”

Over the past year, fifty percent of the participants have reduced their number of jobs, partly because of the pandemic and partly because of events in their personal lives. It is worth mentioning again that adjuncting is supplemental income for four of the adjuncts with multiple jobs, including the only adjunct with a high level of food security. Moreover, of the two

single-job adjuncts, one of the adjuncts currently experiences food insecurity but is not able to get a second job due to visa restrictions; the other adjunct is able to rely on their spouse’s paycheck.

As seen in Table 1, Participants A, G, H, I and J average more courses than the other five participants. In combination with Figure 1, which shows that Participants G, H, I, and J currently have one job, this suggests that consistently teaching more courses, and therefore making more through adjuncting, might reduce the need to work multiple jobs.

**Figure 1: Number of Jobs**



### ***Minimizing Food Expenses***

Extensive budgeting and planning were a vital component to food access for seven participants, four of which hold one job. In an effort to save time and money, one adjunct began using a meal kit service to help with planning, saying that “at 8.99 a plate, you know, for each of us, it's a real meal, it's vegetables and meat. And you know, it's a real thing. And I couldn't afford to put that together from the grocery store.” Thus, planning efforts are equally as important as budgeting, if not moreso, particularly during COVID. When access to grocery stores is limited, making sure to buy enough food to last until the next grocery trip is how to ensure as balanced a

diet as possible. An adjunct illustrated this point, “if I did not plan well enough, and for whatever reason, the fresh meats or whatever ran out, I’m having to do [frozen] fish sticks or something.”

Planning efforts may also involve going to multiple stores, especially discount ones, for different groceries so that they can get the lowest prices on each item, something which three adjuncts reported doing. An adjunct explained, "I visit three different grocery stores because I know this one has cheaper meat; this one has cheaper dairy, this one has cheaper vegetables and produce."

Part of budgeting includes determining how much, if at all, they can afford to eat out. An issue raised by five adjuncts, Participant G said that “we have made enough changes to our budgeting and getting rid of expenses that were unnecessary expenses...We don't, we don't eat out. We don't do any sort of those things that most people would budget into their income...Our income goes for bills and food.” However, as Participant G also pointed out, budgeting is difficult when adjuncts do not know how many classes—and, by extension, how much money—they will have in the upcoming semester; they explained, “like this summer, you find out the week before [the semester starts], Oh, wait, no, your pay is not going to be what you thought it was and what you budgeted on because we decided that there wasn't enough people in there, or whatever.”

Relatedly, two more adjuncts said that they have little variation in the types of food that they buy and eat, and Participant D said that they would like to “[be] able to like have more [food] options than I actually do.” Another adjunct linked the little variation to buying things that have the best deal, saying “you can find stuff on sale and you can eat there's always something to eat, but it's not always what you should be eating. Or you're just so tired of it.” In the same vein, four adjuncts spoke about stockpiling nonperishable foods in their pantries to have on hand.

Participant I said that “we have to have, like, cans and bags of rice, and there's always beans and rice available if you're really hungry.”

In addition, seven adjuncts reported skipping meals or times where they were hungry but did not eat, though this answer was complicated due to weight loss efforts (See *Concern Over Weight*). Nevertheless, three also explicitly linked the practice to financial reasons. For example, Participant C said “I usually skip breakfast, but it's mostly because, yeah, cause I think it's more economical...I just don't eat breakfast. I'm used to not eating breakfast;” and a second adjunct said “So you know, when you eat one meal a day and you say you're intermittent fasting, it sounds a lot [better]. I'm just too poor to afford food.”

Furthermore, three adjuncts, none of whom currently experience food insecurity, cited growing or raising some of their food at home as a reason for their higher food security level. The size of the gardens vary from a few plants, like “some potatoes and things,” to larger, more involved gardens that border on being farms. Regardless of the size, having a garden enables them to spend less money on expensive produce. Two of the three adjuncts also have chickens, and they both said that they eat “a lot of eggs.” Still, a garden is only a feasible option for people who have the time, energy, space, and money to plant and maintain it. For adjunct faculty living in a major metropolitan area, working an intensely time-consuming job, gardening may not be a realistic goal or expectation.

Yet budgeting and planning efforts may not be enough, and five adjuncts reported buying cheaper foods because it was what they could afford or because they were easier to prepare. The following quote from Participant E highlights this point: “if I want to be fiscally responsible in other areas, then like, I need to be buying cheaper food.” Participant I elaborated when asked about what they would change about their diet, stating “I would have better quality and less

quantity. I think oftentimes, my husband and I are eating the wrong thing. And a lot of it because that's what we have available.”

### **C. Health Awareness**

#### ***Nutritional Knowledge***

As evidenced by Participant I's above quote, the same five adjuncts were well aware that the cheaper foods were more often than not unhealthier, much to their displeasure. One of the five adjuncts specifically acknowledged that these foods, such as ramen and pizza, are “higher in sodium” and have “more preservatives” than the more expensive options at the store, but still relied on them when they were “struggling a little more.” Another adjunct expressed their frustration, saying “I think it's a healthy food problem, like buying the cheap meat and cheap flour. And, you know, I think [the] food pantry foods [mostly have lots of sugar]...not [many] vegetables, right? Not [many] fruits.” Not only do these quotes show an awareness over the unhealthiness of the foods they are buying and eating, they also show a desire to eat healthier foods.

#### ***Health Concerns***

While the relationship between weight and health is complex and nuanced, adjuncts spoke about their malnutrition in terms of weight. In their interviews, eight participants made reference to both their weight and a desire to lose weight, often skipping meals as a way to limit food intake. One participant spoke about the impact of low diet quality on their family's health, “Physically, we gained lots of weight. Okay, because [we're] not eating healthy food...So I really gained weight [during COVID], actually. Instead of losing weight, it's gain because of [unhealthy food.]” Conversely, one adjunct experienced weight loss during particularly stressful times of the past year, but also expressed a desire to lose weight.



They explained, “everybody who weighs more than they should carries around more, puts stress on their heart, stress on their cardiovascular, on the kidneys. So I’d just as soon continue to work to maintain and control my weight.” Yet, participants felt that the foods they had access to affected their health and weight. For instance, take the following quote: “During COVID, [we] gained weight, which is wrong. Why? Because I fed them instead of [giving them] good nutrition. So, [is it] my fault? I think it’s [an] economic problem, too.” Skipping meals, which cuts down on costs and lessens the amount of fattening foods being eaten, seems like a reasonable alternative.

Beyond malnutrition, adjuncts reported other health concerns. One feared that COVID complications might be exacerbated by their poor diet, recalling “[The doctors] say that the texture of my liver has changed since I had COVID... I’m supposed to eat healthier and get more exercise. That’s what my doctor told me...so yeah, I’m more concerned about what I eat now.” Another spoke about how the stress over adjuncting and the constant worry about food irritates their Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). In turn, when their IBS is causing problems, they might eat less.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The causes of food insecurity among adjunct professors are varied and intermingled; they cannot be separated and they exacerbate each other. For example, some participants took on multiple jobs because they could not afford food otherwise, but in doing so they did not have enough time or energy to prepare the food they worked extra to be able to afford. Ignoring the emotional and social impacts of adjuncting, which are the result of job precarity and poor working conditions— not separate from but in addition to low salaries— to instead only address the monetary causes of food insecurity ignores the broader context. Thus, it is only through a

combination of interventions that address each of the causal factors that food insecurity among adjuncts at UNC Charlotte can be minimized, mitigated, and even prevented. Based on the results presented above, the following recommendations include a more equitable course selection process, changing the contract structure to decrease job precarity, and providing adequate compensation by means of increased pay-per-course rates, parking passes, and affordable benefits.

### **A. Equitable Course Selection**

The current course selection process, which favors tenure track and full-time faculty, increases the risk of food insecurity among adjuncts. As it stands, adjuncts do not get much, if any, say in the courses they teach or these courses' delivery methods, often resulting in more time spent working outside of the classroom, more stress, and feeling "second-rate."

Departments may also limit adjuncts to three courses in order to avoid the small pay increase and access to benefits that become available when an adjunct teaches four courses. Moreover, during COVID, letting tenure track faculty select course modalities first resulted in a disproportionate amount of adjunct teaching face-to-face classes. In addition, given the health and safety concerns associated with being in a poorly ventilated room with dozens of people during a pandemic, adjuncts reported feeling disposable. Thus, the course selection process constrains adjuncts' time and emotional energy, both of which were found to be a key determinant of food insecurity.

Creating a more equitable way to assign courses, such as requiring tenure track faculty to teach the same amount of face-to-face and lower level courses as adjuncts, would lessen the aforementioned time and emotional constraints placed on adjuncts, helping to mitigate food insecurity by extension. Post-COVID, when the majority of classes are in-person, these efforts

should shift to ensure that adjuncts do not disproportionately teach lower level and writing-heavy courses.

## **B. Changing Contract Structure**

In a similar vein, the precarity associated with the semester-by-semester contracts that adjuncts receive creates a cycle of worry wherein adjuncts are never sure of what their lives and financial situations will look like in the coming semester. In conjunction with job stress, worry over the future was linked by adjuncts to worsening mental health conditions. At the same time, poor mental state was a factor that contributed to food insecurity, as the associated exhaustion and lack of mental wherewithal made maintaining a balanced diet feel untenable. Increasing contract lengths from single-semester to year-long, which half of the participants indicated a desire for, would provide at least a few months of job security a year.

Furthermore, the single-semester contract prevents adjuncts from being able to readily leave the profession because they would need to have a job lined up months before the end of the semester when new contracts are offered. So, year-long contracts would allow adjuncts a greater window to search for another job, which may pay more and provide more financial, emotional, and social stability, if they so choose.

Equally as important is the need for a guaranteed number of classes. As it is, adjuncts can have courses taken away or added up until a couple of weeks into the semester. Adjuncts may also expect to be offered a certain number of courses, only to find out that they will not be getting them. Though not every adjunct wants to work as a full-time professor or even teach multiple classes, being able to expect a set number of courses would give adjuncts a better idea of their upcoming financial situation so that they can plan and budget accordingly. Not being

able to budget properly due to job precarity was a barrier to food access, which would thus be addressed.

### **C. Adequate Compensation**

#### ***Increasing Pay-Per-Course Rates***

By structuring adjunct pay as pay-per-course, and therefore only paying adjuncts for the number of hours they spend in a classroom teaching, the University is able to avoid paying them for all of the required work they do outside of the classroom, like grading, planning, answering students' emails, etc. As a result, adjuncts are only compensated for a fraction of their time and effort. For reference, eight adjuncts reported that, for every one hour of teaching, they spent two hours working outside of the classroom; at best, it was a 1:1 ratio of paid to unpaid time.

Moreover, the pay-per-course rates do not constitute a livable wage, and adjuncts relied on partners and other jobs to make ends meet. Consequently, not having enough money to buy food that was sufficient in both quantity and quality was the leading cause of food insecurity among the participants. In order to prevent food insecurity among adjuncts at UNC Charlotte, it is vital to increase the pay-per-course rates. Ideally, the entire pay structure would be changed, so that there is not a division between in-classroom and out-of-classroom duties or paid and unpaid hours.

#### ***Parking Passes***

Relatedly, paying \$480 a year to be able to park on campus, as is required to teach face-to-face classes, takes money that could be used to buy food or otherwise alleviate the financial stresses experienced by adjuncts—student loan debt, medical and dental debt, housing debt, veterinary bills, car payments, other bills, and childcare being the main ones—and gives it back to the University. In other words, the University essentially docks the pay of adjuncts for

driving to campus, teaching in-person courses, and not teaching online courses, the latter two of which are largely out of adjuncts' control. Though a discount to parking passes would not be unwelcome, forcing adjuncts to pay for parking at all is an unneeded burden on their incomes and directs money away from food budgets. Providing adjuncts with parking passes, then, would be giving them a raise and helping to lessen the likelihood of food insecurity.

### ***Affordable Benefits***

While adjuncts teaching four courses a semester are eligible to purchase benefits through the University, these benefits are reportedly unaffordable and low quality; adjuncts teaching fewer than four courses a semester receive no benefits. As with parking, not providing adjuncts with benefits requires them to devote a significant chunk of their distressingly low income to it, diverting money away from food. Additionally, the lack of insurance was particularly distressing during the pandemic, wherein adjuncts were disproportionately put at risk by teaching in-person courses. Lastly, the demands of adjuncting and the accompanying risk of food insecurity takes a toll on the body— one that was commented on by eight adjuncts— which the lack of benefits further prevents adjuncts from being able to address. Providing quality, affordable benefits to adjuncts would lower stress levels, help to increase their overall health, and leave more money in their budgets for food.

### **Further Research**

First and foremost, further research should aim to include a more representative sample of adjunct faculty, both in terms of size and diversity. A survey of adjunct faculty on campus would also create a better picture of food insecurity rates. Secondly, while it was sufficient for this research to show that pay-per-course rates were low enough to cause food insecurity, future research would benefit from gathering data on pay-per-course rates, the conditions that result in a

raise, course selection processes, and office assignment policies, the details of which vary by department.

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## **Appendix A: Recruitment Email**

Subject: Seeking participants to help with study of food insecurity in part-time, non-tenure track faculty at UNC Charlotte

You are invited to participate in a research study examining food insecurity in part-time, non-tenure track faculty at UNC Charlotte. The goal of this study is to document the experiences of adjunct faculty at UNC Charlotte in regard to food insecurity; explore the factors that lead to food insecurity among adjunct faculty at UNC Charlotte and how they are intertwined; and provide recommendations, guided by the concerns raised by part-time non-tenure track faculty themselves, on how to help mitigate adjunct food insecurity in a way that addresses the causal factors.

To participate in this research, you must be a current part-time, non-tenure track faculty member at UNC Charlotte, and you must be 18 years old or older. To be eligible, you cannot be a current student at UNC Charlotte or another university.

Those who choose to participate will complete one questionnaire and one interview, both online. For the first part of this study, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire (approximately 15 minutes) to confirm your eligibility and consent to participating in the study. We will also ask for demographic information. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be linked to Calendly.com and asked to schedule a time for a Zoom interview where you will be asked about your experiences as a part-time faculty member at UNC Charlotte, career trajectory, the effect(s) of COVID-19 on your job, financial constraints and strategies, whether you have experienced food insecurity while being a part-time non-tenure track faculty member, and your perception of food insecurity among your colleagues. The interview will last approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. Upon the completion of your interview, we will compensate each participant with a \$20 prepaid Visa gift card as a token of appreciation for your time. Your interview data will be kept confidential from others, and all identifiers will be stripped from the data.

To see if you are eligible and participate in the study, click the following link:

Researcher Contact Information:

Alexandra Pardo (Primary Investigator): [apardo1@uncc.edu](mailto:apardo1@uncc.edu)

Nicole Peterson, Ph.D. (Advisor): [npeterson@uncc.edu](mailto:npeterson@uncc.edu)

UNC Charlotte IRB# 21-0428

## Appendix B: Eligibility Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions to determine if you are eligible to participate in this research study.

1. Are you currently employed at UNC Charlotte as a part-time non-tenure track faculty member?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Have you taught at UNC Charlotte as a part-time non-tenure track faculty member for at least one semester?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
3. Are you a current student at UNC Charlotte or another university?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. Are you 18 years or older?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

### *Faculty Experience*

We'd like to start with some questions about your experiences as a part-time faculty member.

1. How long have you been at UNC Charlotte?
2. What positions have you had at UNC Charlotte?
3. How many courses do you typically teach a semester?
4. When do you know how many courses you'll be teaching in a semester?
  - a. If given the opportunity, would you want to work full time as a professor? Why or why not?
5. How long is your contract with UNC Charlotte for?
6. When do you know if your contract has been renewed?
  - a. When would you like to know if your contract has been renewed?
  - b. Who is in charge of renewing your contract?
7. How many hours a week do you spend working outside of class for your position?
8. Can you describe the work you do outside of the classroom?
  - a. Holding office hours, attending meetings, grading, planning, advising, etc.
9. Have you been asked to take on additional tasks for the department outside of teaching?
  - a. Serving on a committee, advising students, etc.
  - b. Did you say yes? Why or why not?
10. Do you think you receive fair compensation for your work?
  - a. Salary, health benefits.
  - b. What would you consider fair compensation and benefits?
11. What, if anything, about your job do you find stressful?
  - a. Why do you find (insert identified part) stressful?
12. Do you feel you've faced any barriers in your teaching or professional career?
  - a. Gender, race and ethnicity.
13. Has your job affected your mental or physical health?
  - a. Has your job affected your social life?
14. Do you feel supported by the University?
  - a. If yes, how so?
  - b. If no, in what ways would you like to be supported by the University?
15. What parts of your job are you satisfied with?
16. What parts would you like to change?
17. During your time as an adjunct, have you previously or do you currently work multiple jobs?
  - a. If so, how many?
  - b. If so, how many hours do you spend at those other job(s) in a week?

### *COVID-19*

This has been an extraordinary year due to the pandemic and other issues; we want to learn a bit about how these have affected your work.

1. How has COVID-19 affected your job at UNC Charlotte?
  - a. Has it affected the amount of work you have to do?
  - b. Has it affected the time it takes to do your work?
  - c. Has it affected the number of courses you teach?
2. What has been challenging about the transition to online teaching?
  - a. Were there any costs associated with transitioning to online teaching?
    - i. If so, who covered the costs?

### ***Financial Constraints***

We'd like to learn more about the financial aspect of the faculty experience. Learning about your financial constraints would help us to see the effects, if there are any, of potentially low compensation rates.

1. Do you have any experiences with student loan debt?
  - a. Probe: medical debt, mortgage, credit card debt
    - i. When did you start accruing debt?
  - b. If no student loan debt, why not?
2. Have you ever used a payday loan? Why or why not?
  - a. If so, can you tell me about the experience?
3. Does anything else put a strain on your income?

### ***Food Security***

Part of what we'd like to understand about part-time faculty experiences is around their basic needs security. Understanding food access, for example, would help us to see how part-time faculty may need better access to resources, food or otherwise. We have a few questions from the USDA that help with this, and hope you can answer these about your general experience as a part-time faculty member, both pre-covid (if relevant) and now.

1. Do you ever worry about being able to afford food? Why or why not?
  - a. How often?
2. Do you ever worry about having enough food? Why or why not?
  - a. Have you eaten less or skipped meals?
  - b. How often?
3. Have you ever run out of food before you had money to buy more?
4. Do you ever feel hungry but do not eat?
  - a. If so, why?
5. To you, what is a balanced diet?
  - a. Do you have a balanced diet? Why or why not?
  - b. What prevents you from having a balanced diet?
  - c. What allows you to have a balanced diet?
  - d. What would make it easier for you to have a balanced diet?
6. Are you satisfied with what and how you eat? Why or why not?

7. What, if anything, would you change about your diet?
  - a. Quantity, quality
8. Is there anything that prevents you from eating?
  - a. Time, money, access
9. Is there anything that limits your access to food?
  - a. Time, money, access
10. How has COVID-19 affected your access to food?
11. While a part time adjunct at UNC Charlotte, have you ever received federal food assistance (SNAP, WIC)?
  - a. If so, were the benefits sufficient?
  - b. If not, have you applied for or qualified to receive federal food support?
  - c. If you have qualified but have not received SNAP, WIC, etc., why not?
12. While a part time adjunct at UNC Charlotte, have you ever used another food assistance resource, like a food pantry?

***If they indicate experiencing food insecurity***

1. How does food insecurity affect your life emotionally?
2. How does food insecurity affect your life socially?
3. How does food insecurity affect your life physically?
4. If at all, how does it affect your career?

***Faculty perception of faculty food insecurity***

1. Have you ever spoken with other faculty members about food insecurity? Why or why not?
2. Do you know if other faculty at UNC Charlotte experience food insecurity?
  - a. How would they describe it?
  - b. How did you know they were food insecure?
3. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience as a part-time faculty member?