Salaries at UNCA

For faculty of a certain age

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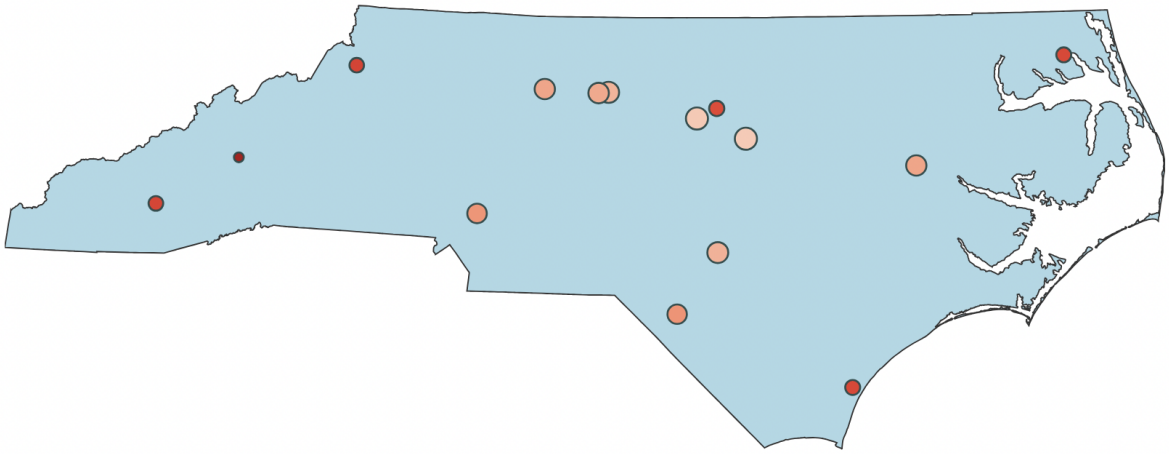


Figure 1: UNC System Schools: Size and shade scaled by faculty salary adjusted by cost of living.

Intro

It's no secret that UNCA has long been underfunded. At least eight different groups have issued reports studying this issue since 2017/2018.

References to those past reports appear as an addendum to this document.

The primary objective of this document is to summarize the status of faculty pay at UNCA relative to other institutions within the UNC System, as well as to other schools with a focus on the liberal arts and sciences - both public and private. In addition, I provide a rather personal perspective as someone in my 30th year at UNCA.

UNCA within the UNC System

Let's begin by taking a look at how UNCA compares to other schools in the UNC system - both currently and historically.

Salaries across the UNC System

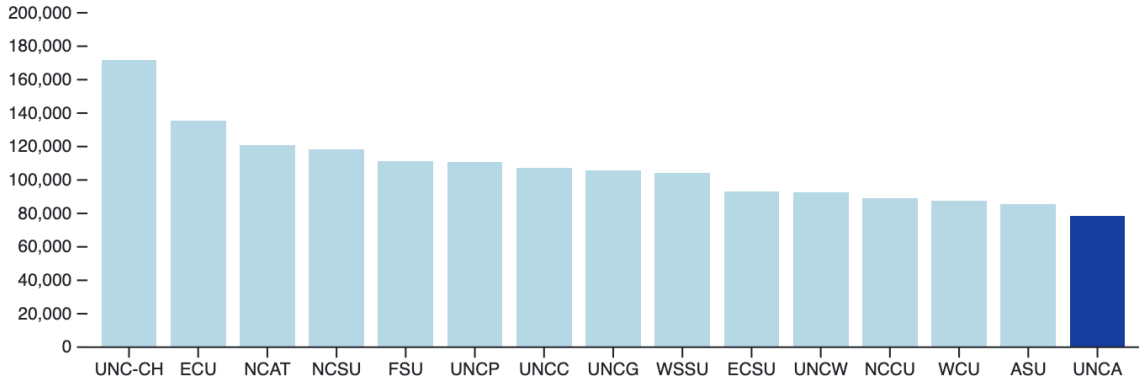
Figure 2 shows how salaries in the system look now. The data comes from the UNC System Salary database and is current as of October 1st, 2026.

The charts show average salaries for various groups of non-medical faculty across the UNC System. UNCA fares well in none of these charts.

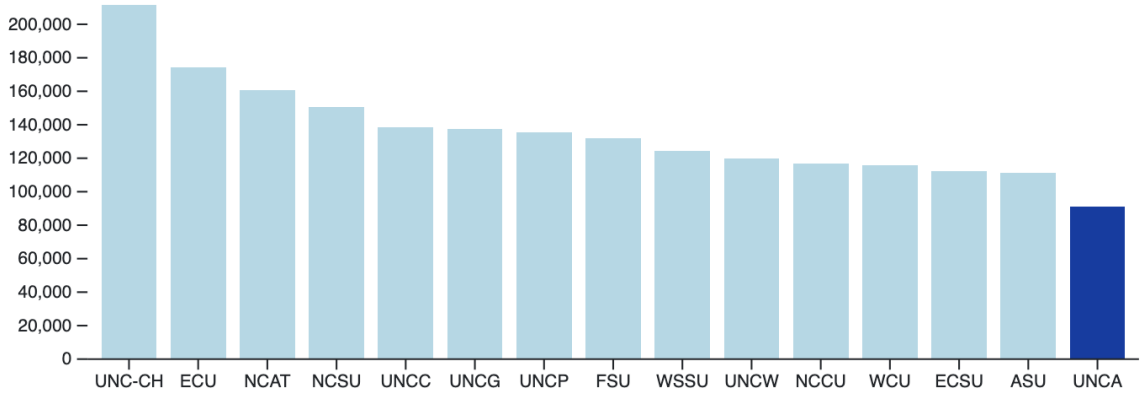
The evolution of system salaries

Figure 3 shows how salaries have evolved from 2012 or 2016 until 2024. This is based on IPEDS data, which provides data over many years but is not as current as the system data.

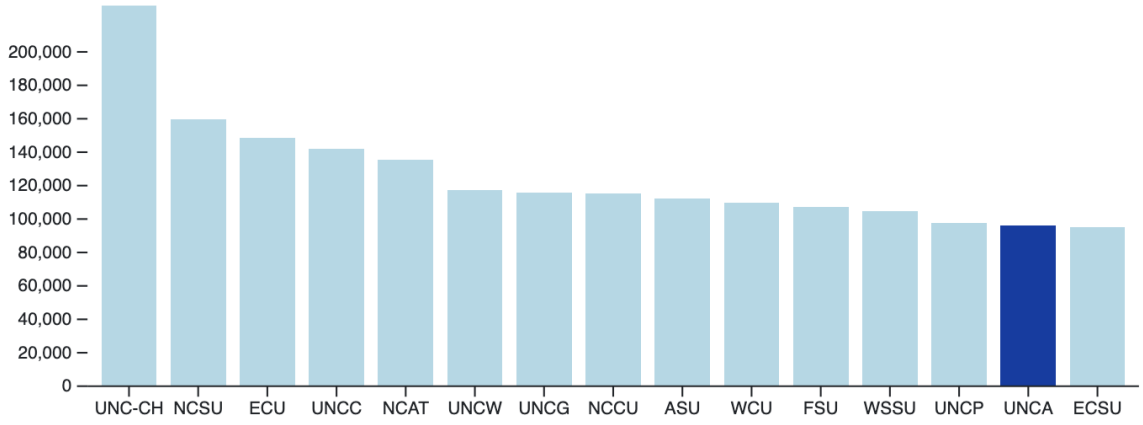
In the first chart, we see that UNCA salaries have been near the bottom of all the system schools since 2012. In the second, we see that the growth rate of UNCA's salaries has been the worst in the system over the time span starting in 2016.



(a) UNCA's cost adjusted salaries are the lowest in the system overall

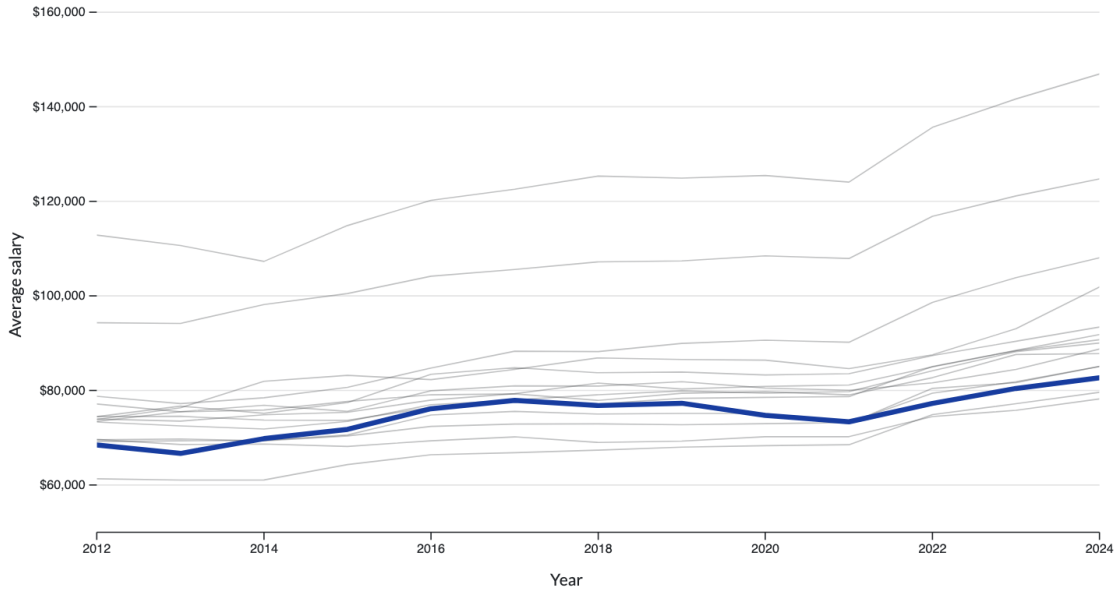


(b) The cost adjusted salaries are particularly bad for full professors

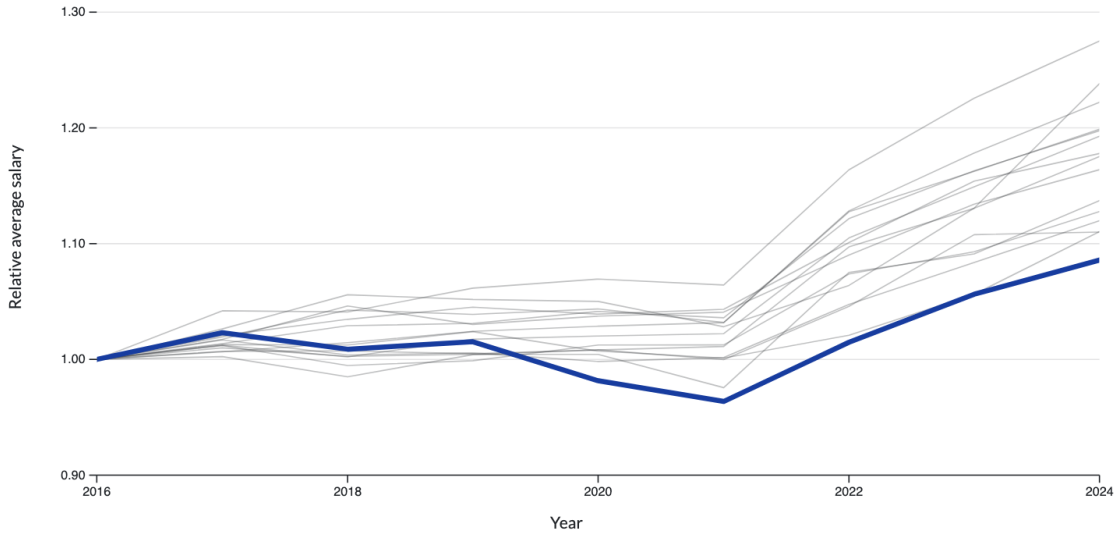


(c) Even when not cost adjusted, full professor salaries are second lowest in the system

Figure 2: Salary bar chart



(a) Raw salary time series



(b) Relative salary time series

Figure 3: System salary time series

Salary compression

Salary compression is the presence of relatively small differences in pay between groups with significantly different levels of experience or rank. It's a natural equity issue leading to problems with morale and retention, as well as promoting "quiet quitting".

One way to measure salary compression at an institution of higher learning is to compute the ratio of the average assistant professor salary divided by the average full professor salary. The larger that number, the more salary compression we have. The value of a healthy ratio might not be immediately clear but we can at least compare that ratio across a number of institutions. Let's call this number the *compression ratio*.

There are 570 public, four-year institutions where IPEDS provides sufficient data to compute the compression ratio. The average value of those compression ratios is 0.71214 with a standard deviation of 0.083474. UNCA's compression ratio is 0.812445, which puts us 1.20163 standard deviations past the mean. Not ideal.

Here's a histogram of all the compression ratios with a dashed line for UNCA:

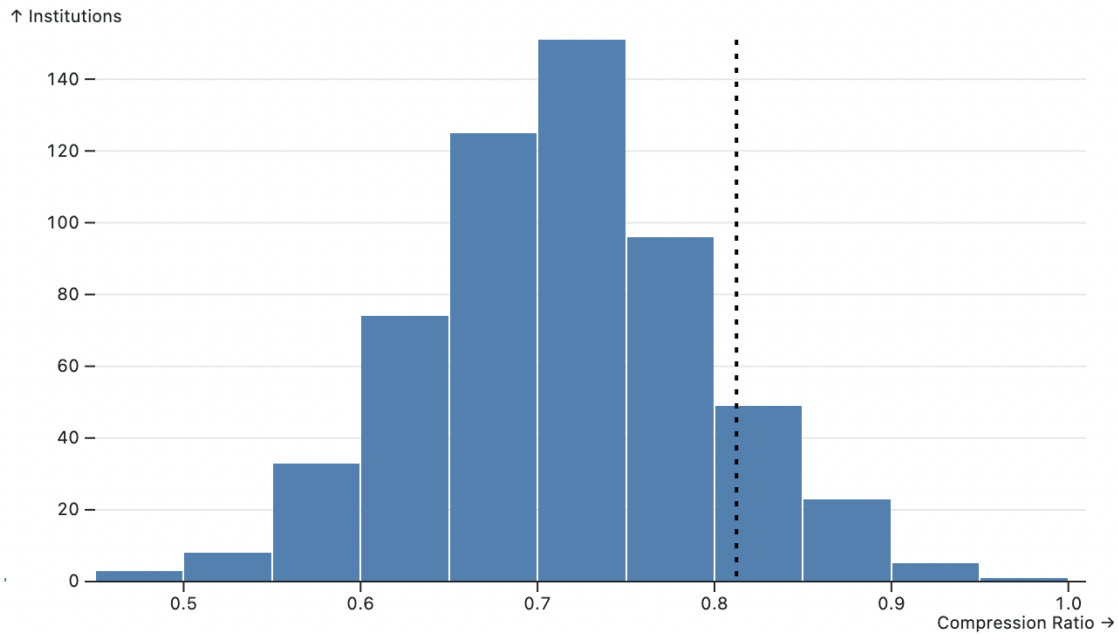


Figure 4: Salary compression at public, four-year institutions

We can also check where UNCA's compression ratio lies in the UNC System. UNCA has the second highest compression ratio in the UNC System; only Fayetteville State has a higher compression ratio. Chapel Hill has the lowest compression ratio, followed by NC State.

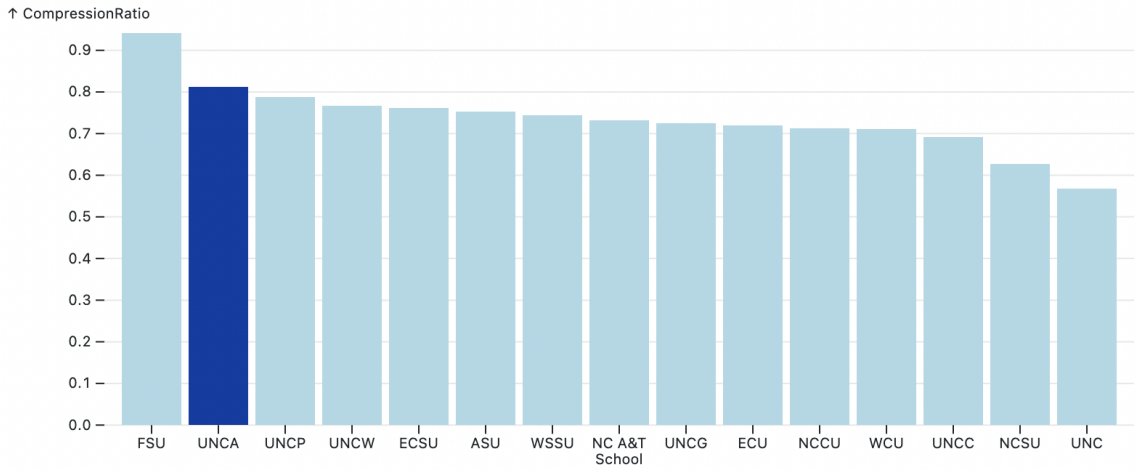


Figure 5: Salary compression in the UNC System

My salary

Let's take a look at my own salary history - in part, because this is a personal matter for me and, also, because I happen to have access to my own complete salary history but no one else's. Presumably, there's a similar story for most long tenured faculty; hopefully, this is not what younger faculty can expect, if they stay at UNCA for a long time.

My salary history and inflation

Figure 6 is based on my own personal data and then shows the same history after adjustment for inflation.

The chart also shows my salary after adjustment for inflation; that situation is clearly worse. I have, in fact, less purchasing power now than I had 19 years ago in 2007.

What might I expect?

I started in academic year 1997/1998 with a salary of $34,000 a year. My salary has generally gone up, though, sometimes faster than others. During my first decade at UNCA, my salary increased from $34,000 to $61,992, which is an effective annual rate of 6.19%.

Assuming I had consistent annual increases of 6.19% since I started at UNCA, my salary now would be

$$\$34,000 \times (1.0619)^{29} = \$194,046.$$

Instead, my salary is $94,767 - well under half of what I might've expected to make after my first decade.

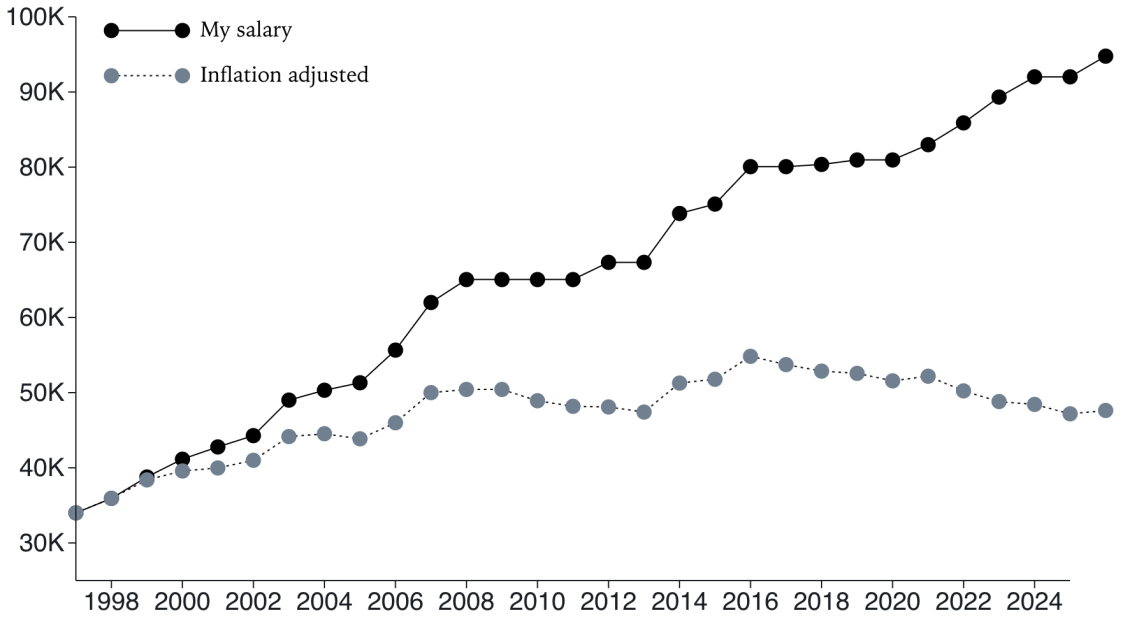

My salary
Inflation adjusted
100K
90K
80K
70K
60K
50K
40K
30K
1998
2000
2002
2004
2006
2008
2010
2012
2014
2016
2018
2020
2022
2024

Figure 6

Figure 7 shows how I might've expected my salary to grow at 6.19% compared to reality.

It's worth pointing out that I have *very* advanced technical skills with software development experience in industry and expertise in machine learning dating back well before the current AI craze. I have exactly the skills our school supposedly seeks for its so-called "future forward curriculum". Why that's not recognized in my compensation, I don't know.

One more data point

Here's one more data point I learned during a recent academic program review:

> The average annual salary of UNCA mathematics ten years after graduation is $103,000. No one in our department makes even $100,000.

Of the nine of us in the department at that time with a Ph. D., seven of us were more than ten years past that degree.

The role of enrollment

There's a near constant drumbeat from our administration that we've got to increase enrollment. If we can just get our enrollment up to a sustainable 3,200 students, then money will flow in and salaries will increase. At least, that's the description at UNCA's 2030 plan page.

> I don't buy it.

The real issue

According to the most recent IPEDS data, UNCA had almost identical enrollments in 2024 and 1996. The difference is that, in the 1990s, small was good. In fact, UNCA was quite selective at that time; within the system, only UNC Chapel Hill was more selective and not by much.

The idea that "small was good" changed concretely around 2011/2012. Prior to that time, UNCA's funding was protected by a specific "hold harmless" policy that protected state funding from reduction as a result enrollment issues. Six campuses received this type of protection but only UNCA received this protection as a result of its "special mission". This was made explicit on page 36 of the UNC System's Long-Range plan which specifies that the system should

> **Restrain enrollment growth** at UNC Asheville and the North Carolina School of the Arts in recognition of their special missions.

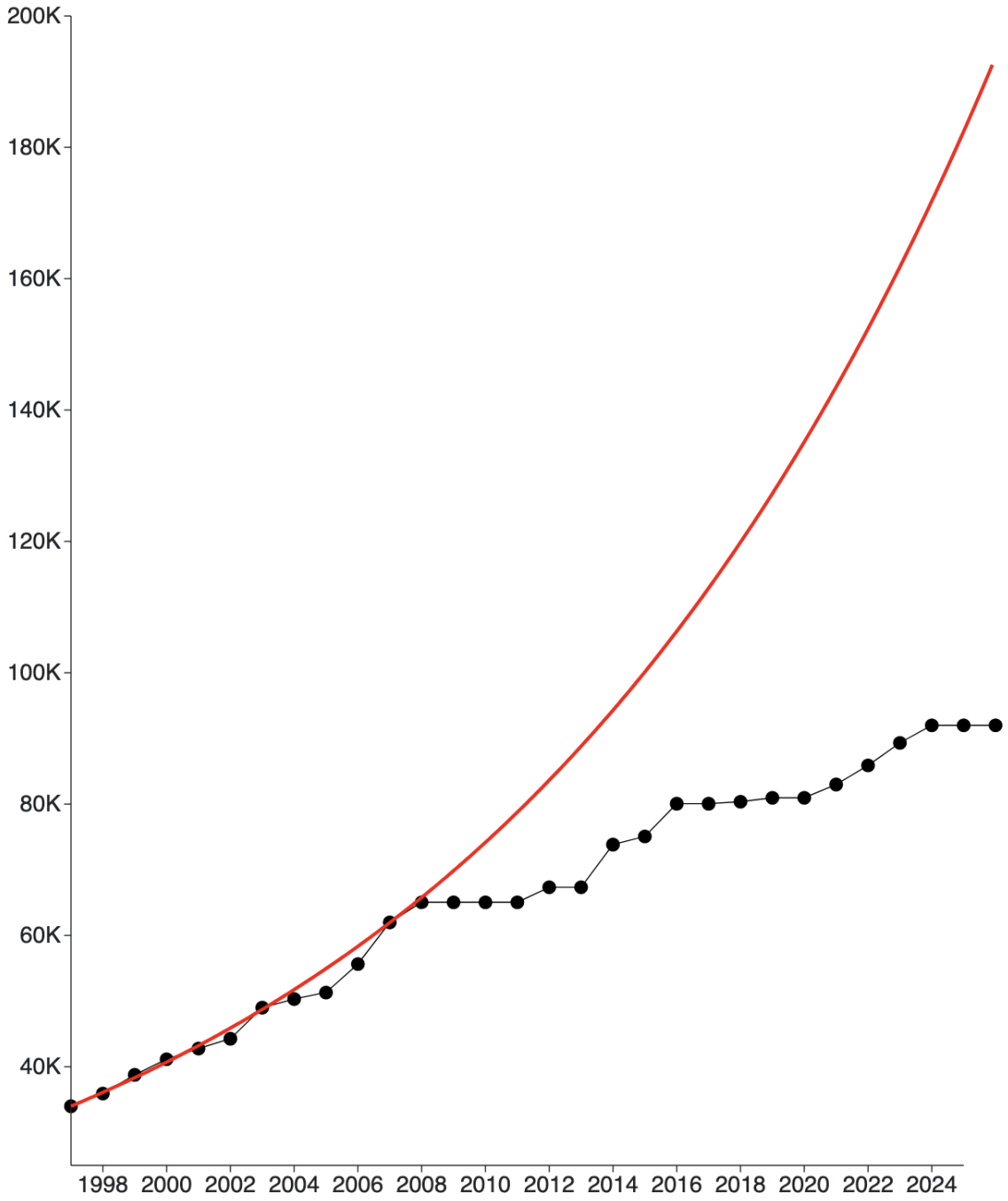


Figure 7: My expected salary based on my first decade

According to this NCLeg document, the hold harmless policy was rescinded in Jan 2011. Continuing policy changes have further weakened our funding model at least three more times. These funding changes are the real cause of our financial challenges.

How large do we need to be?

Given the current funding model, it's reasonable to ask - just how large does UNCA need to grow?

I don't know the answer to that question but I do know that when then VC for Financial Affairs John Pierce reported in 2022 as part of the Cable administration's *Revitalization Plan*, he found that

- UNCA had an annual $24,000,000 funding gap when compared to average peer institutions and that
- An annual enrollment of 4000 students would close that gap by only about $5,000,000.

In a private conversation, he further indicated to me that an enrollment of 5000 students would still get us nowhere close to where we needed to be. He was equally clear that the fundamental issue is inadequate funding from the State.

Summary

I like students and would be perfectly happy to have more. I participate every year in some sort of recruitment activity and do my best to meet students where they are to improve retention. I think it would be great if we got up to 3200 students or even a bit more. But…

> Enrollment is not the root cause of our financial challenges as an institution. More directly, it's a simple matter of funding levels from the State.

There's a lot of excellence spread throughout our hardworking, dedicated faculty. It would be nice to see this recognized in the form of commensurate pay.

Data sources

Salary data for the UNC System comes from the UNC Salary Information Database. The UNC Database provides microdata on salaries for all employees of the UNC System. It's updated quarterly so it makes for an excellent resource that's detailed and current.

The Cost of Living (CoL) data comes from Best Places used here was recorded in October of 2025. Here, for example, is Best Places CoL page on Asheville, which indicates that Asheville has a CoL of 105.8 or about 5.8% higher than the national average.

Average salary data by rank for the 570 public, four-year institutions comes from IPEDS. While not as current, it's really the only publicly available source of data of that breadth.

The inflation data is computed from CPI for Urban areas in the South, which can be obtained from the Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis.

Addendum

Here are all the written reports on compensation at UNCA that I'm aware of, ordered chronologically by release date. There's also a little of my own commentary.

Note that, with the exception of a couple of things that I wrote, these reports are generally PDFs lying on UNCA's Google Drive.

0. Task Force on Faculty Salary and Equity - Jan 2018
   https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W4T64jRPmX6uAsou9K9f0ktizBhU-IIw/view

   This zeroth report predates my participation and is a bit different from the remaining documents in that it is not primarily motivated by concern with the level of compensation at UNCA. It focuses more on equity between and within departments and with procedures for maintaining fairness moving forward. The report does note, however, that "substantive salary increases had not been available for several years".
1. Task Force on Total Compensation - May 2019
   https://drive.google.com/file/d/116rwbrxLTb8bJqdNji5lSnAYNxLAULkw/view

   By Fall of 2018, concern over the *level* of compensation at UNCA had grown and a new task force to study that specific issue was formed. I was appointed to that task force as a member of the Institutional Development Committee of Faculty Senate.
   This report focused on salary and benefits for both faculty and staff at UNCA. It compared that compensation to the cost of living as measured by the consumer price index for Southeast urban areas. We had good data on both of those going back a couple of decades so we were able to illustrate how our effective compensation has decreased over time.
   There were several issues with this study, such as

   - We did not study compensation with our peers in either the system or with similar institutions, simply because that was not part of our charge.
   - We did not study the relationship between compensation and housing costs in Asheville. We would've liked to study this but the data is simply hard to come by.

2. UNCA Salaries and Housing in Asheville - June 2019
   https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MCtSX_TIy-50uICnoeBjNd-aL510HFBZ/view

   When the work of the prior Task Force on Total Compensation was nearing completion, I happened to stumble upon some outstanding data on housing costs in Asheville via a personal relationship with people at Mosaic Realty. I used that data to compare the rate of growth of compensation at UNCA with the cost of home ownership going back a decade and a half. This document is the result of that work.
   While this work was too late to appear in the immediately preceding task force report, it does appear as an addendum.

3. Informal report on Faculty Compensation - Feb 2022
   https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GL8LWyk4u2_JML-D61Ww2utJ0i0pFLe0/view

   In November of 2021, Chancellor Cable announced the "historic" news that the newly passed state budget included a 7% raise to be split over the next two years. Unfortunately, the truly "historic" part was that a budget had finally been passed, we had not received raises for some time, and that 7% over two years did not even keep up with inflation. After email discussions over these issues, as was common on faculty_official@unca.edu at that time, a group of faculty formed an independent working group to study and make a stronger statement on these issues.
   This report was presented to FWDC in Feb 2022 and

   - Focuses on faculty, while acknowledging the situation is dire for staff as well,
   - Is a stronger statement, describing the situation as a "crisis",
   - Refers to the prior task force data on salaries and provides new assessments using BLS data,
   - Addresses morale via surveys like Harvard's COACHE and the UNC System Employee Engagement Survey,
   - Contains a list of asks of the administration including
     - the commitment to secure cost-of-living adjustments and
     - to develop the means to improve salaries at UNC Asheville

   The authors of this report are not identified, though it's signed by 58 faculty members.
4. UNCA Faculty Salaries - Apr 2022
   https://marksmath.org/writ/UNCAFacultySalariesApr2022.html

   I was a member of the informal working group and contributed a fair amount of data and analysis. This webpage represents my own analysis of the issues; it is essentially an early version of the current document.
5. Revitalization Plan - Sep 2022
   https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rl1Ew5Yj2Jky5fjTLO8RXuSiMTh7LB_y/view

   The compensation issues at UNCA are part of broader financial issues involving enrollment, tuition, state appropriations and other issues generally at the state level. Spearheaded by former Chancellor Nancy Cable, former Provost Kai Campbell, and former VC for Financial Affairs John Pierce, the "Revitalization Plan" was an attempt to address all of these. This is their presentation document as of Sep 2022.
   This document states several challenges that UNCA has faced historically including

   - turnover in leadership,
   - biases in the funding model, and
   - cost of living in Asheville.

   The document also proposes a comprehensive plan involving

- increased enrollment,
- replacement of key staff members,
- budget discipline,
- a fundraising campaign, and
- investment from the state.

Two years of significant state funding were obtained and put toward something, I guess. The Asheville Ideas Fest arose from philanthropic donations.
Note: While enrollment is part of this strategy, it's important to note that the plan states quite clearly that "enrollment alone won't provide the net revenue to close the shortfall". It goes further to say "Enrollment up to 4,000 students will yield roughly $5M towards a $24M shortfall." This statement is based on a detailed study by John Pierce and does not appear to be accounted for in current strategies. According to a recent conversation I had with John, enrollment up to 5000 still comes nowhere close to closing the shortfall.

6. First Compensation Committee report - Feb 2023
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Xw1s8al40-dzUccnilEseeu3_BPtJMFp/view

   In response to the informal working group, a standing committee was formed to continue to monitor salaries and compensation at UNCA. I was the first chair of that committee and this is our first report.
   We generally approved of the Revitalization Plan and endorsed it. We particularly liked the fact that the plan makes a strong case that UNCA is simply underfunded by the state. We were also happy to see two years of investment coming to UNCA but were deeply disappointed to see absolutely no investment in current faculty and staff.
7. Slides for committee presentation to Staff Council - Mar 2023
https://marksmath.org/presentations/CompensationSlides2023/

   As chair of the Compensation Committee, I presented our findings to both Faculty Senate and Staff Council. These are the slides I used for those presentations.