

Feeling Alone in Academia: Perceived Social Isolation among Instructional Faculty

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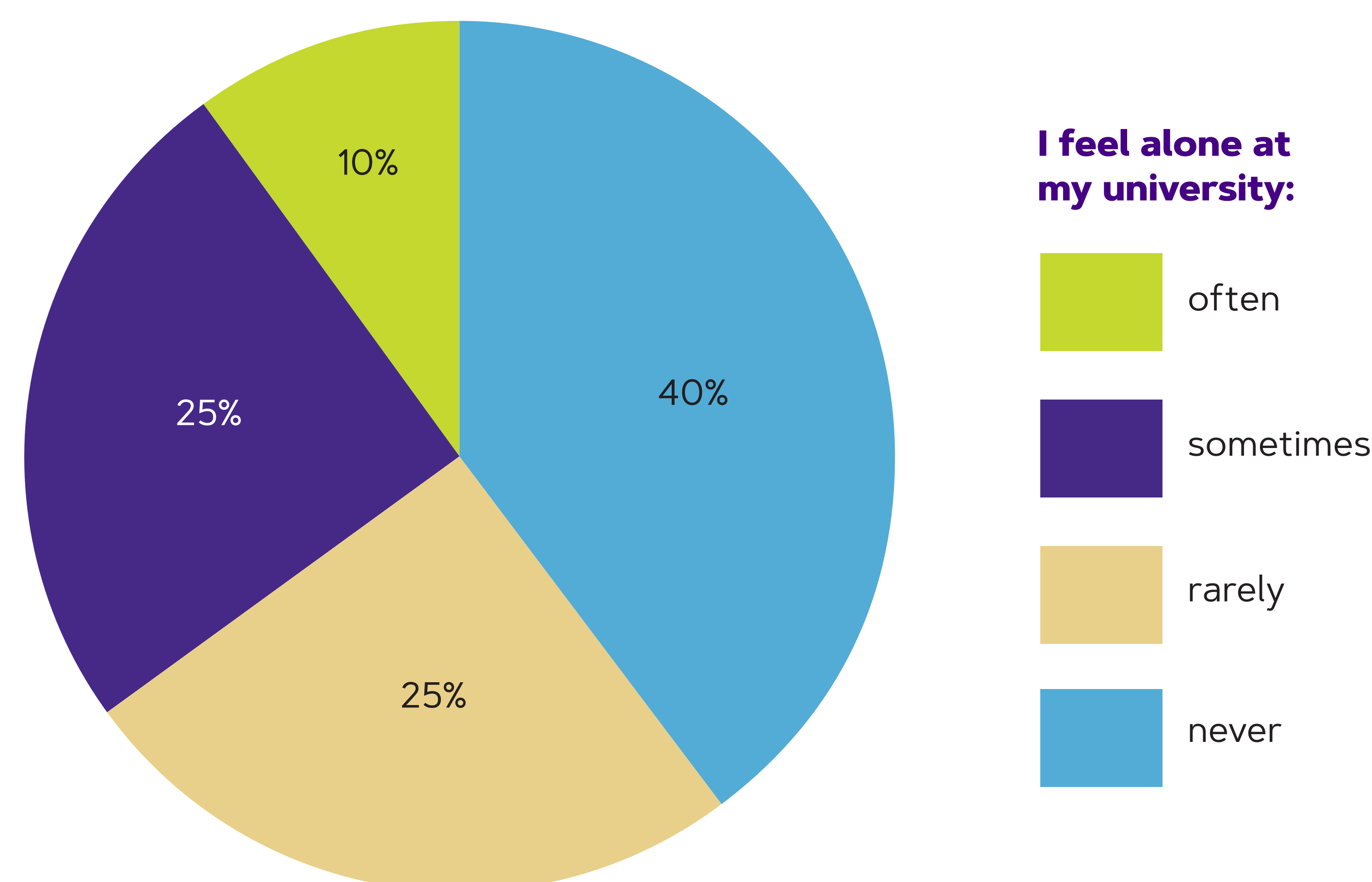
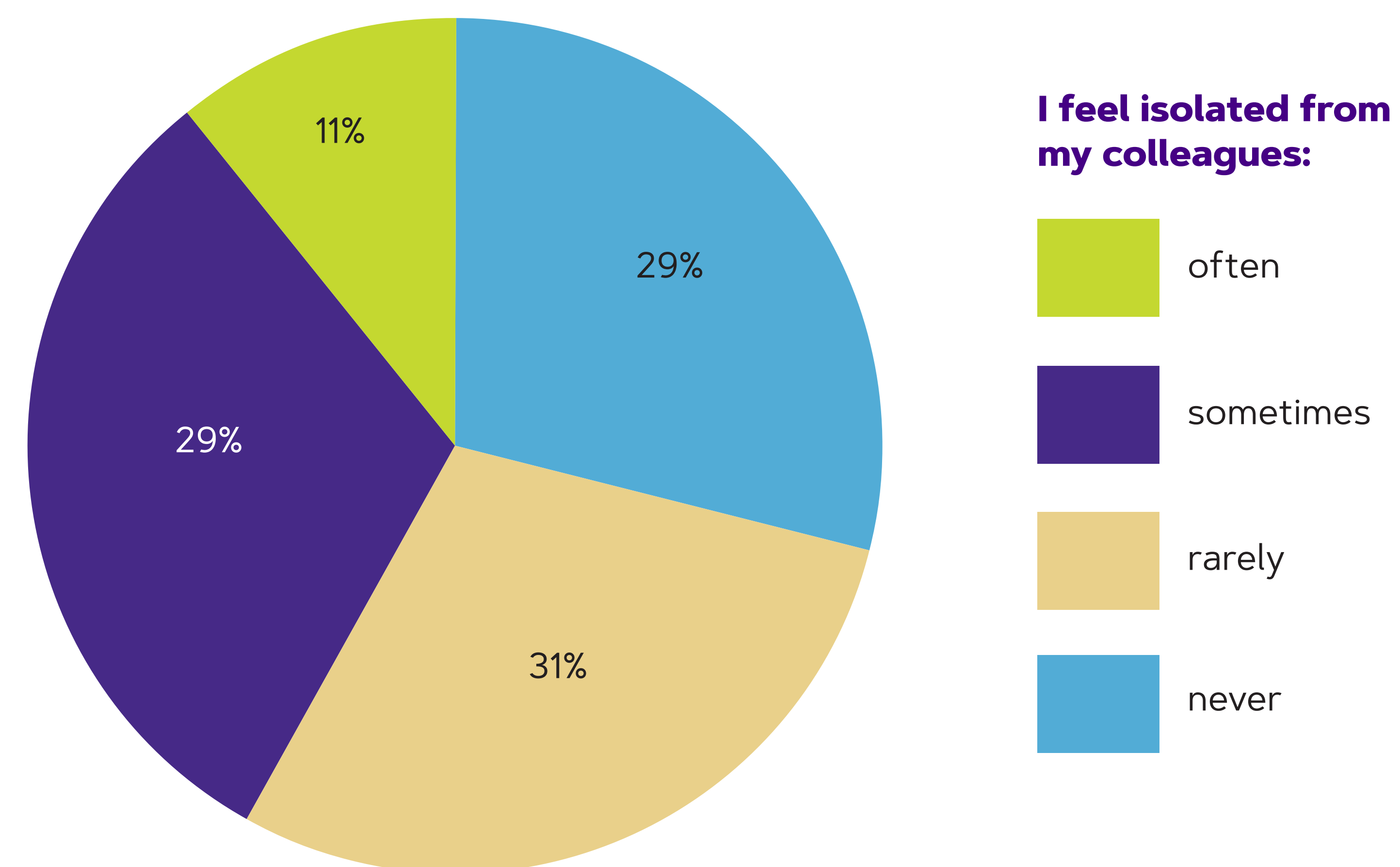
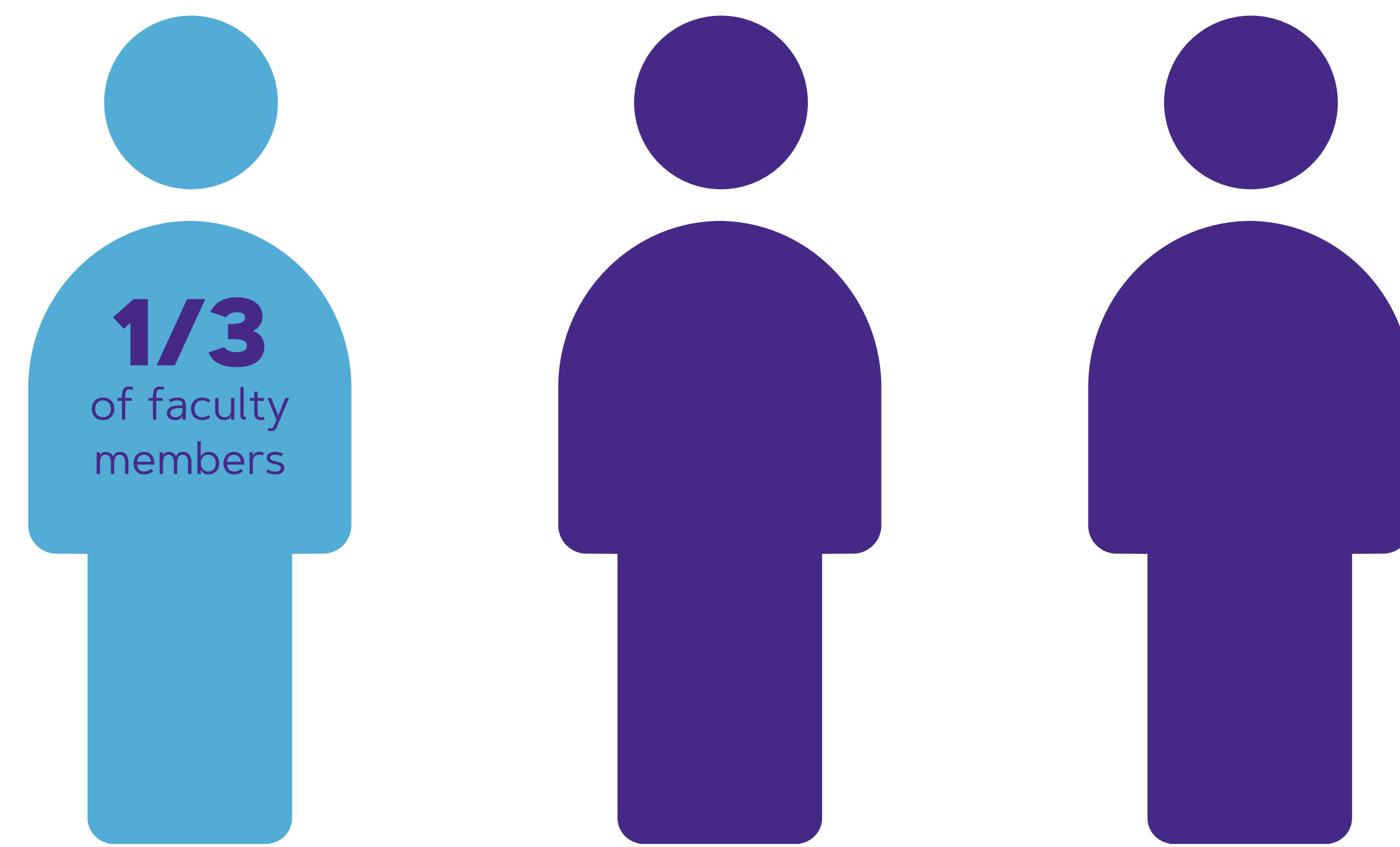
Abstract: In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer argued that one of the best ways to improve our craft is to learn from the community of fellow teachers. He also observed: "community is not easily achieved in academic life, given all that divides us." The purpose of our study was to examine the sense of community and connection among instructional faculty at our university. We found that one-third of faculty members reported sometimes or often feeling alone at the university, and the problem was worse for part-time faculty.

Introduction: Loneliness, or perceived social isolation, is on the rise in the United States. In fact, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (2017) argued that we are experiencing a "loneliness epidemic." Recent research suggests that at least one-third of U.S. adults are lonely (e.g., Anderson & Thayer, 2018; Cigna, 2018) and loneliness can have serious mental and physical health consequences. For example, lonely individuals are at an increased risk of experiencing depression, increased vascular resistance and blood pressure, impaired immune function, fragmented sleep, and a host of other health problems (see Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014, for a review). Chronic loneliness also increases the risk of mortality by 26% (Holt-Lundstad et al., 2010).

The negative effects of loneliness also extend to the workplace. Employees who feel isolated at work are less committed to their organizations and receive lower evaluations from their supervisors (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). To date, there has been little examination of perceived social isolation among faculty in higher education. There are many empirical studies of loneliness among college students, but none exploring the problem among instructional faculty. The goal of our study was to examine the prevalence of loneliness among instructional faculty at our university.

Method and Results: We invited all full and part-time instructional faculty to participate in an online survey about their "sense of community and connection at JMU."¹ The survey assessed their: loneliness in the workplace, sense of belonging to the university, and job satisfaction. With a 25% response rate ($N = 401$), we found:

- One-third of respondents (34.9%) reported sometimes or often feeling alone at the university.
- Forty percent (40.2%) reported sometimes or often feeling isolated from colleagues.
- More than half (51.4%) reported that they sometimes or often lack companionship at work.
- One in five (20.3%) do not feel a sense of belonging to the university. One of four (25.1%) do not feel a sense of belonging to the faculty academic community.
- Men and women did not differ on workplace loneliness or sense of belonging (both $ps > .05$).
- Part-time faculty were lonelier ($U = 49.74, p = .039$) and had a lower sense of belonging ($U = 5819, p = .013$) than full-time faculty.
- Analyses of faculty of color vs. white faculty did not yield any significant results (all $ps > .05$) but this may be due to the small number of non-white faculty in our sample.
- Years spent teaching did not predict any of the outcome measures (all $ps > .05$).
- Workplace loneliness and sense of belonging were significant predictors of job satisfaction ($F = 128.59, p < .001, R^2 = .42$).



Conclusions: Our results indicate that many teaching faculty feel isolated and alone at our university, at least some of the time. Additional research is needed to determine the prevalence of loneliness across campuses and to examine how perceived isolation affects job performance. If, as Parker Palmer believed, having a community of fellow teachers sustains us in the "trials of teaching" and provides collective wisdom that helps us improve, then is it important for faculty and administrators to prioritize community building. Having a supportive group of colleagues could transform our teaching - and our students' learning.

References

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¹The survey included a battery of reliable and valid measures drawn from the UCLA Loneliness Scale, COACHE Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey, etc. These items are either freely available, or were adapted with permission. For more information about the survey or results, please email the first author at kerrna@jmu.edu.

