Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

When Temporary Becomes a Career. What Does a Decade of Teaching Count For? [1]

November 24, 2026 by facultycouncil@cu.edu [2]

What Does a Decade of Teaching Count For?

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Author note: The views expressed are the author's own.

What does a decade of excellent teaching mean if it offers no clearer path to a permanent position? Across the University of Colorado system, temporary faculty members contribute to students' learning while navigating employment uncertainty. Their experience raises fundamental questions about career advancement, institutional priorities, and the value academia places on teaching.

One of the questions that has never been fairly addressed in academia is:

What is required of a temporary faculty member to secure a permanent position?

In higher education, almost all universities, including the University of Colorado (CU) system, rely on educators who teach on a course-by-course basis without offering them permanent positions.

CU Boulder's faculty employment policy limits instructional associates' appointments to three years, after which the university decides whether they return to lecturer positions or are evaluated for another teaching-faculty appointment. Because this decision depends on curricular needs and available funding, a tenure-track position is a possibility rather than an automatic or guaranteed outcome under CU Boulder's employment policy. It is worth noting that instructional associate and lecturer positions are both temporary and are distinguished mainly by workload rather than academic rank (50% FTE or above for instructional associates; below 50% for lecturers). As Colorado Public Radio's Paolo Zialcita reported in February 2023, SB23-048 sought to extend non-tenure-track faculty contracts from three to five years, but CU Boulder excluded instructional associates and lecturers from its multi-year contract provisions.

Other CU campuses have similar issues: CU Anschutz's policy states that instructional, research and clinical faculty members are ineligible for tenure and hold 'at-will' or 'limited' contracts. Meanwhile, UCCS requires non-tenure-track recruitment materials to state that salaries depend on available funds.

From the students' perspective

Inside the classroom, however, students view their instructors as their professors regardless of whether they hold a tenure-track, non-tenure-track, or temporary appointment.

These interactions shape students' experience of CU Boulder. When instructors do their jobs well, they contribute to a positive perception of the university. What matters to students is how their assignments are evaluated, how they are supported during office hours and how instruction is tailored to their capacities and needs.

The financial conditions of temporary faculty

With many people struggling to make ends meet, the financial situation of temporary faculty members is particularly concerning. Those paid by the course depend on the number of courses they teach for their income.

Although the CU system has implemented compensation increases in recent years, increasing these instructors' income still requires taking on more courses.

The more courses an instructor teaches, the more students they are responsible for, and the heavier their teaching duties become.

Consequently, efforts to secure an acceptable income tie temporary instructors more closely to an insecure employment model as they dedicate increasing amounts of time, effort and professional experience to their work within the institution, instead of pursuing alternative pathways.

Teaching quality and faculty conditions

Faculty duties are enormously time-consuming: grading papers, providing feedback, reassessing lesson plans, offering tutoring and mentorship, and supporting students with disabilities and learning differences. This work requires sustained attention to individual students, even when the number of students keeps growing.

As the number of students' needs that a faculty member must address increases with each additional course, instructors' time and capacity remain limited. Temporary faculty members must balance securing adequate compensation with maintaining teaching quality. Ultimately, their working conditions directly affect students' learning experiences.

What does ten years of temporary teaching lead to?

Let's assume that an instructor has maintained high teaching standards throughout a decade at CU. Wouldn't they have developed exceptional experience? Isn't this experience valuable to the university and worthy of the instructor being granted a secure, ongoing position?

This experience does not simply result from repeating the same job. It develops through the conscious and patient use of different methods to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Experience compounds.

Yet, under the current employment structure at CU campuses, this kind of experience does

not guarantee a permanent position.

Academic ranks and professional value

This raises a fundamental question about equity in academia, where faculty ranks differ according to each position's requirements and responsibilities.

Achieving equity requires a clear professional path supported by transparent promotion criteria. Temporary faculty members should know whether sustained teaching excellence, scholarly work, or specific credentials contribute to advancement, or whether these factors have no bearing on promotion.

A clear career path, not guaranteed advancement

Calling for transparency and stronger career opportunities for those who demonstrate sustained teaching excellence should not be interpreted as advocating automatic promotion based solely on years of service. I propose the creation of a path that allows qualified, high-performing instructors to find permanent positions within Colorado institutions of higher education.

This proposition supports academia's core values, including competitiveness and the pursuit of excellence. Such a system would reward teaching excellence through an inclusive strategy that would foster a more efficient and fair work environment based on collaboration and relationship building to support students and faculty alike.

Recognizing experience and excellence through career advancement is a professional gain for the entire campus, as clear career paths for faculty members who demonstrate sustained high-quality work help foster a healthy and competent work environment.

Investing in experience instead of replacing it

Uncertainty about career prospects may lead temporary faculty members at CU Boulder to seek more secure opportunities elsewhere.

While hiring new personnel may seem like the easy solution, replacing experienced instructors carries costs that go far beyond conducting another recruitment round. The process is not just about filling a vacancy. An instructor can be replaced from one day to the next; however, the relationships they've formed over the years, the trust they've earned repeatedly, and the knowledge of what works and what does not in that particular context cannot be restored in a day or two.

How to proceed from here?

The objective of this piece is not to prescribe a specific policy solution. Rather, the arguments presented here build upon recent measures that the CU system has taken in order to improve temporary faculty members' working conditions.

The discussion should not be solely centered on temporary faculty members' needs or demands. Doing so would be like treating a symptom rather than addressing the underlying problem, which is how the system works and how it promotes the people whose contributions directly benefit the institution.

Regularly revisiting policies and systems through criticism and analysis is a clear sign of a healthy, dynamic academic environment. We therefore invite you – whether you belong to CU, academia, or a different field – to reflect on the questions raised by this piece:

Is there a well-defined career path for temporary faculty members who spend years working for the university on a course-by-course contract basis?
How are temporary instructional needs determined, and how are they communicated?
How well does the current employment system serve and retain talented professionals?

Finally, the question at the heart of any academic pursuit: What would a better system look like to you?

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