

## Guest Column: The Career-Track Path is Good For All of Us

Honors College  
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It goes without saying that, ultimately, an institution of higher education is only as good as its faculty.

As the University of Arizona moves ahead to create a new strategic plan, our outstanding faculty must be at the foundation of any vision and President **Robert C. Robbins** has been very clear in expressing this. The idea of what constitutes being a member of the faculty has been evolving, and over the past five years it has been recognized that there are many faculty on campus who do not fall under the traditional model supported by the tenure and tenure-track paths.

I started teaching as an adjunct here 17 years ago. At that time, my official title was assistant chemist. Back then, the Department of Chemistry didn't have a fitting title for a temporary teaching hire. But a lot has changed since then.

Over time, I moved to a full-time status (lecturer), worked on **major curriculum development projects** [1], co-authored peer-reviewed works on educational development and research, worked with students in the highly regarded UA Faculty Fellows program, advised students in clubs and on thesis work, earned teaching awards, taught more than 15,000 students, and was appointed to associate professor of practice.

And I am not unique.

I and other non-tenure eligible faculty have not only been teaching a significant amount of the student credit hours at the UA, but have been leaders in the implementation of evidence-based instruction, working with student groups and helping to create the small-campus feel the UA has despite being a large Research I institution.

Not only am I not alone, but in this regard our institution is also not unique. Universities across the country have been dealing with the sticky problem of how to cover their teaching, which has its roots in the complex relationship between decreasing resources and increasing demand. Put simply, institutions have not been able to hire enough tenured and tenure-track faculty to cover all the teaching demands. And it was much cheaper to fill those spots with temporary teaching faculty. It prevented the teaching loads of research faculty from increasing, which was critical for them to continue with their important research and scholarship (the value of which has also unfortunately declined in the eyes of political leaders) and afforded colleges with the ability to increase enrollment, which brings in more tuition revenue.

Initially, the result was the creation of a multitiered castelike system where it was actually possible for a temporary adjunct to be hired to teach ideas like human values and rights and

yet be housed in a department that treated those faculty as lesser and dispensable employees who were not deserving of the same rights that they themselves held for our society. Of course, this is an extreme example. But in general, this was the experience of too many non-tenure eligible faculty across the country. Something had to change; this bubble had to burst and a new model was needed.

Fast forward to now, and across the country ? and in particular at the University of Arizona ? a new model has emerged. The value of our teaching-focused faculty has been recognized and we have now moved ahead with the creation of proper titles and formalizing the pathways of advancement for our **newly nomenclated career-track faculty** [2].

Departments across our University are working on formalizing the procedures and requirements for their career-track faculty, and there seems to be a sign of culture change in the air. I would argue that this is now not only a time to do the right thing for these valuable members of our faculty, but a time to also set standards. Just like we want the best tenure-eligible faculty teaching in our classrooms, conducting research and performing service, we should also want the best career-track faculty in our classrooms, engaging in scholarship centered on teaching and learning and contributing in service. We want the best in all our faculty and there is an opportunity now for departments to draft guidelines that ensure we have career-track faculty who are not only excellent learner-centered educators but who also have the opportunity to participate in shared governance. This means granting voting rights within departments and working toward tearing down the castelike culture by setting high standards, rewarding appropriately, and realizing that having a diverse type of outstanding faculty will only strengthen our institution, ultimately creating a better and more valuable experience for our students. We must not look at the formalization of the career track as a diminishment of the valuable work our world-class tenured faculty do in research and teaching, but rather as an enhancement to our institution's mission that can only improve our abilities to deliver high quality learning experiences for our students while also contributing high-impact, creative and world-class scholarship and research (which also supports learning for our undergraduate and graduate students).

I am proud to be a career-track faculty member at the University of Arizona, and fortunate to be part of a department and college that have supported the emergence of this track. I have been able to collaborate with many of my tenured colleagues to create innovative curricular approaches, advance the evidence-based instructional practices movement, and rethink how to redesign classroom spaces to create better learning environments for our students. What I have found to be profoundly unique at the UA is that the high-impact projects I have worked on are driven more from the bottom up than top down.

A coalition of willing faculty have gathered to push forward projects, ideas and agendas meant to add value to the student experience AND they have often been a balanced mix of career-track and tenured/tenure-track faculty working together. For example, the Association of American Universities leadership team on campus, which emerged with funding from the AAU, was a balance of career-track and tenured faculty. This group was responsible for the creation of faculty learning communities centered on evidence-based instruction, the pushing for collaborative learning spaces, and some of the most innovative curricular reforms on campus. In that group, the barriers of who had tenure and who didn't were dropped because everyone trusted that we all had one goal in mind: creating better learning opportunities and experiences for our students. Rather than rallying around rank and status, we gathered around a common goal. Instead of tenure being the currency of culture, ideas centered around increasing student learning were at the core of our mutual respect.

Having outstanding faculty at all ranks is vital as we pursue world-class research, create high impact learning experiences for our students, serve our community as a source of knowledge, talent and ideas, and enact the values we profess.

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#### **Links**

[1] <https://uanews.arizona.edu/story/redesigned-chemistry-course-influencing-future-of-stem-education>

[2] <https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/career-track-faculty-contributions-affirmed-changes-terminology-promotion-processes>