

# **Rethinking the Outdated Binary of Teaching and Service to Unleash Innovation and Support Student Success**

## **A White Paper for the Academic Futures Initiative Submitted on behalf of Boulder Campus Instructor-Rank Faculty**

Boulder Faculty Assembly  
Instructor-Track Faculty Affairs Committee  
November 16, 2017

Instructor-rank faculty have been engaged participants in the Academic Futures discussions. Many have attended town halls and themed sessions, and many are designated “listeners” who are supporting the process. We share much in common with our tenure-stream colleagues, and their hopes and dreams for the campus are quite often our own.

For tenure-stream faculty, the constraining binary that needs rethinking is the one between research and teaching. Rethinking the limiting binary between teaching and service is every bit as vital for instructors. For decades, our campus has defined teaching quite narrowly—as students in seats, and student credit hours on budget ledgers. Definitions of service have likewise been unduly narrow—as our own presence in seats at faculty and committee meetings. **We submit that the campus can achieve a brighter Academic Future by rethinking the inherited—and inherently limiting—binary models of teaching and service. Doing so would unleash innovation among instructor-rank faculty and likewise help improve student success.**

This white paper draws attention to the teaching and service that instructors perform, and more particularly to current policy constraints that make it difficult for instructors to help the campus realize the future it desires. These constraints (most particularly in the College of Arts and Sciences) have to do with the severely diminished role for service in instructor contracts and unduly narrow understandings regarding course equivalences.

Given the campus’s interest in broadly imagining a new future, talk of policy constraints might seem insignificant, or unduly technical. This is most assuredly not the case. **Instructionally-related service performed by instructors is an important place to imagine our future, and course equivalences are vital incubators for change.**

Instructor-track faculty comprise about 25% of full-time faculty on our campus. If we fail to draw on the talents and expertise of instructors, and if we constrain their ability to work toward a common future, then this entire initiative, despite what hopes we all share, will surely fail. We cannot drive toward a future by relying on only three of four cylinders. Instructors are eager to power this future.

### **Why Instructor Service is Central to the Campus’s Academic Future**

*In its core logic, the primary service performed by instructors is curricular in nature, and consists of instructionally-related activities. Such service is central to the value, role, and identity of instructor-track faculty, and maintains and fosters their professional currency in a field. Service is*

*likewise central to student success. More generally, such instructionally-related service provides a place for instructors to imagine a future—for themselves and for the campus.*

The service performed by instructors adds enormous **value** to the unit, school/college, and the campus. Broad in its range and impact, instructor service is most especially salient in its relation to curriculum, instructionally-related activities, and student success and retention. Whether service is related to developing new curricula, innovative pedagogical perspectives, and meaningful assessment tools; or to overseeing multi-section courses and the training of lecturers and graduate students; or to mentoring students and fostering relationships that help ensure retention and success, instructors and the service they perform are central to the undergraduate mission—and to the future the campus now wishes to imagine.

Service is a defining feature that distinguishes **faculty roles**. Service is one of the main responsibilities that instructors *share with tenure-stream faculty*, and it is what connects both tenure-stream faculty and instructors to the campus community and its ongoing welfare. The service roles of instructors and TT faculty sometimes differ, but these roles are both necessary and complementary. Instructors are eager to perform service when that service is recognized and appreciated, and they perform this service well.

**Service differentiates instructors from lecturers.** Although lecturers and instructors both engage in a good deal of teaching, it is instructor service that builds an identification with the campus and helps sustain its educational mission over time. Lecturers perform a valuable but limited role in the classroom alone, based on changing and immediate instructional needs, and are not expected to engage in the very service that is central to the role of instructors and their contributions to the institution.

What is less commonly understood is how service shapes the **professional identity** of instructors. For tenure-stream faculty, professional identity is largely tied to research. But because instructors are not rewarded for research (though many instructors are in fact research active), their engagement with the campus and their disciplines through service becomes central to their professional identity and the management of their careers over time. It is also a crucial part of their identity as teachers, since it is often through service—mentoring, advising, taking part in co-curricular activities—that instructors can become close to their students and help to assure their success.

Service is also fundamentally important to the ability of instructors to maintain and expand their **currency in the field**. For tenure-stream faculty, currency in the field is driven largely by research activities, and their awareness of new developments in their respective fields informs, in turn, their classroom teaching. Given that instructors are not rewarded for research, service remains a key vehicle for ensuring that classroom teaching reflects best practices. Professional development activities such as instructionally-related committees, workshops, seminars, and conferences have considerable value for maintaining currency. Because currency in the field is a central criterion for reappointment, opportunities and rewards for service should not be discounted as a minor afterthought to an instructor's contractual obligations, but recognized as a vehicle for ensuring the professional development necessary for keeping classroom instruction at a high level.

Given high teaching loads, instructionally-related service becomes the only vehicle for instructors to contribute to the fresh thinking and innovation that will **help the campus move toward a desired future**. Discussions in the Academic Futures initiative often involve rethinking undergraduate teaching, pedagogical innovation, new approaches to curricula, ensuring student success and retention, and fostering a deeper sense of belonging among our students. These desired outcomes, and more, hinge on the active engagement of instructors. Together with our tenure-stream colleagues, we wish to work toward that academic future. Yet current policies conspire against that engagement.

## Concerns regarding Service

*Recent policy changes in Arts and Sciences, and on campus generally, run counter to broadly shared goals of fostering undergraduate teaching excellence and achieving a shared academic future because they undermine and/or denigrate instructors' service contributions.*

The ability for instructors to perform service, and to have that service appropriately recognized and valued, has been undermined by recent policies and developments. Two policy areas are of particular concern as the entire campus thinks about its future.

### Devaluing Service in Instructor Contracts

For some twenty years in Arts and Sciences, a 100% appointment, a 3/3 course load, and a 75/25% teaching/service merit ratio was the default instructor appointment. That appointment is no longer possible, with the default option for a 100% appointment now being a 4/4 course load and an 85/15% teaching/service merit ratio. The costs of not valuing service—both psychological and real—have been unmistakable.

New instructor contracts focus on increased teaching, but come at the expense of service ensuring that instructors have enough time to mentor, advise and take part in activities that are vital to student retention and success. It additionally undercuts the ability of instructors to remain current in the field. These options also actively discourage instructors from performing service related to curriculum and pedagogy that is vital to their units and to our campus. Instructor service is often seen in shortsighted ways—as simply attending faculty meetings or sitting on a committee. It is so much more. Instructionally-related service is the place where instructors imagine and act on the future.

Climate surveys suggest that instructor morale is low, and the reasons go well beyond understandable concerns about pay. Instructors are productive and engaged when their work is respected. Right now, with instructors being asked to teach more, service is squeezed out, to the detriment of A&S and the campus. Indeed, in this climate, the teaching itself is likely to suffer. Moreover, promotion to senior instructor and teaching professor require, among other things, a profile of service at the campus and even national level, something increasingly difficult to achieve given college and campus policies regarding service. Service goes to the heart of who instructors are and what they do. If the campus trivializes service, we are well on our way to turning instructors into lecturers, with an associated loss, over time, in the quality of undergraduate education. And in treating instructors in this way, the campus at large is one step closer to becoming a community college. This is an academic future none of us desire.

### Course Equivalences

By all accounts, there has recently been close scrutiny across campus of “course equivalences.” Given the higher teaching loads and reduced rewards/opportunities for service in the contractual arrangements noted above, these course equivalences are vital if instructors are to perform any meaningful service and pedagogical innovation. In the absence of course equivalences (and administrative positions made possible by them), important service will go unaddressed or will be performed poorly by already overtaxed and demoralized instructors.

Course equivalences are incubators for instructors to help realize the change that the campus desires. Given high teaching loads, the work of instructors is already highly constrained. We have become quite efficient in delivering undergraduate education. But those very efficiencies may prevent us from imagining, developing, and realizing future changes and improvements to that education.

When long-standing course equivalences are limited and allowed only through a process of petitioning, the effort to request and argue for course equivalences is itself cumbersome, and represents a considerable waste of time and energy. Individual requests made by chairs and directors create an enormous amount of work. And a one-size-fits-all model serves units poorly, as service needs associated with curriculum and teaching vary among units.

### **Paths Forward toward a Shared Future**

*We strongly urge that renewed attention be paid to the service performed by instructors, and that the material and contractual conditions under which instructors work need to facilitate the performance of that service, so intimately tied to instructionally-related activities, student success, and the general future of the campus.*

We believe that this recommendation can be operationalized in a variety of ways that will serve both undergraduate education for the campus at large and individual instructors:

- *Encouraging innovative arrangements spanning teaching and service.* For decades, we have been caught in a rigid binary that separates teaching and service, most often to the detriment of both. **The Academic Futures initiative is an opportunity to re-envision the relationship between teaching and service.** Indeed, many of the innovative ideas that have been discussed in town halls and themed meetings involve, in one way or another, a fresh look at these two areas of faculty activity. But we cannot envision, much less realize, that future when policies tie us, ball and chain, to the past.

Associate Vice Chancellor Jeff Cox and Provost Russ Moore have both invited us to think about the future in ways that are not tied to current budget models. Those models need to reflect and support, they tell us, the future we desire. We submit that the same should be said for models of academic labor. **Let us envision a future, and then permit the flexibility needed to arrange teaching and service activities in ways that would help us realize that future.**

Administrators should welcome and reward innovative ways of spanning and connecting teaching and service. For example, instructors might be particularly well positioned to offer intensive mentoring of at-risk students or students seeking more extensive faculty contact. Innovative arrangements to this end should be encouraged. Likewise, many instances of high-impact teaching and learning often require a close connection between teaching and service that current contracts fail to value or reward. Co-curricular activities also invite us to rethink teaching and service. For tenure-stream faculty, research is often the means by which to rethink curriculum and pedagogy, to explore options for change. For instructors, service can provide that same opportunity. But it is largely an opportunity withheld.

- *Creating flexible contractual arrangements.* In their design and execution, instructor contracts should reflect not just the importance of teaching but also the central role of service. Although most chairs and directors understand and appreciate the service performed by instructors, associate deans, deans, and higher administrators are more removed from the work of instructors.

Service is all too often an afterthought, if that. We urge the campus to re-envision instructor contracts so as to place service in its proper, legitimate role. If an 85/15% teaching/service merit ratio remains a baseline, we strongly recommend that units be allowed to tweak that ratio (and associated course loads) to reward instructors who have a clear record of performing valuable service.

- *Ensuring robust but flexible parameters for course equivalences across all units.* Given the important service instructors perform that is related to instruction, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, advising, and other aspects of student success and undergraduate education, course equivalences should not be reduced or otherwise viewed with suspicion. Where instructors and their chairs and directors can make effective arguments for such course equivalences, those arguments need to be entertained, and indeed encouraged. Units should be encouraged to develop a set of characteristic situations in which service would be performed for course equivalences so that administrators and faculty are not constantly spending valuable work time justifying individual occurrences. Likewise, units should get together to compare best practices and to better understand how needs differ among units. Course equivalences for curricular and instructionally-related activities are both needed and legitimate, but the approval process must be streamlined.

If we are to realize a better academic future, and thereby improve undergraduate education, the campus needs to recognize and facilitate instructor service. Failing to do so, we risk disengaging a large proportion of our faculty, the very faculty most often in the position to give close attention to student success and retention, and to revitalized pedagogy. Failing to do so, we ignore a reservoir of talent, energy, and good will without which our dreams will not come true.

Instructors are willing and eager partners in our Academic Future. Let us craft policies that unleash their potential.

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