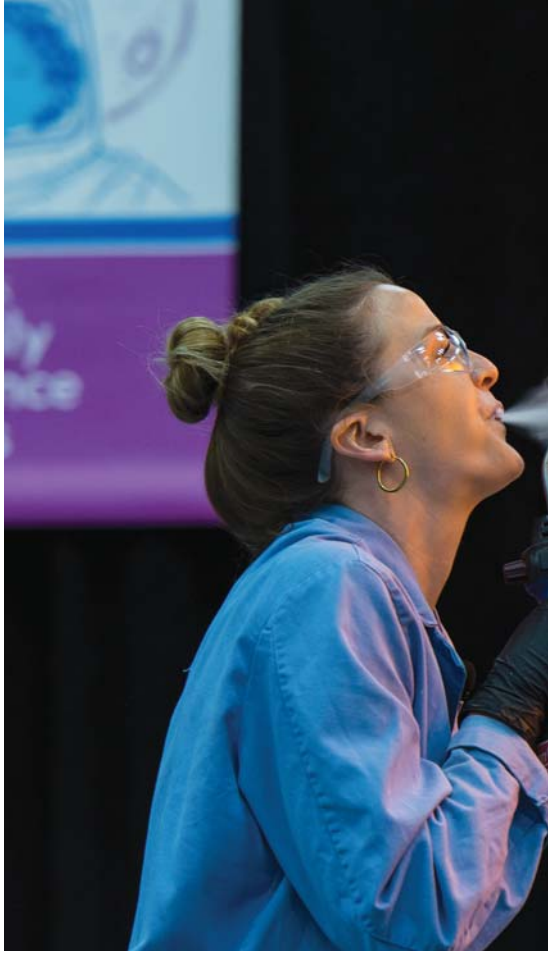
Contract lecturers are a growing yet precarious population in higher education

Some institutions seek better career paths for non-tenure-stream teachers.



When they're lucky, college students encounter dedicated instructors who care about their subject and are passionate about teaching. But lucky or not, there is a good chance that the person at the podium or in the lab is someone on a limited-term contract, not a tenured or tenure-track faculty member.

Over the past few decades, the percentage of US academics on the tenure stream has declined steeply, and the percentage that is not has grown. That shift has occurred in tandem with and as a result of shrinking budgets, growing enrollments, and shifting politics. Breakdowns by discipline are not available, but across all disciplines today, some 70% of US faculty are not on the tenure stream, according to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Similar trends are occurring in Australia, Canada, and the UK.

The more a department serves others on campus and the less of that demand the department can meet on its own, the more contract lecturers it is likely to employ. At the University of Maryland, College Park, for example, physics has about 70 faculty on the tenure stream and employs 3 full-time and 6 part-time lecturers. By contrast, the physics department at California State University San Marcos has 6 tenured or tenure-track faculty and, for any given term, 12–15 contract lecturers.

The terms of contingent employment vary widely. The part-time or full-time contracts may have to be renewed each academic term or each year, last several years, or be on a rolling basis, which requires an extended advance notice to cancel. Some contract employees have office space and access to office equipment and supplies. Some receive benefits such as health care, retirement plans, and reduced tuition; part-timers have less access to those benefits. They are called lecturers, contract lecturers, contingent lecturers, non-tenure-track faculty, professors of instruction, professors of the practice, sessional instructors, casuals, and adjuncts. The supply of applicants for such positions is usually abundant, and sometimes departments call on graduate students to fill gaps.

The status of contingent lecturers varies tremendously, says Carl Wieman of Stanford University, a Nobel physics laureate and education leader. "It varies from one institution to the next and across [individual] institutions. In some departments, lecturers are third-class citizens. In others, they are treated like regular members of the faculty—and that's when it works best."

Whatever their titles or terms, contingent lecturers, who generally hold PhDs, are precariously employed. They lack academic freedom, job security, and financial stability. They earn significantly less than their counterparts on the tenure stream. According to data collected by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2016–17, contract lecturers in physics typically earn less than $4000 per course.

Patchwork

Like many contract lecturers, Brian Wilson fell into teaching by picking up a class in 2010 after finishing his PhD on relativity. He teaches at the University of Toronto, where, he says, "I get four months at a time, but they have already given me contracts for January through April. After that, I'm technically unemployed, but based on the last several years, they will have work for me beyond that." Mostly he teaches large introductory physics courses for engineering majors.

Wilson earns roughly Can$8500 (US$6600) per course and typically teaches nine courses a year. "I am well accepted in the [university] community," he says. "Many sessionals are new, or jaded, or they are stretched thin because they teach at multiple campuses. I'm lucky I get a full course load at a single campus."

Montserrat Geier came to the US in 1999 as a visiting physics professor from Brazil, where she held tenure. She decided to stay, and she taught for a while as a "freeway flyer," commuting between campuses to cobble together a living. Now, as a full-timer on a rolling three-year contract at Cal State Long Beach, she earns about $60 000 a year. The number of contingent lecturers on the campus has been going up for years because retiring faculty are not replaced and the number of students is increasing, says physics chair Andreas Bill. Currently the department has 11 tenure-stream faculty and 6–8 contingent lecturers.

Another common arrangement has contract employees splitting time between teaching and administrative or lab work. For several years after he got a PhD in biophysics at Imperial College London and did two postdoctoral stints

EXPLOSIVE DEMONSTRATIONS ARE KATE BIBERDORF'S SPECIALTY. In addition to teaching, the associate professor of instruction in chemistry at the University of Texas at Austin oversees the public outreach program Fun with Chemistry, through which she reaches tens of thousands of schoolchildren each year.

VIVIAN ABAGIU, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

in the US, Mark Pearson taught physics for $1000–$1250 per course credit at Juniata College in Pennsylvania. In 2011 that morphed into a full-time job as a lab instructor and equipment coordinator; he now works on an annual 10-month contract for roughly $42 000. "It's not what it should be," he says, but "I love being here, and I value the flexibility." The salary is manageable because his wife, a physician, earns more.

Corporate higher education

University administrators, state legislators, and other decision makers and purse-string holders may believe that limited-term contracts are mutually beneficial. Common conceptions are that the lecturers are recent PhD graduates gaining teaching experience as they prepare to apply for jobs, they are retirees who want to keep their hands in academia, or they are fully employed—working in industry, teaching high school, or whatever—but want to be involved in university life.

But a different picture emerges from *Out of the Shadows: Experiences of Contract Academic Staff*, a report released in September by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). From 2005 to 2015, the number of academic staff in Canada working part-time grew by 79%, while the number of tenure-stream faculty grew by 14% and the number of students grew by 28%. Of the survey's 2600 respondents, more than half said they want a tenure-track or full-time permanent college job. And two-thirds said their mental health has been negatively affected by the instability of their employment status. Most contract academic staff "are struggling to make ends meet," says CAUT president James Compton, a tenured professor in information and media studies at the University of Western Ontario. The report "dismisses the myth about the happy moonlighter."

Starving the Beast, a 2016 documentary by Steve Mims on higher education, highlights the startling statistic that state funding for US public universities plummeted from roughly 60% of their annual budgets in 1980 to 12% in 2015. To try to make up for the shortfall, universities have raised tuitions and looked to donors, whose gifts often come with strings attached. "Many institutions have drifted away from their core missions, devoting smaller portions of their total budgets to instructional and research activities," notes the 2016 AAUP report *Higher Education at a Crossroads: The Economic Value of Tenure and the Security of the Profession*.

"Higher education has become more corporatized," says Gwendolyn Bradley, an AAUP senior program officer. The growth in contingent labor extends to all sectors of higher education, including community colleges and private colleges and universities, and is mirrored in other sectors of the economy, she notes. As an example of how the bottom line increasingly drives decisions in academia, at some universities tenured faculty now must win promotion to the highest status of full professor within a certain time or their teaching load goes up.

Hiring instructors on limited-term contracts cuts an institution's costs. The practice gives departments flexibility to vary their course offerings based on enrollment and availability of permanent faculty; if someone goes on sabbatical or is ill, for example, a temporary lecturer can be brought in on short notice. Occasionally contract lecturers teach specialized classes for which no permanent faculty are available.

But there are disadvantages for institutions too. The low pay and insecurity can lead to high turnover. It's a challenge to plug contract lecturers into courses that are introducing reforms, such as increasing student interaction and reducing lecture time, says Edward Price, who recently served as physics chair at Cal State San Marcos. Many lecturers are on campus only when teaching, so there is "little opportunity for chance encounters with students to talk about their career path or get advice," Price says. "It's the intangible things that make college more than just a collection of courses." And since contingent faculty don't usually serve on committees, he adds, "we are missing out on their input, and it puts more of the burden on tenure-track faculty."

Toward better career pathways

Andrew Robinson, who since 2011 has taught physics as a contractor at Carleton University in Ottawa, notes that the continued employment of people in positions like his rests heavily on student evaluations. "It makes people cautious about challenging students. It can be better to play it safe, to get good evaluations." For his part, he'd like a half-time, permanent lecturing position. "It would make things like getting a car loan easier."

"People assume we are in this position because we didn't succeed as researchers, but that's not true," says Stephanie Bailey, who quit a research career in nuclear

CLARISA BERCOVICH GUELMAN (in turquoise) teaches calculus-based introductory physics for life-science majors at California State University San Marcos. A long-time, full-time lecturer, she is one of many contract lecturers the university's physics department employs to teach service courses.

JESSAMYN TROUT

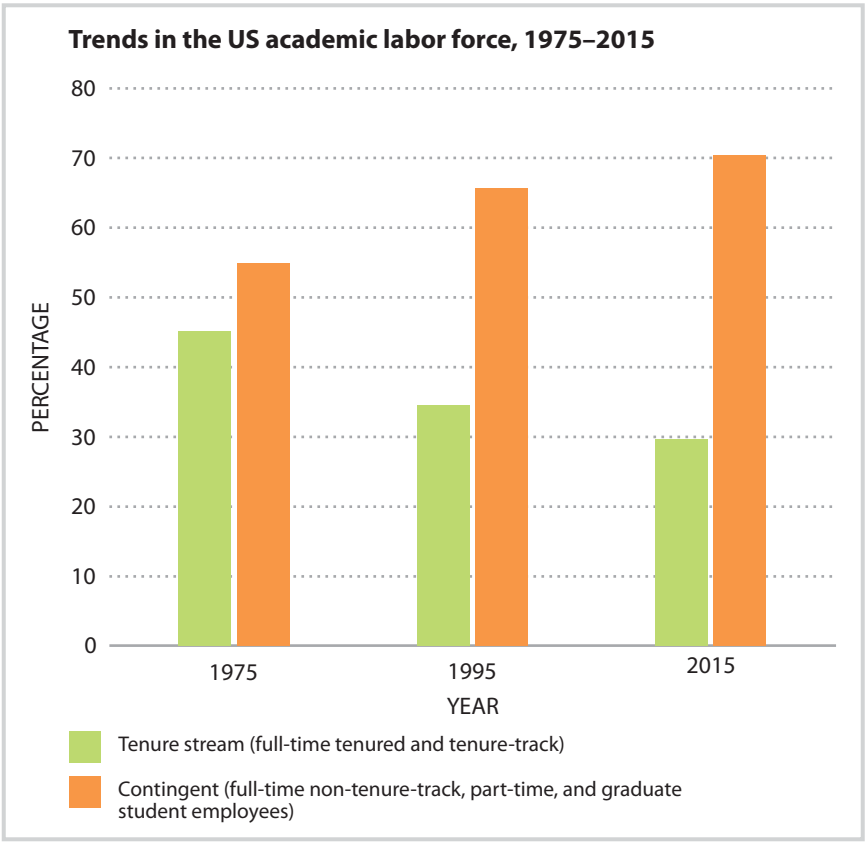
physics and is in her fourth year as a lecturer on an annual contract at the University of California, Santa Cruz. With union help she managed to get her initial annual salary bumped from about $45 000 to about $65 000. But the prospects of a secure job there are dim. Bailey says she feels appreciated and thinks the department would want to hire her, "but they don't have [an approved] position from the university administration." That's a common sentiment among physics lecturers: Departments want to do well by them, but their hands are tied.

Unusual for a lecturer, Bailey serves on campus committees. "I am doing these things because I am passionate about my job, I want to be a part of the larger university community, and I have my eye on a tenure-track teaching position," she says. Her position does not include support for professional development or conference participation. Like most physics lecturers, she usually teaches big service courses.

Long-term and permanent teaching positions exist, but they are rare. In some cases, teaching positions are tenured and well paid, although the pay is still less than for regular faculty. The University of California system, for example, has some tenured teaching positions that go by "lecturer with security of employment." People in such positions have many privileges and responsibilities of regular faculty, and they are expected to stay up to date with teaching methods, introduce new approaches to research colleagues, and spend ample time with students.

Across the US, an emerging trend is to dust off lecturer positions and improve their image. A couple of years ago, for example, the University of Texas at Austin (UT) convened a task force to devise and implement better practices. Shelley Payne, who recently stepped down as associate dean for faculty affairs in natural sciences, says that "it was clear we would never go back to all tenured and tenure-track faculty." Also driving the trend toward hiring lecturers at some universities, including UT, is a rock-star approach: hiring top researchers to increase the school's standing. Such expensive, high-profile researchers may negotiate a reduced teaching load, which increases the demand for an offsetting cadre of cheaper teachers.

"We needed to step back and look at our instructional faculty and to try to prevent last-minute, semester-to-semester positions," says Payne. One aim is for



OVER THE PAST FOUR DECADES, the percentage of tenure-stream faculty in US higher education has fallen, while that of contingent staff has risen. (Data from the American Association of University Professors.)

students to be taught by dedicated teachers. "There should be stable positions with a clear career pathway." The upshot at UT is a new title—lecturers are now called professor of instruction or professor of practice. And the positions have a bit more security; they start out on one-year contracts and progress to three-year rolling positions. But the starting salaries remain low, between $40 000 and $70 000 per academic year. By comparison, entry-level tenure-track faculty get $80 000 or more.

Permanent faculty and contract lecturers are hired for different reasons, with different expectations, and based on different criteria. Contract lecturers are typically hired on an as-needed basis, notes Cal State Long Beach's Bill. They are not responsible for developing research projects involving students, and they don't—and cannot be expected to—carry the vision of the department. Nor are they held responsible if the department is not doing well. "They are recognized for their excellence in teaching through being rehired," says Bill. That explains the difference in salary and work conditions, he says, "but it does not justify the instability and worries lecturers face."

"A lot of places have had short-term in-and-out lecturers," says Wieman. "They realize that's not a good model." New approaches of creating longer-term lecturer positions, he continues, are being seen as having many advantages over short-term contracts. They are cheaper than hiring tenure track: Salaries are lower, and they don't require startup funds or labs. "It's a chicken-and-egg problem," he says. "When departments see the lecturers as important, they set higher standards, and they hire better." At the highest level, he says, "the lecturers in a department become teaching experts. They drive innovation. That is the best model."

But for many lecturers, improvements still seem a long way off. Sarika Bose, CAUT committee chair for contract academic staff, has taught English literature on limited-term contracts at the University of British Columbia for more than 15 years. Yet she reports that her salary "is about Can$15 000 less than a starting elementary school teacher."

"The university should be a leader of hope," says Bose. "But how can we teach hope when we—the teachers—feel hopelessness ourselves?" **Toni Feder**