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It's Time for College Professors to Teach

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Issue
Brief

Introduction

Higher education is plagued by concerns about the return on investment of a four-year degree, low rates of degree completion, and the mental and emotional health of students. A factor in all these concerns is the frustrating reality that, at far too many of the nation's 2,000 four-year colleges, the work of teaching and mentoring is only a secondary concern. This has had unfortunate consequences for costs, instruction, and campus culture. It also presents an opportunity for governing boards and public officials to step up.

It is no coincidence that the nation's most expensive colleges are those at which faculty teach just two to four courses per *year* (amounting to three or six hours a week of classroom time each semester). At these institutions, faculty devote the lion's share of their time to research, bureaucratic duties, and chasing grants. In a burst of candor, John McGreevy, provost at Notre Dame, revealed that his institution boasts whole departments in which the faculty norm is a 1-1 teaching load (that is, teaching one three-hour class in the fall and one in the spring).¹ Indeed, McGreevy notes that teaching loads at the leading colleges have shrunk precisely because colleges compete for faculty by promising that they'll teach less.²

The result? Colleges have resorted to relying on part-time faculty to provide the requisite teaching. Between 1999 and 2022, the 45% growth in faculty substantially outpaced the 25% increase in undergraduate enrollment.³ At the same time, the share of full-time professors on the tenure track declined from 72% in 2002 to 62% in 2023. The number of graduate teaching assistants jumped by 40% in that same period.⁴ The result is that more and more teaching is being shouldered by part-timers, adjunct faculty, and teaching assistants, who have limited opportunity or incentive to invest themselves in students' academic lives.

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At community colleges and many regional institutions, faculty routinely teach four or more courses each semester.⁵ If colleges adopted the not-so-radical norm that faculty should devote half their working hours to instructional responsibilities, it would have massive benefits for colleges: reducing costs, alleviating the need for adjunct faculty, and increasing faculty–student interaction.

So why don't we talk more about faculty workload, given the familiar concerns about college costs, the student experience, and the “adjunctification” of higher education? For starters, higher-education research organizations seem disinclined to release data on faculty work time to the public.

How Much Do Professors Actually Teach? Shhh ... It's a Secret

Ohio University economist Richard Vedder noted: “One of the closest guarded secrets in American higher education is the average teaching loads of faculty.”⁶ Vedder wasn't wrong. Since 1996, for instance, the University of Delaware has administered the annual National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity, surveying faculty and teaching assistants about course loads and enrollment. The data, though, are “only available to four-year, non-profit institutions of higher education.”⁷ This secrecy, needless to say, is not the norm for surveys collected by publicly supported institutions. Tellingly, this study is being discontinued because the number of participating institutions “has slowly declined to unsustainable levels.”⁸

The U.S. Department of Education used to track faculty workloads through the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF), administering it in 1987–88, 1992–93, 1998–99, and 2003–04. The survey asked professors about their teaching loads, instructional time, use of teaching assistants, and scholarly activity. After 2004, the National Center for Education Statistics stopped collecting these data.⁹ The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has collected data on faculty teaching regularly since 1989. However, only the data collected prior to 1999 are publicly available.¹⁰ A request for more recent data requires a multipage proposal with a theoretical framework, a fee, and a description of how any results will be shared.¹¹

The Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University has administered the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) since 2003.¹² While the center does not publish full results or information on individual institutions, it does publish some data visualizations with aggregated information on faculty teaching load and time use. (Detailed institutional data are shared privately, only with participating institutions.)¹³

We searched a dozen organizations (including the Association for the Study of Higher Education and the Institute for Higher Education Policy) for the terms “faculty teaching loads,” “college course load,” “teaching load,” “professor course load,” “professor schedule,” and “faculty load.” In 10 of 12 instances, the searches returned zero results.¹⁴

Clearly, there is a shortage of concrete, reliable data on teaching in higher education. Even the information that does get collected is not publicly disseminated.



Teaching Is Not the Priority

Across a large swath of academe, teaching is perceived as a burden to be endured. Faculty bemoan heavy teaching loads. Prized faculty teach light loads, with courses “bought out” by research grants or fellowships. (Deans and department chairs similarly negotiate for reduced teaching loads.) In short, a lighter teaching load is a badge of professional success.

University of Pennsylvania education professor Jonathan Zimmerman notes that faculty tend to characterize “research as their ‘work’ and teaching as their ‘load;’” a habit that, as Zimmerman dryly observes, says “volumes about academic priorities.”¹⁵ University of Michigan political scientist Edie Goldenberg and her coauthor, the late John Cross, note that much undergraduate instruction has been farmed out to non-tenure-track staff so that tenured faculty can focus on research, grants, and administration.¹⁶

Vedder has observed that at schools with large numbers of graduate students, faculty “turn much of the critically important teaching of beginning undergraduates over to inexperienced graduate students.”¹⁷ He elaborates that at top research universities, it is “not uncommon for professors to teach but one course, usually for three hours a week. A load of two courses per semester (six hours in the classroom) would be considered fairly heavy.”¹⁸ Naomi Schaefer Riley has noted that “to do the real work of teaching...colleges have ‘adjunctified’ themselves, using part-time faculty, graduate students, and others hired on a semester-to-semester basis.”¹⁹

A few studies have examined how instructors spend their time. One survey of scientists and engineers at 150 research institutions found that tenured faculty reported spending about one-third of their time on teaching-related activities.²⁰ Another study found that tenure-track faculty reported spending 27%–35% of their working hours on instructional tasks.²¹ In 2021, two assistant professors in the humanities penned a piece detailing their work routines: they reported devoting slightly less than 16 hours a week to teaching; 8 hours weekly to campus “service” (including campus programs and academic journals); and another 5–10 hours weekly to administrative tasks like email, trainings, and professional development.²²

The Competition to Teach Less

In 2019, John McGreevy, fresh off a 10-year term as dean of Notre Dame’s College of Arts and Letters, described a destructive “arms race” in teaching. He asked: “How many courses per semester should a faculty member at a major research university teach?” and continued:

The question is rarely asked—because it’s in no one’s interest to ask it. Not presidents, since in public institutions they, unlike faculty members, have to answer questions from more or less curious and informed state legislators about how professors use their time. . . . And not professors, eager to conduct more research, certainly, but also craving the flexibility of a schedule not burdened by the day-to-day rhythm of class meeting times.²³

McGreevy pointed to reporting by the University of Chicago’s John Boyer that the typical teaching load at his institution had been five or six courses a year into the 1960s but, by the 1980s, had declined by a third in the social sciences and humanities departments.²⁴ Similar trends were identified by Duke University’s Charles Clotfelter, who examined four highly regarded colleges and found a significant decline in the number of courses that faculty taught per year between 1977 and 1992.²⁵



At Notre Dame, McGreevy noted:

Faculty members in the humanities, social sciences, and arts moved from 3-3 on a semester system in the 1970s to 3-2 and then 2-2 in the late 1980s. When I started as dean, in 2008 . . . humanities, social-science, and arts faculty members taught two courses per semester. . . . The first strike came in economics. “We need to go 2-1,” the chair politely explained, “because otherwise we can’t hire anyone.” He was right, and so we did. . . . The next barrage came in psychology. “No top department is 2-2 anymore,” an external reviewer told me.²⁶

To compete for faculty, Notre Dame felt compelled to follow the lead of other universities. This is not unique to Notre Dame; when Yale’s political science department shifted to 2-1, McGreevy was told that it was because Harvard had done so. He observed: “When one program reduces teaching schedules, faculty members at other programs use competing offers to begin the process of forcing change across the academic ecosystem.”²⁷ In theory, reduced teaching loads are supposed to be conditional and variable—reserved for faculty who are bringing in funds and shouldering lots of other work. But the reality is that, as in any large organization, the new norm soon becomes the default.

The Problem with Fixating on Publication

Decades ago, researchers were already noting that four-year institutions, almost irrespective of institutional mission, tended to reward research and publication rather than teaching.²⁸ Indeed, more than a half-century ago, Harvard scholars Christopher Jencks and David Riesman mused on the “art of teaching,” noting that professors “have only a limited amount of time and energy, and they know that in terms of professional standing and personal advancement it makes more sense to throw this into research than teaching.”²⁹

The trend has only accelerated. Colorado State University’s Kimberly French and several colleagues have observed: “Even within teaching-oriented institutions, faculty are increasingly research productive, in an effort to generate funds and emulate the professional status awarded to their colleagues in research universities.”³⁰ The result is an ever-quickening publication paper chase. Between 2007–11, scholars across 290 PhD-granting U.S. institutions published 158,000 journal articles. Between 2015–19, faculty at those same institutions published 215,000 articles. At those institutions, the social sciences faculty grew 5% during 2011–19; the number of journal articles that they produced increased by 36%.³¹

As Philip Altbach and Hans de Wit observed in 2019, “there are too many books and articles of marginal quality, predatory journals are on the rise, and there is a tremendous pressure on academics worldwide to publish.”³² Indeed, University of Exeter’s Mark Hanson and several colleagues have reported on the rapid increase in the number of articles published per year during 2013–21, an emphasis on quantity that, they suggest, may have come at the expense of quality.³³

This incentive to churn out ever more publications has led to the publication of fragile studies whose conclusions cannot be replicated.³⁴ The result? It has proved disturbingly difficult to replicate findings in psychology, medical science, biology, economics, and the social sciences.³⁵ A survey in *Nature* found that more than 70% of researchers, primarily in the sciences, reported trying and failing to reproduce another scientist’s experiment.³⁶ Data from the Center for Scientific Integrity



show a steep increase in the number of retracted articles over two decades' time: approximately 10,000 papers published in 2022 were retracted; only 1,400 were retracted in 2012 and a mere 300 in 2002.³⁷

Meanwhile, much of what gets published is never read and never cited. Some 70% of the arts and humanities studies published in Web of Science, an index of scholarly journals, in 1990 were not cited within 25 years of publication.³⁸ An analysis of Scopus, a database of peer-reviewed literature, found that roughly 36% of arts and humanities papers, books, and chapters published during 1995–2015 had never been cited.³⁹

Summarizing a national survey of scholars, Patrick Collison and Michael Nielsen concluded: “Over the past century, we’ve vastly increased the time and money invested in science,” but the enterprise “is becoming far less efficient.”⁴⁰ Much of what is published in academe today is transactional, destined to be ignored, and more about careerist routine than about advancing knowledge or understanding. Such data make the case for reconsidering when publication represents a useful contribution—especially when it comes at the expense of time devoted to teaching and learning.

What’s College For, Anyway?

Students, parents, voters, and policymakers tend to imagine that the primary purpose of a four-year college is educating students. That is why the public provides enormous sums in grants, aid, and subsidized loans. If that is no longer the case, we should reevaluate the appropriate level of public support for four-year colleges. But assuming that the public and college leaders are in agreement about the importance of teaching and learning, the role of faculty clearly needs a reset.

Trustees should insist that teaching be the foundational responsibility of a professor’s job, with expectations and incentives overhauled to reflect that understanding. Colleges should actively engage professors in reimagining academic culture and then collect the information necessary to ensure that their campuses are operating in accord with this mission. There should and will be exceptions, but those should be exceptions—not the norm.

Embrace Transparency

When it comes to faculty workloads, boards and policymakers often don’t know what they don’t know. It is remarkably difficult to obtain data on teaching loads, professorial workweeks, and the like. Boards should start by directing that the leadership of an institution annually share reports on faculty teaching loads, service-related obligations, and research activity. College departments already gather most or all of the requisite information for purposes of tenure, promotion, and salary adjustment—but it is not always coherently assembled, much less shared with the board. For public institutions, policymakers should require the sharing of these same data with the state legislatures that fund them.

Boards should also insist on annual updates regarding staffing and workloads. What share of instruction is being provided by part-time faculty? What do students report about faculty availability and engagement? What do faculty report regarding their administrative burdens? How are new hires evaluated? Boards should share information with national entities and peer institutions to develop a robust picture of campus practices and culture. The board must ask the right questions to ensure that decision-making takes into account not only course loads and instructional hours but also what those mean for campus culture and student learning.



Reset Expectations

Most four-year colleges employ faculty on a nine-month contract, covering approximately 40 weeks. They typically require faculty to teach 13 weeks in the fall and 13 weeks in the spring—26 weeks of teaching in total. Colleges should adopt a norm that faculty commit 30–32 hours a week to instructional tasks during those 26 weeks.

While the details vary, a typical course entails about seven hours of instructional responsibility per week over the course of a semester: three hours of teaching and another four of planning, grading, and office hours. Some faculty will insist that such a figure is low; others quietly concede that teaching assistants, canceled classes, and years of experience mean that it can be high. In practice, the tally will vary by subject, student makeup, and pedagogy. Expecting faculty to devote 30–32 hours a week to teaching for 26 weeks per year, with other burdens appropriately reduced, would mean that faculty would be devoting about 800 hours per year to instruction (with 14 weeks still largely reserved for other pursuits).

If faculty work a 40-hour week and a 40-week (nine-month) year, typical faculty members would be devoting 50% of their salaried time to teaching. That leaves the other half of their nine-month work year for university service, research, and related pursuits. While the particulars would vary based on considerations such as class size or pedagogy, this would allow the typical full-time faculty member to routinely teach four or five classes per semester. (There should, of course, be flexibility for new faculty, or those taking on a new course, who might need additional time to prepare.) At an institution where faculty currently teach two courses in the fall and three in the spring, this would roughly double the amount of faculty instruction.

In practice, this would allow for smaller classes, reduce bottlenecks that make it harder for students to graduate on time, and lower costs by reducing the need for part-time adjuncts and teaching assistants. Coupling this with an expectation that extra teaching comes with an increased number of “office hours” would strengthen the focus on instruction and the bond between students and faculty.

Revisit What It Means to Be a “Good” Faculty Member

Today, even at “teaching-centered institutions,” teaching is too often deemed a burden. Hiring, promotion, and pay are driven more by research and grantsmanship than teaching. It's time to rethink this arrangement. Policymakers and trustees are in a position to insist that colleges rebalance their commitments. Those charged with governing colleges should ask themselves two simple questions: Do we think that teaching is a critical part of our mission? And, if so, what does it mean to be a “good” scholar?

Right now, institutions compete for faculty by promising substantial time for research, and they evaluate faculty based on publications, presentations at conferences, and the like. Trustees and policymakers should ask themselves whether these are complete measures of a scholar's contribution to an institution's mission. While NIH grants, million-dollar research collaborations, and widely cited research might constitute a substantial contribution, publishing “enough” in the “right” outlets should not serve as the only measure of accomplishment at any but the most research-centric institutions (more on this below).

For colleges that view themselves as educational communities, we suggest a default commitment to teaching and demonstrated competence as an instructor. This means placing a premium on faculty who willingly teach essential courses, make exceptional efforts to mentor students, help colleagues become more instructionally effective, or have a record of excellent instruction. Though all these efforts can be difficult to measure (which has been part of the rationale for emphasizing publication frequency so heavily), these challenges deserve to be confronted—and are being addressed in practice.⁴¹



Let Professors Teach

Every college proclaims its commitment to teaching, but far too few walk the walk. Vaguely urging faculty to “take teaching more seriously” would neither be meaningful nor fair, absent two complementary changes: to recalibrate the amount of research activity that faculty are expected to engage in; and to radically reduce the amount of time that faculty are expected to devote to administrative duties. If faculty are expected to act like educators, they need the time and bandwidth to do so.

When colleges articulate the administrative responsibilities of faculty, their lists are remarkably elastic: engaging in departmental administration, participating in outreach initiatives, bringing guest speakers to campus, reviewing manuscripts, advising student groups, and so forth. While all these activities can certainly be valuable, the question is *how* valuable and *how much* time faculty should devote to them. Notre Dame, for instance, sets an expectation of 10% of total workload for assistant professors and 20% for tenured faculty;⁴² 10%–15% sounds reasonable, if perhaps a bit high, and would amount to about 200 hours a year (of the 1,600-hour work year mentioned above).

It is essential that colleges actually honor that commitment—and not permit other obligations to sprawl at the expense of teaching. Trustees and policymakers have a concrete interest in professors being able to teach. For example, for the 2023–24 academic year, the nine-month average salary for an associate professor at a four-year public institution was just under \$100,000.⁴³ If that professor taught five courses per year, the faculty cost per course (before accounting for benefits) would be \$20,000. If that same scholar were teaching eight or nine courses a year, the cost per course would be more like \$12,000; the potential savings are enormous.

When faculty teach more and are actively engaged with students, it reduces the need for adjuncts, offers increased support for students, and bolsters outcomes. A substantial part of any savings should be invested in boosting faculty compensation—especially for those faculty serving more students, teaching foundational courses, or coaching colleagues. Boards should recognize that what matters on a teaching-centric campus might not align with what national associations deem important—and that’s okay. Among other things, it means that decisions regarding hiring, tenure, and promotion should rely less on publication or the opinions of disciplinary specialists and more on what happens in classrooms and with students.

A Warning Label for Research Institutions

There is, of course, an important place for research institutions. Research institutions should hire and promote faculty based on research activity, grant dollars, and publications—not on the basis of teaching and instruction. But lacking evidence that any of these factors makes for good teaching, research institutions for which teaching is a peripheral concern should be treated as suspect, when it comes to an undergraduate education.⁴⁴

Institutions that emphasize research owe it to prospective students to be clear about their priorities. Any designated research institution that chooses to maintain modest teaching loads and research-centric personnel policies should, as a condition of eligibility for public funds, be required to appropriately label all webpages and marketing materials. We would recommend something like: “This is a research institution. Faculty are hired and evaluated based primarily on their research. Classroom teaching will often be taught by part-time faculty or graduate assistants. This may affect course availability, mentoring, and instructional quality.”

While the value of research institutions should be acknowledged, we should cease assuming that good research institutions are necessarily good educational institutions. The unique goals of research institutions will inevitably be reflected in hiring decisions, promotion criteria, and instructional organization. Thus, a warning to prospective students seems appropriate.



Conclusion

Might a shift in focus from research to teaching repel faculty who don't want to teach? Possibly. But this should be seen, in the lexicon of Silicon Valley, as a feature—not a bug. Institutions of higher education should seek faculty who *want to teach*. There is no shortage of potential academics. The National Science Foundation notes that slightly fewer than 58,000 doctorates were awarded in the U.S. in 2023, and barely a third of those recipients have found employment in academe.⁴⁵ Given the surplus, colleges should screen for faculty who take teaching and mentoring seriously. It would help, of course, if doctoral programs prepared future professors to do this work.⁴⁶

Inevitably, a proposal like this will be read with one eye on the politics of our polarized age; some may read it as an attack on higher education and college faculty, and embrace or reject it on those grounds. But we'd urge such readers to think twice: this is not a tale of individual culpability but about how larger dynamics have distorted institutional priorities and professional work. We suspect that many in higher education would welcome the chance to devote more time to teaching if they were confident that it would be valued and that the demands of busywork and pressures of publication would lessen. There is a win-win to be found for students, scholars, and the nation. But it will take bold leadership to make it happen.



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