Letter from the Editor-in-Chief: How Much Do Faculty Work?

Russell L. Herman

The University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC

Once again there is an economic cloud hovering over college and university instructors. Over the last several decades, the typical response to recessions has been to cut state higher education budgets and replace the funds supporting public education with increases in tuition and fees. Gold (1995) noted that during the recession of the ‘90’s, “higher education took the worst beating of any major spending category.” This led to average tuition increases of 36.6 percent between 1989-90 and 1992-93 at four-year public colleges and universities. More recently, we are seeing additional increases in the costs of education and efforts to change higher education as we once knew it. Along with consideration of such changes, people often ask, “How much do faculty work?”

This question is tied directly to other questions, such as “What do college and university faculty members actually do?” and “How much time do faculty invest in teaching, scholarship, and service?” Readers of this journal no doubt have varying answers these questions. However, contrary to public perception, most faculty do not come and go as they please. To be an effective instructor involves “active involvement with students, constant preparation and reflection, engagement in peer collaboration and discourse and community involvement with the next generation of scholars and leaders.” An effective teacher cares about teaching and students. Every component of their workload ties what they do to the advancement of knowledge in both the content and teaching methods aimed at fostering lifelong learning in their students.

I know I have been quite busy myself over the last two weeks. I typically come to work by 6 A.M. in preparation for 8:00 A.M. classes every day and office hours every day and leave after 5:00 P. M. In the last two weeks I had 10 meetings with students on projects and a Directed Independent Study. I did two peer classroom observations, three events for the Center for Teaching Excellence, attended two colloquia, participated in a panel discussion open to the public on the notion of time (which took hours of preparation for a ten minute presentation), attended a two hour department meeting, attended a two hour meeting on evaluating faculty teaching, spent time reviewing annual reports for the previously mentioned meeting, and had a planning meeting for an upcoming public seminar by a noted speaker. I also reviewed a couple of papers for professional journals, entertained student questions when they came by outside of office hours, and wrote two refer-

---

1 Author’s email: hermanr@uncw.edu
2 Correspondence with John Fischetti, JET Editorial Board.
ence letters for students. This past weekend my colleagues and I ran five events for the regional Science Olympiad, which required getting majors to volunteer and to draft the events and spend 6 A.M. to almost 5:00 P.M. on campus on a Saturday. Well, that is almost all I have done the past two weeks. I also worked on putting the current issue of JET together. I am sure I am leaving something out, like editing and posting video lectures of one of my classes, grading homework, and hoping to find time to finish the draft of a textbook for my publisher.

Questions about faculty workload are not new (Charters, 1942; Wyant & Morrison, 1972). Charters (1942) discusses data collected from faculty of the College of Education at Ohio State. In this study faculty report many of the same activities that we would list some seventy years later: class instruction; preparing syllabi, notes, exams; professional reading, writing, attending lectures, practicing; grading and reading papers; mentoring; professional functions; dissertations and theses; conference attendance (also with students), committee meeting and committee work; research; clerical work; preparing for professional activities; and other assorted activities. They overall worked 50-65 hours per week. This included working additional hours during the evening and over weekends. Half those interviewed began work between 8:00 A. M. and 9:00 A.M. and half ended between 7:35 P. M. and 10:30 P.M. The median class load was 12 hours and they spent roughly the same amount of time in preparing for classes and grading papers. The rest of the time was devoted to the other activities.

In 1994 the AAUP published a report, The Work of Faculty: Expectations, Priorities, and Rewards, which described the climate at the time and that preferred maximum faculty workloads were determined. In 1969 the goal was to balance teaching and research. In the 90’s service was added to the mix. The general recommendations in 1969 were that for undergraduate teaching the maximum, though not recommended, load was 12 hours per week with not more than 6 different preparations per academic year. For graduate courses the maximum was 9 hours per week. The report also included data from the Department of Education that reported 1988 faculty workloads across colleges and universities by Carnegie Classification indicating that the average total number of hours worked by faculty at 4-Year institutions was 54 hours per week. The time spent on various activities in Fall 1987 differed across different institution types, but the percentage of time spent on teaching varied from the low 40%’s for research institutions to 60-70% at comprehensive, liberal arts, and two-year institutions. A large chunk of the remaining time was divided amongst research and administrative activities.

A 2012 FSSE (Faculty Survey on Student Engagement) survey of faculty in 2011 indicate that faculty spend on average 64% of their time to teaching and 14% to research. Another report of interest is the HERI Faculty Survey (Hurtada, Eagan, Pryor, Whang, & Tran, 2012). More recent data can be found online from various institutions. For example, MIT posted a 2004 faculty survey which is interesting to read because it is an in-depth review of not only faculty activity, but also looks at areas that faculty find particularly stressful. In fact, this survey highlights a high level of stress in spite of the fact that most faculty enjoy this line of work. This is contrary to the discussions which recently took place at the Forbes blog site as a result of Adams (2013) reporting that the least
stressful job is that of a university professor. This sparked a few responses, including the thoughtful response from David Kroll (2013) and the numerous comments on his article.

One omission in many studies is to track the work habits of professors during vacations and summer months, which is another misperception that has appeared in the media (Levy, 2012). Faculty salaries only cover nine months of the year. Often faculty work over the summer: doing research; going on field trips; hosting study abroad trips; writing papers and books; conducting or attending professional workshops; going to conferences; or, carrying out curriculum development for the following academic year. Many faculty work over Fall and Spring Breaks, which are only meant to be breaks for students. Some faculty get external funding, but that is another area affected by recent budget cuts. So, in order to get the necessary work done which counts towards their productivity (Musick, 2011; Townsend & Rosser, 2007), faculty often have to support their funding for professional development, including books, travel to conferences to continue learning new content and pedagogy and technology to keep up with the rapid rate of change.

There have been many comments in recent years mischaracterizing faculty workloads. No doubt readers of JET are well aware of how much time they spend on teaching, scholarship, and service. We are also aware of how difficult it is to keep up with our content areas and new research into student learning and methods for reaching students or using emerging technologies. On top of this, our students are changing and what they bring to the classroom is changing. We are seeing workloads increase in order to address accountability, especially in assessment. (We have to design our own assessment rubrics, administer them, and write up reports on what we have learned.) But if some have their way, like the Governor of Ohio, we may see a government mandated increase in faculty workload (Kilpatrick, 2013; Straumsheim, 2013). So, perhaps more of us (as part of our workload?) might consider tracking our activities over a period of time as preparation to answer “What do faculty do?” (For example, see Nell (2011).) Communicating what we actually do might demonstrate that we are continuously striving for effectiveness and excellence both in and out of the classroom.

References

FSSE 2012, Faculty time spent on research, teaching, and other professorial activities. Retrieved March 5, 2013, from http://nsse.iub.edu/_/index.cfm?cid=509


