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What Do Professors Do All Day? (I've Been Trying to Answer Most of My Life)

By Lisa Roney

UCF Forum columnist

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What do professors do all day?

It's a question that many people ask under their breath frequently, but that seldom gets answered directly. As a child of a professor who then became one myself, I've been trying to answer this question most of my life.

Once, when I was about 8, a neighbor kid put it bluntly: "My mom saw your dad going to the mailbox in shorts and a T-shirt in the middle of the day. Doesn't he have a *job*? What does he *do* all day?"

Back then, of course, it didn't merit comment that this kid's mom stayed home all day herself. But even if we're more accepting of househusbands nowadays, it can be disconcerting to be mistaken when you're a hardworking professional. Whether it's me or my husband (also a professor), even in the age of telecommuting, we find this mystified attitude still prevails. People often think professors have it easy. Even within the academic community, as we settle into each new school year, we faculty will be met with some surprise by new students and community college transfers because we are not in our offices eight hours a day.

So where are we? I read once in an online forum about the academic life that professors are paid for "being in class six to nine hours and holding two or three office hours a week." This sounds like an incredibly good deal for the professors and a bad deal for those who pay taxes and tuition. If that's true, we only work eight to 12 hours a week. Or, if observers consider grading and class-prep time, they might think 20 hours a week. Hostile answers often reflect a misunderstanding of the range of responsibilities and purposes that faculty serve.

I sometimes encounter students who believe similarly that my job is teaching, period. If so, it would make sense that I would be either in the classroom or in my office. When I inform them that teaching makes up only a portion of what I'm evaluated on, they are shocked. I explain that 40 percent teaching, 50 percent research, and 10 percent service

is typical for a tenure-track faculty member at a four-year institution. I say, “Just for the sake of argument, let’s estimate I’m working 20 hours a week on my teaching, and that’s 40 percent of my job. You do the math. For a 40-hour work week, I’m already spending too much time on y’all.” We laugh. They know I spend far more than 20 hours a week on my teaching.

It’s often necessary for me to go on to explain that service includes things such as curriculum development, committee work, event planning, student-organization advising, and other tasks that take place beyond the classroom. I let them know that tenure-track positions, like mine, are only one of several kinds of faculty jobs, and that tenure almost always requires significant research and a six-year probation and review before the job becomes long-term. We talk about how other kinds of faculty positions (primarily non-tenure-track) may be assigned a different proportion of responsibilities, and that there is a complex array of issues around the types, compensation and responsibilities of different kinds of faculty.

Most professors I know, whether tenure-track or not, log in between 50 and 80 hours a week, and don’t quit working when they go home.

This gets at the question of: ***Why are you hanging around the house in your bathrobe on a weekday afternoon sometimes?*** It might be because we taught until 10:30 the previous evening. Or, these days it could be that much of our teaching and contact with colleagues comes via email and online courses. We are now more available than ever. I know that I usually spend at least two hours every morning trying to satisfy email requests and keep up with the constant influx.

It’s also because many of us spend a lot of time alone at the kitchen table grading papers, or in a home office or art studio hammering away at the next research paper or daubing paint onto a canvas (and one’s clothes). We work at home because much of our labor requires uninterrupted concentration, at least ideally. If we don’t require specialized laboratory equipment, we often dedicate space in our own homes to our efforts.

Yes, we are paid to *think* and to move our areas of research and investigation forward, as well as teaching. This brings to our students cutting-edge knowledge as well as, often, funding and respect to our campus. Some may see this as a luxury, but it’s hard to deny that the life of the mind, whatever one thinks of it, often does not call for fancy dress.

On the other end of our long days, there are often events such as gallery openings, visiting speaker lectures, and visiting-scholar receptions, on top of the department meetings that may start at 4:30 p.m. and often run to 6 p.m.

Which leads to another question: ***If it’s fun, an event someone else might attend for pleasure, how can that be work?*** Indeed, faculty are lucky in that we usually do love our jobs. We invest deeply in both our students and in the research that we conduct outside of the classroom, to the extent that some consider being a professor a calling, similar to being a pastor or a nun.

Faculty members deal constantly with the tension inherent in being dedicated and also needing time away, needing self-care, needing personal time. For me, going to hear my MFA students read from their work provides great pleasure and pride, but it takes time from my family, from my down time, and from my own other categories of work. Juggling a variety of demands constitutes another cognitive load that can become yet another form of work. It takes constant decision-making and prioritizing.

What do we do all day? Part of what makes this an important and interesting question is that we do such a variety of things it's difficult to summarize. It depends a great deal on our fields of research and our particular university assignments, as well as simply which day of the week it is and whether we are teaching face to face or online.

You can bet, however, that we will likely be working—for our students, for our programs, for UCF, for the community, and for the greater knowledge and understanding of the world.

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