



Progress

WORK IN PROGRESS

What Americans Don't Understand About Teachers and Professors

Given that education has become polarized and politicized, it makes sense that educators feel misunderstood and underappreciated.

By Derek Thompson



This is Work in Progress, a newsletter by Derek Thompson about work, technology, and how to solve some of America's biggest problems. [Sign up here to get it every week.](#)

Last week, I asked readers to tell me what people don't get about their job. In an economy with thousands of occupations and hundreds of sectors, and where many people within the same large company have no idea what their colleagues do all day, I thought hearing from dozens of people about the reality of their work would be valuable.

I received several hundred replies—from opera singers, TV screenwriters, chefs, neuroscientists, and more. However, no category of workers wrote back more than teachers and professors. Given that education has become polarized and politicized, it makes sense that educators feel misunderstood and underappreciated.

By a wide margin, the most common reply among college and university professors was that teaching is just a small part of the job. “Standing in front of a classroom full of undergraduate students represents about 5 percent of my time,” said a tenured geology professor in Canada. He continued:

Each hour of classroom time requires a similar amount of preparation time. If I create a new course, I am busy full time for roughly half a semester, doing background readings, assembling display materials, and writing lecture notes. I have a group of 12 research students; for each of them I must write grant proposals to generate the funding they need.

I interact regularly with funding organizations, meet the students regularly to review their progress, take them into the field for weeks of training and orientation at the start of their projects, read background literature so I can

remain up to date on their widely varied research topics, and edit their reports and manuscripts for submission to journals.

I review other people's work constantly. The scientific peer review process requires two or three formal reviews for every paper or thesis that is published. If I and my students publish 10 papers each year then I need to do as many as 30 reviews just to balance the amount of review work we are generating for others in the system. I also sit on several administrative committees that require regular meetings, which requires hours of preparation by reading and, again, reviewing documents.

Somewhere among all those demands I have to try to find time to work on my own research projects, which are the fun part but which generally get shoved to the back of the queue.

Several professors pointed to the irony that they are primarily thought of as teachers by their students and the public, even though they are promoted based on factors that are basically unrelated to teaching, such as publishing articles in obscure journals and raising grant money for a university.

“People think my job consists of giving a lecture for a few hours per week, with a lot of freedom and free time after that,” said one professor at a public university in California. “Teaching is just something to motivate the legislature to send taxpayers' money to the university. Legislators think the purpose of funding the university is so Johnny or Suzy can go to college and get a degree and a better-paying job thereafter, and pay taxes to the state. What drives the campus culture, and takes the most time, is research.”

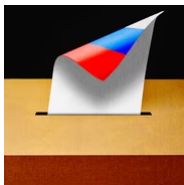
So, a professor's job is a strange bundle: teacher, administrator, researcher, and grant-wrangler. “You see the disjunction here?” wrote Jon, a professor at a state university in Texas. “Undergraduate teaching is the backbone of most universities, yet at institutions like the one at which I work there is no reward for quality teaching.”

The incentive structure of education also came under sharp criticism from Kory, who said he's taught "at least two years at all four major levels of public education: elementary, middle, high school, and undergraduate." Kory wrote:

We talk about and reward teachers as becoming better at their craft the older their students are. College professors ... make more money. But anyone who actually works in education knows that elementary teachers are, pound-for-pound, the best at what [they] do. First grade teachers move mountains everyday. Fourth grade teachers would make our best cult leaders if they weren't justifiably exhausted all the time.

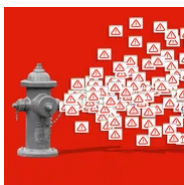
Perhaps the most bizarre and borderline-exploitative part of the work is that today's professors often write free articles for academic journals that they have to pay to access. "When we write articles for academic journals, we are not paid for the articles," said Caitie, an associate professor. "And the journals are incredibly expensive, so in some cases, I can't even access a journal article I've written because our university doesn't have a subscription to that journal. When I review journal articles, I'm not paid for that work either." Several readers referred to an observation from the economist John Kenneth Galbraith that academics are the most self-exploited class of workers.

RECOMMENDED READING



Putin Didn't Think He Would Fool Anyone

BRIAN KLAAS



Is This the Beginning of the End of the Internet?

CHARLIE WARZEL



Early Photos of Hurricane Ian's Landfall in Florida

ALAN TAYLOR

We also heard from several high-school teachers, who addressed the idea that they're lucky to take the whole summer off. "I spend my 'summers off' reading books to improve my teaching, find new texts to teach, write [the] curriculum, and plan for the upcoming school year," said Amanda, a high-school English teacher from Colorado. "Teaching is a constant, year-round career."

Many readers argued that teaching—whether K–12 or college—is more demanding than most people think. "I'm at school from 6:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. every day," Amanda continued. "When there is a school dance, I chaperone from 7 to 11 p.m. on a Saturday. We frequently have meetings after school, extra days of training, parent-teacher conferences, weekends spent grading, and time spent just attending student events like plays, concerts, and sporting events." Sylvia, an English professor at a small liberal-arts college, added, "You're never not working. I never even go to a movie without thinking, 'Can I use this in my class?'"

So, if being a teacher or professor is often so grueling, why does anybody do it? "Despite the meager pay and the constant criticism in the media, many people will never understand that the wide majority care about kids," said Donna, from Maine. "There is nothing more rewarding than seeing the light bulb go on when a student masters a skill or grasps a concept."

"I can't imagine doing anything else," said Amanda, the high-school English teacher. "I love getting to talk about big ideas with kids still forming their opinions, I love teaching them how to write and share their thoughts, I love teaching them to be curious and ask questions."

Remote work is already changing the way millions of people work and where they live. Register for Derek's office hours on the future of this phenomenon. If you can't attend, you can watch a recording any time on The Atlantic's YouTube channel.
