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Dear Colleague:

How many hours a week should a professor in an institution like UW-Madison teach? As an academic, you can't expect me to give a simple answer! What I can do is to provide a context for thinking about the question.

I begin with the idea that many jobs have a front stage and a back stage. Routine jobs tend to be almost all front stage: the curtain rises at 8 and sets at 4 sharp. Little or no preparation is required before one appears on the scene and no work is taken home. In the performing arts, we are perhaps most conscious of the existence of a sprawling backstage. The pianist appears for only one concerto, lasting three-quarters of an hour, but the time he spends backstage to prepare for that brief appearance is long and arduous. The same goes, of course, for professional athletics. Athletes appear briefly on front stage, behind which are hours and days of practice, including muscle-toning exercises and regimens of food intake and rest that seem to have little to do with the game itself. No true fan of baseball will insist that his team play more often if by playing more often--hence with less time for practice--it plays less well.

The performance of an artist and that of a professor before her class have a couple of significant differences. The artist is guided by a score or a script which does not change. Moreover, his audience is not itself (usually) made up of artists--aspiring pianists or actors. By contrast, the professor has to write her own script, and she has to improve her script, based on research, year after year. Moreover, in upper-division classes and seminars, her audience is not made up of rank amateurs but are themselves aspiring professionals. A professor of geography teaches other budding geographers who, because of their own ambition in that particular field, can be highly critical of the performer.

I have already linked research to teaching. The two activities go together. Nevertheless, people have claimed that research is somehow antagonistic to teaching--that it takes the professor away from classroom performance. Is this true? Again, the answer cannot be simple for it hinges a great deal on how one understands the word "research." At the most basic level, I understand research to be another word for serious thinking. No one, I hope, will say that serious thinking in the library, lab, or, for that matter, at the kitchen table, is bad because it takes time away from more hours in the classroom.

However, just as there is good and poor thinking, so there is good and poor research. What is good in each case? A general answer is resonance and fertility. An idea is mediocre if it has no resonance. A piece of research is mediocre if it has little or no consequence, not only for the professor's

peers and students but perhaps even for herself in the sense that no new project--even for herself--flows naturally and compellingly out of what she has done. So a legitimate complaint of tax-payers might be: the professor's research is not good enough, her thinking is not sufficiently deep or serious. Conclusion: UW professors should spend more time backstage thinking hard and doing research so that when they do appear before students they will have worthwhile things to say that cannot be found readily elsewhere.

If we are serious about education, the question is not simply how many hours in a week a professor appears before her class, but how well she uses those hours. (The baseball analogy I have offered earlier may be helpful here: the reward of watching one superior game is surely greater than that of watching two or three run-of-the-mill ones). I have been saying: good research is good thinking, and good thinking is good research. But what about presentation--the technique of getting the message across to students? Well, here I reaffirm a traditional view, namely, good thinking is clear thinking, and the degree that one can get an idea across depends very much on how clearly and firmly one has oneself grasped it. True, we cannot all be Susanne Langer or Stephen Hawking, but the lucidity of their exposition of the most abstruse subjects ought to be our model. By example, they teach us how to teach.

Why am I writing this letter? To whom is it news? Obviously, it is not news to my faculty colleagues. It is not news either to hardworking legislators who know from their own experience that effectiveness frontstage--at the conference table or in a legislative session--is the fruit of prolonged preparation backstage. It is not news to students, who have voted with their feet: they have come to UW-Madison knowing full well that it is a teaching and research institution. What draws them here is--well, the Ratskeller, but also, I submit, the excitement of emergence--the feeling that they are at a place where new ideas and their embodiments come into being and where, indeed, they themselves can and do contribute to that process.

Best wishes,

*E. L.*