

Introduction to University: Lecture Two

A First Look at Professors

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Since professors and students are the two most important groups within any university community, each should know something about the other. I find that students often don't have a clue as to what professors are all about. (Probably professors are just as clueless about students.) That students know so little about the people who will be central to their lives for three or four years is why each year I give a talk to my first-year students about just what it is that professors do.

What *do* professors do, then—and why do they do it?

Research, teaching and service. Professors pursue research, inquiry, interpretation, curation, appraisal or scholarship; they help apprentice intellectuals acquire the skills and knowledge useful to hard thought; and they help to promote the life of the mind.

Research includes everything a professor does in engaging intellectually with his or her object of study. It includes, of course, conducting experiments and making observations, if the professor is a scientist, but it also includes interpreting novels and films, interpreting social phenomena, articulating tastes and values, seeking to resolve philosophical problems, and criticizing the research, interpretations, appraisals and solutions of other professors. English professors, historians, and philosophy professors engage in what university people are happy to call “research,” just as physics professors do, although the research of the former rarely involves experiments and might not produce any sort of thing that could ever count as knowledge.

The category of research also includes disseminating one's research, that is, getting one's results, ideas, interpretations and appraisals out to the community of academics and intellectuals, and to the public. To disseminate their research, professors publish articles and books, give lectures and presentations, post videos, and write for magazines, newspapers and blogs.

Summed up, a professor's research consists simply in, first, thinking hard about things and, second, explaining one's thoughts to others.

Teaching includes everything professors do in order to help students to become competent intellectuals. Teaching takes place inside and outside the classroom, and it's done both formally and informally. It involves constructing curricula and syllabi, and reading about and discussing teaching, as well as delivering lectures to students and conducting seminars. (Some activities, such as writing a textbook, clearly count as both research and teaching.)

A professor's research and teaching are not independent engagements. Each informs and improves the other. University teaching depends on research, on thinking hard about things. Unless a professor is actively pursuing study, he won't excel at bringing his students into the world of study. He'll simply be reporting to them what he himself has learned or been told earlier in his career. Research, although it doesn't depend on teaching (as teaching does depends on research), can be helped immensely by teaching. A professor concerned to help his students become competent intellectuals themselves will be stimulated to make his thoughts clear and to connect them to matters, especially to controversies, that resonate with us all. The effect of teaching can be to bring breadth, direction and clarity to a professor's research.

That research and teaching inform each other is denied by some academics. But they think of teaching as imparting knowledge and skills to students, the knowledge and skills of a discipline, say, or those needed for a career or to be a good citizen. When we think of teaching as initiating students into the life of the mind, though, it is only a professor who conducts research who can show students the nature of academic endeavour. The professor initiates and socializes students into the life of the mind by example.

Research and teaching are the twin centres of an academic university, a university that houses liberal study. What about service? Service, like teaching, is about helping people to live the life of the mind, but it is specifically to help people to live the life of the mind by tending to the institutions that support that life.

One of a professor's concerns, then, must be to see that his or her home university runs well, that research and teaching are going well in it. Professors serve their universities by, for instance, sitting on committees or assuming the responsibilities of an officer (being the Undergraduate Advisor in one's academic department, perhaps). Service also includes communicating suggestions and criticisms regarding the university to colleagues and administrators. (To criticize the proliferation or busywork of committees is one important way to serve one's university.)

Activities directed toward institutions outside one's own university can also help promote the life of the mind. Running a discussion group, organizing conferences or talks, editing journals, refereeing papers for conferences or for publishers, reading and commenting on a colleague's manuscript, advising student groups – these are all ways of serving the academic community and intellectual life. Writing popular articles for newspapers and magazines is also to engage in service (as well as in research).

A centrally important service role for professors these days is criticism of contemporary trends at universities. Universities are abandoning academic values and their academic mission. Professors must raise their voices against the means and ends of their institutions if universities are to remain hospitable to liberal study.

Why do professors engage in research, teaching and service? Simply for the love of it, at least with regard to research and teaching. We professors will say we're *working* on a paper or *working* when we give a lecture, but more accurately we're at *play*. Professors, at least ideally,

enjoy their academic endeavours simply as ends in themselves (even as they might also enjoy the steady income or the status that comes with being a professor). Professors want to think hard about the difficult matters that intrigue them and to bring their developed thoughts to others – to other professors, to students, to anyone interested in their topic. Professors enjoy being with students, whom they take to be apprentice intellectuals, especially when those students are also engaged in study just for the love of it. Professors delight in delivering lectures to students or overseeing seminar gatherings with students, for it's exciting to be with young intellectuals themselves excited to think hard about difficult, intriguing matters.

Perhaps service is only rarely loved for its own sake. Sitting on committees is dull and draining, and organizing conferences is always frustrating. Someone needs to do these things, though, and to do them right, if institutions that protect and promote the life of the mind are to exist at all. It is, then, because professors love thinking hard about things and recognize that the possibility of their thinking hard about things depends on the existence and well functioning of institutions to house the activity of thinking hard about things, that professors shoulder the burdens of service. Indeed, the sad state of our current universities, and of intellectual life generally, is largely due to the fact that those who love research and teaching haven't been volunteering for service or raising their voices in criticism. Service roles and activities have been left to those who care more about other things than they do about the life of the mind. Service has been relegated to people who would have the university be directly involved in quests for social justice, for instance, and that fact has diverted the university as an institution from protecting and promoting the life of the mind.

Professors engage in research and teaching because they love living the life of the mind, and they accept service, or should accept service, in order to make it possible to live the life of the mind. In the main, then, professors do what professors do because it's fun.

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