

BACKGROUND

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The Professor Racket: How Universities Could Reduce Poor Teaching and Shoddy Research

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

University professors are conducting junk research—grievance studies or non-replicable studies generated with p-hacking, specification shopping, and other fraud.

Despite this low-quality research, universities are facilitating an increasing allocation of professor time to research activity by reducing teaching loads.

Universities must raise teaching loads; if professors teach more classes, they will have less time to produce quantity over quality in their research.

An academic colleague recently quipped, “I could retire, but who could tell the difference?” As with most jokes, this one has an element of truth. The truth is that the average professor works far less than most employed people do, especially compared to those in well-compensated professional occupations.

To compound that problem, too much of what professors spend their time on is unproductive, failing to yield societal benefit or to advance the missions of their universities. Those who govern universities, including their senior leadership, boards of trustees, and public policymakers should restructure the requirements and incentives in academia to improve professors’ productivity.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/bg3901>

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The “Overworked” Professor

When listening to many professors, they sound like they are among the most overworked people on the planet. Reality rarely matches their rhetoric.

Professors often come to campus a few times a week to teach courses, hold office hours, and occasionally attend a committee meeting. For the rest of the week, they are nowhere to be found. They may work at home to produce research, prepare for classes, or grade exams. But judging by the volume and quality of the research that most produce, as well as student accounts of teaching practices,¹ it is hard to imagine that these tasks consume the rest of their week.

Breaks for spring, summer, Thanksgiving, and winter eliminate almost two-fifths of the year from the academic calendar. Professors certainly devote portions of those breaks to research and class preparation, but again, judging by results, the average workload seems light. Overall, it is fair to say that academia is a remarkably cushy field.

Other close observers of higher education paint a similar picture of professors not fully using their time productively. As now-retired Northwestern University professor Joseph Epstein put it, “When I began teaching in my mid-30s, an older friend, long resident at the same university, said to me, ‘Welcome to the racket.’ What he meant is that I would be getting a full-time salary for what was essentially a six-month job, and without ever having to put in an eight-hour day.”²

George Mason University economist Bryan Caplan described it even more dramatically: “Tenured professors get good salaries to do about 10% of a real job. 15% tops. All their other responsibilities are, for practical purposes, optional.”³

Of course, these accounts stand in stark contrast to Boise State professor John Ziker’s description, who claimed that academics tend to work 60-hour weeks.⁴ He based that claim on a survey he administered to 30 colleagues who provided details of everything they did the previous day.

Leaving aside whether Ziker’s survey of a few dozen professors at his university is representative of academia more generally, there are serious problems with simply asking professors about how much they work. Because university administrators are unwilling to judge the quality of academic contributions (out of fear of having those judgments challenged and due to an aversion to exerting the effort required to assess quality), professors are primarily evaluated for promotion, tenure, and raises based on the *quantity* of their activity.⁵ For these evaluations, professors compile lists of their accomplishments, commonly known as “brag sheets” because they reward those who exaggerate as much as possible.

The incentives for professors to inflate their accomplishments are so great and the task of having to brag about one's effort is so routine that most professors have internalized their distorted narrative as if it were the truth. If they openly admitted that they spend little time on teaching and service and that their research was produced with minimal effort, they would be unlikely to receive tenure or later promotions and raises.

So, it has become an ingrained part of academic culture to complain to colleagues, on social media, and, apparently, even to researchers studying the topic about how much they all work. It is accurate for a few professors, mostly high-powered academics at top institutions, but at the hundreds of public and low-status universities, the assertion that they all work 60 or more hours per week is preposterous. The old joke is that being a professor means that one works 24/7—24 hours a week for seven months. The truth is more likely to be found in jest than complaint.

Spending Too Much Time on Useless Research

But even if it is hard to believe that professors work far less than those in similar occupations outside academia, such as lawyers, accountants, or industry scientists, it is abundantly clear that the task that consumes a significant and growing portion of their time—producing research—is most often useless. Strong professional incentives exist for professors to increase the volume of their research publications regardless of quality.

The exact numbers vary depending on which kinds of articles are counted, but all accounts of trends in academic publishing describe a dramatic increase over time. One analysis puts the number of published academic articles in 2022 at more than 5 million, increasing by more than 20 percent over a five-year span.⁶ Foreign academic activity has contributed greatly to the total volume, but even when counting only English-language publications, the number of journals has risen by almost 40 percent over the past decade to more than 35,000.⁷

Some might interpret this high volume of research activity as evidence of the expansion of human knowledge, but if that were true the increase in publications would be accompanied by an increase in the *use* of that research, as measured by how often it is read and cited by others. Yet, academia has become a play in which everyone struts about the stage and no one is in the audience to view it. As Lokman Meho put it, “It is a sobering fact that some 90% of papers that have been published in academic journals are never cited. Indeed, as many as 50% of papers are never read by anyone other than their authors, referees and journal editors.”⁸

An analysis by Michael Fire and Carlos Guestrin found that, excluding self-citation, “72.1% of all papers published in 2009 had no citations after 5 years.”⁹ This high rate of uncited research is especially surprising given the perverse incentives to inflate citation counts with more numerous publications and ever-longer reference sections.¹⁰ Despite these distortions that tend to overstate research influence, the increasing uselessness of much research still prevents it from attracting any readership or outside attention.

Concerns about research quality are particularly severe in the humanities. James Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose sought to highlight the problem by publishing a series of fake articles that most people would understand as hilarious parodies—and which academic journals treated as cutting-edge scholarship. They submitted 20 fake articles and found:

Seven of our papers were accepted, many in top-ranking journals. These include an adaptation of Adolf Hitler’s “Mein Kampf,” which was accepted by a social work journal. Another develops the concept of “fat bodybuilding” for a discipline called fat studies, and a third claims to address “rape culture” by monitoring dog-humping incidents at dog parks in Southeast Portland, Oregon.¹¹

But this problem is not confined to the less-scientific humanities or the politicized fields sometimes called “grievance studies.” In the social sciences, psychology has endured what is known as the “replication crisis,” in which perhaps half of its published findings cannot be replicated by other researchers.¹² Investigations of p-hacking and specification shopping, techniques by which researchers can artificially claim to have discovered statistically significant results, suggest that these problems are common throughout social science, although they are more common in some fields than in others.¹³

In medicine and the other hard sciences there has been a rash of high-profile allegations of research fraud, involving Harvard Medical School and the president of Stanford University, who was forced to resign from his position.¹⁴ The hard sciences have also witnessed the most dramatic rise in the volume of articles published despite rising concerns about the importance and replicability of those findings.¹⁵

There have been impressive advances in science to which academic research has contributed enormously, but these are refreshing splashes of water in an ocean of junk research—grievance studies or non-replicable research generated with p-hacking, specification shopping, and other types of fraud. University leaders and policymakers can drastically reduce the total volume of junk research produced without undermining the mission of universities to seek the truth and expand human knowledge.

Universities Are in Peril

Despite low quality, universities are facilitating this increasing allocation of professor time to research activity by reducing teaching loads. A former dean at Notre Dame described the common pattern: “Faculty members in the humanities, social sciences, and arts moved from 3-3 on a semester system in the 1970s to 3-2 and then 2-2 in the late 1980s.”¹⁶ A “2-2” teaching load means that tenured and tenure-track professors would typically be expected to teach two courses that meet for about 2.5 hours per week each semester. By the 2000s, professors in science and engineering were down to a 1-1 load with the expectation that they would generate research grants. More recently, leading universities are making 2-1 standard in the social sciences.

Universities are pushing faculty to allocate more of their time to research for a number of reasons. First, they believe that research productivity, primarily measured by its quantity, has the greatest potential to increase a university’s status in academia and influence in the broader world. Second, they believe that research generates significant additional revenue in the form of grants and gifts. Third, they believe that increasing the share of professor workload devoted to research over teaching is the best way to attract and retain the most talented faculty.

Leaving aside the merits of each of these claims, the biggest problem with the arguments used to justify shifting more faculty toward research is that none of them serves the central mission of higher education—the discovery and dissemination of truth. Having greater status and influence, increasing revenues, and attracting talented faculty are all worthless if they are not in service of searching for and teaching the truth.

This is not lofty rhetoric. The hard reality of higher education is that the entire enterprise depends on taxpayers and tuition-payers believing that universities serve the noble purpose of truth-seeking to justify their enormous and constant need for public subsidy. The moment that people lose faith in universities and begin to see them as a racket meant to enrich and indulge the people who work in them, the subsidies disappear and higher education collapses on itself.

Universities are increasingly looking like rackets to outside observers. The congressional hearing in which three university presidents embarrassingly were unable to explain why chanting genocidal slogans did not violate their codes of conduct has become the most watched hearing of all time, with more than a billion views.¹⁷ Professors still retain the high regard of college-educated Democrats, but among Republicans and those without a

college education, sentiment toward academia has soured enormously. In a recent Gallup survey, only 22 percent of Republicans viewed college teachers as having high honesty and ethical standards, 40 percentile points less than among Democrats.¹⁸ Even with the higher regard among Democrats, the overall opinion of academia has plummeted, with Gallup concluding that “[c]ollege teachers have not been viewed this poorly since 1977.”¹⁹

Rising tuition costs, ideological imbalance, low-quality instruction, and increasingly unreliable or irrelevant research are depleting the reservoir of goodwill that universities have accumulated over time. If those who govern universities are not moved by the truth-seeking mission of academia to pursue reforms, they should be motivated by the potentially existential threat that a collapse in public confidence might pose to organizational survival.

Solutions and Problems

To restore confidence in universities and to re-focus them on their truth-seeking mission, trustees and policymakers need to eliminate the aspects of higher education that enable rackets: light workloads and the rising volume of low-quality research. To do this, those who govern universities need to raise teaching loads for tenured and tenure-track professors. If professors teach more classes, there will be fewer questions about how much they are actually working. And if the incentives are shifted back toward teaching, professors will produce less bad research.

Higher education has the twin purposes of discovering and disseminating truth. Excess research has been undermining the former while distracting from the latter. Increasing teaching loads has the potential to address both problems by reducing the opportunity and reward for producing junk research, while re-directing professors toward teaching.

The most serious problem with increasing teaching loads for professors is that they generally hate having to teach more and too often are lousy in the classroom. To some extent professors have been conditioned to be poor instructors because the worse they are at doing it, the more universities hire others, like adjuncts, to do it instead.

The late poet Shel Silverstein observed a similar problem in the poem, “How Not to Have to Dry the Dishes,” which reads: “If you have to dry the dishes / (Such an awful, boring chore) / If you have to dry the dishes / (’Stead of going to the store) / If you have to dry the dishes / And you drop one on the floor— / Maybe they won’t let you / Dry the dishes anymore.”²⁰

This perverse incentive system has similarly encouraged professors to develop learned helplessness when it comes to advising and administration,

responsibilities that regular faculty used to hold and which have been taken over by an ever-expanding cadre of professional advisors, student life staff, and university administrators. Between 1976 and 2021, the number of full-time professors for every 1,000 students increased modestly, from 52.2 to 59.7, but the number of “other professional” staff more than tripled from 18.1 to 60.9, and the number of administrators nearly doubled from 11.7 to 18.5 per 1,000 students.²¹ Professors may complain about bureaucratic bloat at universities, but they often facilitated the growth in non-faculty staff by refusing to do non-research tasks that had traditionally been among the responsibilities of professors or by doing those tasks poorly.

The same story describes the growth in adjunct instructors. As professors resisted having to teach so that they could focus more on research, universities significantly expanded their use of non-tenure-track or adjunct instructors.²² In addition to being willing to cover more classes, adjuncts brought the additional benefit of being cheaper.

According to research by David Figlio, Morton Shapiro, and Kevin Soter, it also appears that adjunct instructors are better teachers. They compared students who had adjunct or tenure-track faculty in introductory courses at Northwestern University to see how they did in subsequent courses in that field. Students who had adjunct instructors in introductory courses did better in more advanced coursework in that subject, meaning that they must have learned more from the adjuncts. As they put it: “We find consistent evidence that students learn relatively more from non-tenure line professors in their introductory courses. These differences are present across a wide variety of subject areas, and are particularly pronounced for Northwestern’s average students and less-qualified students.”²³

If universities attempt to make their tenure-track faculty teach more there is a danger that they will resist, seek employment at other universities with lower teaching loads, or simply perform poorly in the classroom. The response to these challenges, however, is not for universities to cater to the unreasonable demands of their professors. Instead, universities need to reform their evaluation and tenure policies to make assessment of the quality of teaching more meaningful and to make faculty risk losing their jobs if they are unable or unwilling to do it well.

And if universities were to lose low-quality faculty to other universities, that could make it easier to reduce headcount as teaching loads increase. For those professors that universities are determined to retain, they should compete for them by offering attractive salaries rather than by offering lower teaching loads. Good professors tend to have the time and energy to both teach and conduct quality research. The financial savings of

reducing the number of dead-weight professors as teaching workloads are increased should allow higher salaries for those who are excellent at both responsibilities.

The only people who believe that it is impossible to judge the performance of professors in the classroom are those who are bad teachers. Most professors and their department heads know who the quality instructors are. Universities just need to empower supervisors to exercise these judgments and to impose meaningful rewards and sanctions related to faculty performance as teachers, advisors, and mentors.

Conclusion

Of course, none of the changes described in this *Backgrounder* will be easy, but it is important to clearly identify the nature of the problem and at least embark on the path of a solution. Academia has slowly become a racket in which professors do not work very hard and focus far too much on unproductive and low-quality research. The general public is becoming increasingly aware of this racket and is losing confidence in universities, threatening the large public subsidies required to sustain the current structure of higher education.

The public realizes that quality teaching is more socially useful than the avalanche of uncited and obscure research professors have been producing. Re-focusing professors on teaching and away from low-quality research by increasing teaching loads and reducing faculty headcounts must be on the agenda for any university wishing to sustain itself over the long term.

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Endnotes

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