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# A Student Perspective on the Causes of the Commercialization of Higher Education and the Movement of Professors Away from Undergraduate Teaching Towards Research and the Effect Those Two Movements Have on Undergraduate Learning and Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

There has been a continuous movement of faculty at institutions of higher education away from a focus on teaching undergraduate students towards individual and specialized research and graduate teaching. This paper will attempt to explore some of the apparent driving factors for this movement as well the impact that it has on undergraduate learning. These factors include, but are not limited to, professorial desires to spend more time on research and therefore less time on teaching, particularly undergraduate teaching; the pressure to use research as a way to obtain funding and income separate from the institution whom the professors are attached to; the idea that undergraduate teaching is of little practical use to the professor; and that time spent teaching is negatively related to the salary of the professor. These problems are ultimately an issue of the culture of higher education where solving the issue requires a change in the culture and attitude of higher education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The lack of emphasis on undergraduate teaching has produced a cycle of negative tendencies in the interaction between professors and students. With the decreased emphasis on undergraduate teaching resulting from increased emphasis on research, the professors have begun to expect less from their students. In doing so students became accustomed to receiving high marks for relatively little work. Because student evaluations are one of the few, if not the only, method for evaluating teachers that is of concern to administrations the professors were inclined to keep students happy, an inclination that encouraged the continued reduction of expectations for good marks. This gave students a power to continue to reduce their work load. Therefore the cycle of professors making classes easier

and students complaining about low marks which has the effect of professors making classes easier and giving higher marks is created.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The rising prevalence of entrepreneurial activity has resulted in increased conflicts of interest between revenue-generating activities and quality undergraduate education (Lee & Rhodes). Professors want to spend more and more time on research and therefore spend less time on undergraduate teaching (Arum & Roksa 6).

This is because research and graduate teaching has becoming increasingly beneficial, especially in contrast to undergraduate teaching. As Bok suggests in the first chapter of his book *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, "Having lost sight of any clear mission beyond a vague commitment to 'excellence,' our sprawling multiversities are charged with creating a vacuum into which material pursuits have rushed in unimpeded . . . The growth of money-making possibilities extended well beyond universities and institutions. Individual faculty members, especially at the best universities, found new ways to supplement their incomes with lucrative activities on the side" (Pg. 5-13). Increasingly, active participation in research and consulting, rather than teaching, has become the road to success in academia and the proverb "publish or perish" has become increasingly a rule of necessity.

Beyond individual financial gain, actual teaching has come to mean less and less when it comes to promotion within an institution (Arum & Roksa 7). Scholars engage from numerous types of research, however, few of the research topics and ideas come from undergrad students (Shore, Pinker, Bates 24). For this reason professors see little to no practical use for their undergraduate teaching. Secondly, undergraduate teaching is negatively related to professor salary, especially when compared to research and graduate teaching (Fallick).

Nonetheless, it seems unreasonable to think that students are consistently finding ways to manipulate faculty into making their lives easier. Arum and Roksa suggest that, “If students are able to receive high marks and make steady progress towards their college degrees with such limited academic effort, must not faculty bear some responsibility for the low standards that exist in these settings . . . In these settings, formal and informal ‘treaties’ often emerged: where teaching was ‘perceived as an art of capturing audiences and entertaining them,’ and teachers and students ‘arrange deals or treaties that promote mutual goals or that keep the peace’” (Pg. 5). Under this understanding teachers have become entertainers, just looking to get through the class in a similar way to many students. If this is true, the question also becomes why do these lower standards exist? Equally as importantly, how did they come about?

## **METHODS**

The data and scholarly articles referenced in this paper were discovered almost exclusively through the JSTOR and ProQuest online databases. The only exceptions are the data and data visualization referenced to Fallick where the data comes from a peer reviewed journal and the visualization from Fallick and the data referenced to Wilson from the Chronicle of Higher Education. Because the research was done with the purpose of including it in this particular paper, the documents were coded, annotated, and analyzed with the intention of supporting the argument made in the paper.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

One of the most pressing issues in higher education right now is the prevailing culture of “the art of college management” and its relationship to the historic and consistent movement of professors away from focusing on undergraduate education towards research and graduate level teaching. The increased availability and ease of access to information through the internet combined with the trend of

professors assigning less work has contributed to the movement of students away from working hard and towards focusing on the non-academic aspects of college. This movement combined with the increased importance of independent research for faculty advancement within institutions has led to a system where faculty do not challenge the students as thoroughly and as a result the students do not work as hard because they do not want to and do not feel that they have to.

In their book *Academically Adrift*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa reference data (Figure 1 and 2 below) that suggests that, “today, full-time college students on average report spending only twenty-seven hours per week on academic activities-that is, less time than a typical high school student spends at school . . . they have developed and acquired ‘the art of college management.’” At first glance the “art of college management” seems like it would be a good thing. Taken exclusively as the understanding that students are spending less time working but making the same grades it would appear that students are, as the proverb goes, “working smarter not harder.” However, Arum and Roksa continue by suggesting that for students “the art of college management” is defined as, “success . . . achieved primarily not through hard work but through ‘controlling college by shaping schedules, taming professors and limiting workload’” (pg.3-4). It therefore appears that students are not in fact becoming more efficient learners but are instead becoming more efficient manipulators; manipulators of schedules to allow them to take the easiest classes with the most convenient timing and manipulators of teachers, pulling whatever strings that they can to limit the amount of time and effort necessary for completing work and reducing the time commitment and quality of work necessary for increasingly high grades.

Figure 1: Average Grade Point Average In US Colleges from Stuart Rojstaczer & Christopher Healy's *Teachers College Record*

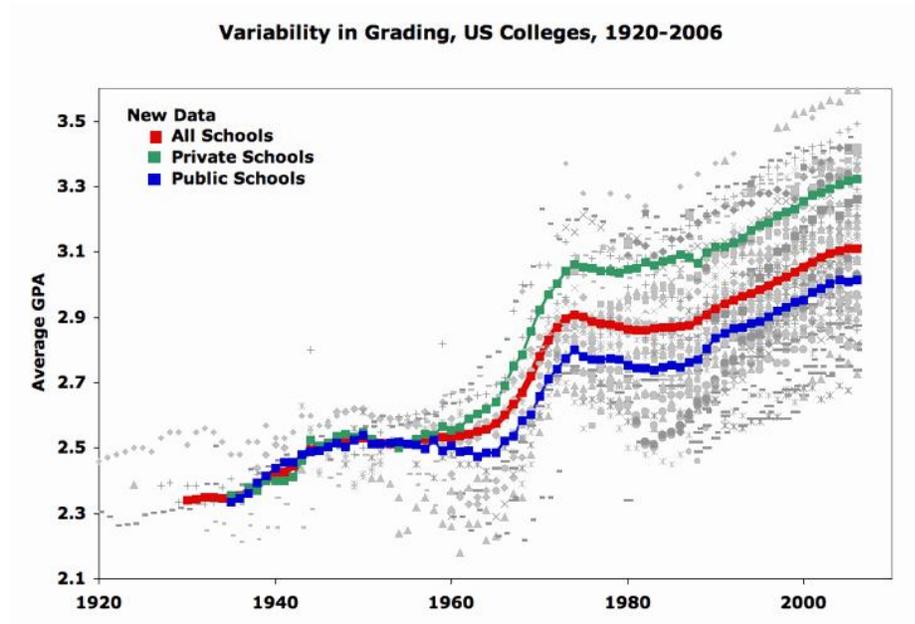
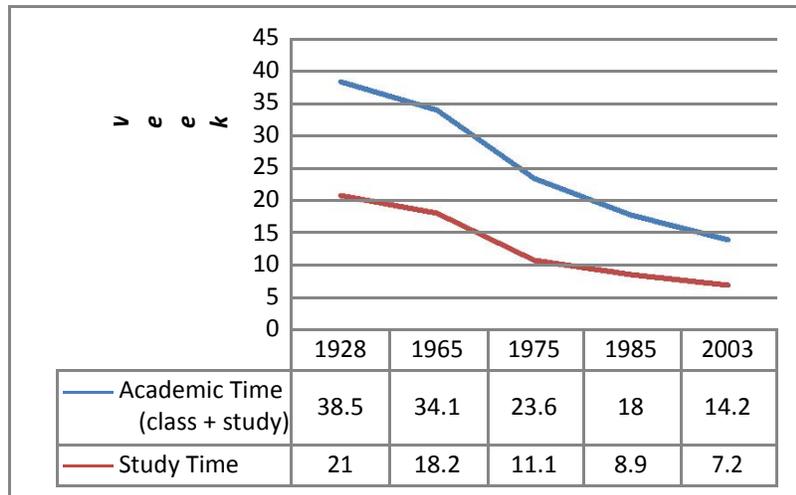


Figure 2: Average Hours per Week Spent on Academics and on Studying Data Taken From Philip Babcock & Mindy Mark's *The Falling Time Cost of College: Evidence from Half a Century of Time Use Data*



One potential reason for the development of this type of culture is that faculty at many schools are being required to do more and more work without necessarily seeing a proportional raise in pay or increased likelihood for tenure. Arum and Roksa suggest that, "Full-time faculty in resource-poor institutions likely feel increasingly overwhelmed and demoralized by the growing institutional demands placed on them and their inability to identify sufficient resources to maintain traditional levels of

support for undergraduate education” (Pg. 6). Many teachers have to teach an increasing number of classes and, in doing so, are forced to create more work for themselves. Professors that were hired to teach one class one day a week have been forced to start teaching three or more classes with a class every day (Wilson). While at first glance teaching three classes in a semester does not seem terribly taxing, some professors are being required to teach up to six classes a semester. One needs to recognize that professors have to put in at least as much, if not more, time than their students in terms of time actually spent in class and preparation for class plus the need to spend time researching plus the time needed to potentially be doing other academic or non-academic pursuits. Some teachers may find that the only way to maintain a manageable workload for themselves is to reduce the amount of work given to each class so that the total amount of work for the professor remains reasonable. This becomes an especially appealing option when the professors also have to leave time for research, something that many teachers are beginning to see as more important to their success in academia than teaching.

Figure 3: Sources of Inspiration for Research for 50 Professors Representing 28 Departments and 7 Faculties in Pinker, Shore, Bates’ *Research as a Model for University Teaching*

Reflection on lit. or theory	38
Political or social inspiration	3
Needs in school	2
New colleague’s interests	1
Discussion with colleagues or research team	2
Input from graduate student	2
Professor’s own graduate studies	2
Undergraduate teaching	0

With research becoming increasingly important to professors it makes sense that professors would spend their non-research time doing things that might help their research. In their paper *Research as a Model for University Teaching*, Shore, Pinker, and Bates suggest that, “[T]here was no mention that any of their 160 subjects mentioned teaching as a source of research ideas” (24). Because research has taken such a primary role in the interests of professors the fact that undergraduate teaching does not serve to benefit research, professors are less inclined to put additional effort into their undergraduate teaching. This is corroborated by the data that showed that, “of 49 professors, regardless of discipline, 36 primarily lectured to their undergraduate students” (29).

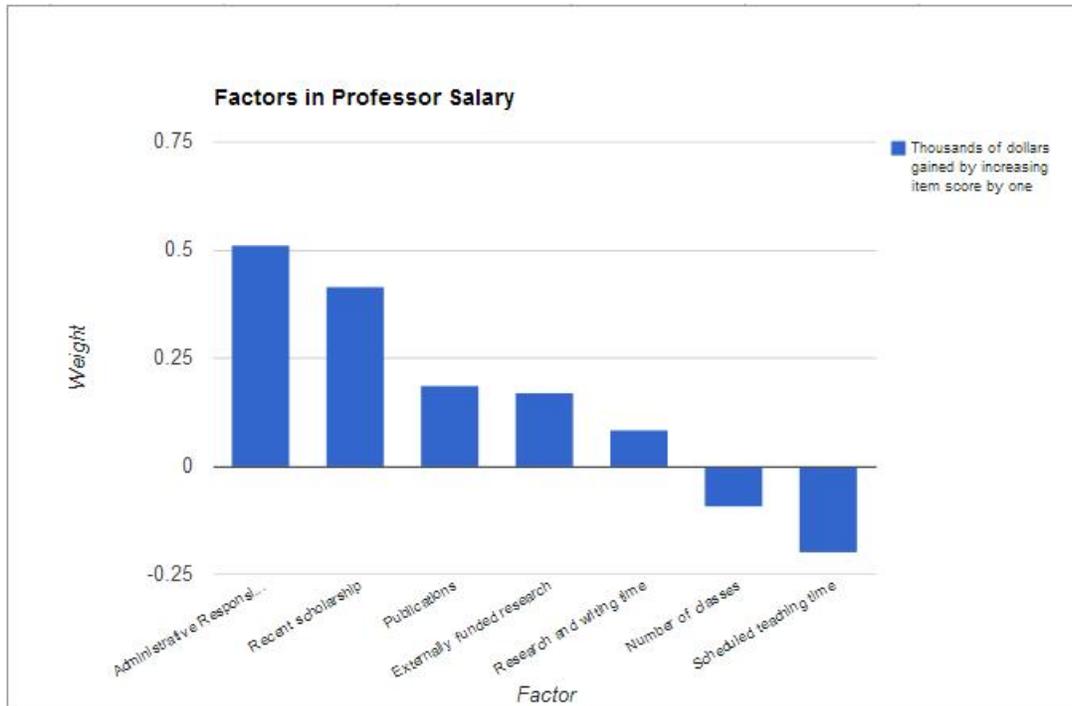
Secondarily, research is generally considered to have the goal of creating new knowledge whereas the goal of teaching is getting students to master old knowledge. Because of this split, research is not generally applicable to teaching, furthering the divide between research and teaching. Lectures are the simplest and least engaged style of teaching and it therefore makes sense that professors primarily interested in research would lecture to their undergraduate students, especially when there is no way to connect the research being done to the class being taught.

Another reason why teachers may see it as beneficial to make their classes easier and more entertaining is to increase their chance for promotion and tenure. According to Arum and Roksa, “To the extent that teaching mattered in tenure decisions at all, student satisfaction with courses was the primary measure that faculty considered relevant: a measure that partially encourages individual faculty to game the system by replacing rigorous and demanding classroom instruction with entertaining classroom activities, lower academic standards, and a generous distribution of high course marks” (Pg. 7). It is reasonable for teachers to do what they feel needs to be done in order to try to advance their careers, however, this attitude seems almost antithetical to the mission and purpose of institutions of higher education to challenge and push students to become intellectually nuanced and fulfilled and represents the larger crisis in education, especially in the liberal arts.

At the same time that professors are making classes easier they are also moving more and more towards research as another way to advance their careers, potentially contributing to the problem. As Bok suggests in the first chapter of his book *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, "Having lost sight of any clear mission beyond a vague commitment to 'excellence,' our sprawling multiversities are charged with creating a vacuum into which material pursuits have rushed in unimpeded . . . The growth of money-making possibilities extended well beyond universities and institutions. Individual faculty members, especially at the best universities, found new ways to supplement their incomes with lucrative activities on the side" (Pg. 5-13). Increasingly, active participation in research and consulting, rather than teaching, has become the road to success in academia and the proverb "publish or perish" has become increasingly a rule of necessity. This leads professors to want to allocate more and more of their time to non-teaching pursuits because they are ultimately more beneficial to them. By allocating less time to teaching and the work associated with teaching, professors revert to the technique mentioned above of cutting the amount of work they give to the class in order to cut the amount of student work they need to grade as well as cut down on the amount of time they need to prepare for their classes and lectures, therefore increasing the amount of time that they can devote to research and consulting.

Figure 4: Fallick's Graphical Analysis of Data Regarding Professor Salary Taken from McLaughlin, Stuart, and

Montgomery's *Factors Which Comprise Salary*



The rising prevalence of entrepreneurial activity has resulted in increased conflicts of interest between revenue-generating activities and quality undergrad education. More reputable faculties and institutions were more likely to be cited by industry as being beneficial and the way to become reputable is to publish and be cited which results in royalties (Powers 41). While faculty generally feel a sense of satisfaction from teaching, as shown in the visualization, entrepreneurial faculty are more likely to have more prestige and be paid more than their colleagues that focus on teaching. The joint benefits to the institution and professors that research brings has led to a practice of hiring cheaper, part-time faculty to do a significant amount of the teaching so that professors have more time to do research (Lee & Rhodes 743). This practice puts the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning at risk in order to promote financially gainful research. While it is true that funding gained by research is sometimes used

to build and stock laboratories for student use, policies such as those discussed above suggest that undergraduate learning has been deemphasized in favor of financial gain and public notoriety.

## **CONCLUSION**

The problem in higher education is that there is a lack of incentive for professors to focus on teaching and maintaining a level of academic rigor. Professors find that they are better off forcing students to do less work so that time previously spent grading papers can be spent on research. In addition, there is a normative support for the behavior displayed by professors. Faculty are encouraged, both by colleagues and institutions, to conform to certain behaviors. For this reason, even though there is a verbal support for the improvement of undergraduate teaching, if the norms of behavior amongst other professors is to not follow the recommendations that would improve undergraduate teaching but instead focus on research, professors are less likely to engage in those behaviors beneficial to undergraduate teaching and instead focus on their research. As Eimers, Braxton, and Bayer put it, “if norms support a given recommendation then a faculty member is more likely to enact it. On the other hand, if little normative support for a given recommendation is present among the faculty, then that recommendation will be less likely endorsed” (571). This suggests that the movement away from focusing on undergraduate education is an issue of culture, often propagated by the institutions themselves. It would thus appear that the path to change lies in a change in emphasis during graduate school towards better teaching skills and a change in emphasis within institutions to place greater value on teaching and less value on the research that professors are doing. In doing so the culture of higher education and academia would gradually shift back towards teaching, providing a balance between teaching and research rather than a domination of one aspect over the other.

The blame, however, is not entirely on professors. Students have bought into and taken advantage of the professors’ lack of focus on them instead of demanding more attention. Students

ought to be outraged that professors would rather do research than provide a good education for them. However, instead they take it as an opportunity to get what they see as a necessity for financial success, a college degree, in the future without having to put much effort in. Ultimately what suffers the most is education and scholarship. When professors don't want to teach and students don't want to learn intellectual growth becomes stunted in favor of financial gain, which is an outcome with potentially very negative consequences.

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