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Research and Teaching Are Two Different Callings

By Dr. Gary Deel

Faculty Director, [School of Business](#), American Public University

During my Ph.D. studies, I took a course with a professor who began the first day of class with an introduction that went something like this: “Hi. My name is Professor John. I don’t like to teach. But I am required to do this, so let’s try to get through it together. Here’s the syllabus. Email me if you have any questions.”

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Once I got over the shock of his introduction, I reflected on his words. On one hand, I respected his radical honesty. On the other, I felt as if he had written off the class as a waste of time, for him as a teacher and, by consequence, for us as his students.

Then I started thinking about all of the professors under whom I had studied throughout my academic career who behaved as if they didn't enjoy teaching. How many of those faculty members were thinking exactly what John was, but were simply too bashful or indifferent to say so?

An Untenable Problem: Faculty Members Who Would Prefer Not to Teach

We have an untenable problem in many of our higher learning institutions today: faculty members who would prefer not to teach are forced to do so instead of using their time in more profitable and fulfilling ways. This problem is dangerous for several reasons.

First, it creates less productive employees. When you're forced to do something you don't like, you're not likely to put maximum effort into it.

The "go-getters" aren't very motivated to go or get when their work makes them feel miserable. This is why people with mismatches between their occupations and their passions generally can't wait until the clock strikes five each day so that they can run out the door.

I can certainly relate to this feeling with prior jobs I've held. I'm willing to bet most people who read this article can relate, too.

However, by contrast, if you're permitted to labor over those things that you excel at and find pleasure in, the effort tends to come naturally. After I found my calling in higher education, work suddenly ceased to be painful.

Second, the fallout of an unhappy teacher is poor-quality education that can drastically affect learning. How much can we really expect students to get out of a class when the teacher doesn't want to be there?

As educators, students are, in a very real sense, our customers. Think about the last time you received service from a restaurant server who behaved as if they didn't want to be there. How enjoyable was that dining experience? I bet not nearly as much as it would have been if the employee had had a better attitude.

The same cause-and-effect relationship exists in our colleges. However, the consequences of ruining educations and turning students off learning are much more serious than disappointing service at a restaurant.

And the worst part is that none of these consequences should be a surprise to us. Why would we expect positive outcomes when we force people to do things they don't enjoy?

Many Professors Are Expected to Perform Some Combination of Research and Teaching to Satisfy Their Job Requirements

One of the most common causes of unhappy teachers is that many professors are expected to perform some combination of research and teaching to satisfy their job requirements. This is the result of the understandable assumption that the foremost authorities in their fields –researchers working on the front lines between what is known and what is not – ought to be the best folks to teach others in their disciplines.

Why not? Wouldn't we naturally want the most knowledgeable people to be the ones to instruct new generations?

It makes sense, but unfortunately, it ignores the basic fact that field expertise is not the only quality needed for effective teaching. We know intuitively that to be a good teacher, one must possess much more than just a working knowledge of the curriculum.

Understanding of [learning psychology](#), pedagogy/andragogy, assessments, curriculum design, compassion, empathy, patience and passion — these are indispensable traits of an effective teacher. And they are qualities that cannot be assumed simply because a person possesses a terminal degree in a given field.

Frustration in those who don't possess these skills and qualities, but who are nonetheless expected to teach, is understandable. Imagine if, upon completing medical school, a new doctor is hired at a hospital but is immediately informed by her supervisor that she'll be spending only half of every workday practicing medicine. In the other half, she'll be doing carpentry.

This situation would probably be pretty annoying, unless of course she coincidentally happens to be a doctor who also loves carpentry. In such a case, she might be fine with her split responsibilities.

Likewise, there are some individuals who are good at teaching *and* research, and who enjoy both. They generally fit the status quo nicely.

However, these people tend to be the exceptions. For most faculty members, their multi-pronged positions are simply an inconvenient trade-off to pursue the part they do best and enjoy most.

So faculty who love to live in the lab or in the library to conduct research, but hate to teach, are forced to spend hours each week engaging in activities that they don't enjoy. As a result, they usually put minimal effort into their teaching. At the same time, faculty members who love to teach but abhor the labors of research are threatened with "publish or perish."

Finding Jobs that Offer the Right Balance of Teaching and Research

How do we correct these costly misalignments? The solution is simple, but not necessarily easy. It requires honesty about the differences between these two pursuits. When I completed my doctoral work and began looking for a full-time position in academia years ago, I thought long and hard about what kind of position I wanted.

I knew that I wanted to teach. But I wasn't sure that I wanted to stomach the pressure and politics of a research quota. I knew that if I ultimately was forced to do research that I did not want to do, my work would be subpar and painful.

I also knew that the time I spent doing research would be time I could spend much more productively and enjoyably [teaching students and developing young minds](#). So I made my decision and pursued a career direction that allowed me to dedicate most of my time to teaching, with a very small percentage toward other tasks that I enjoy much less.

These kinds of positions do exist. Many institutions offer instructor and lecturer positions that mean larger teaching loads but without the research agenda of traditional professorships.

Another place to find teaching-exclusive opportunities is in the world of online education. The responsibilities of the faculty at my institution, American Public University, are largely instruction-based, with minimal research requirements for regional accreditation purposes.

Research collaborations at APU are encouraged for those faculty members who enjoy it, but they are not forced upon us. In the world of online universities, teaching is the predominant focus.

Career Paths for Those Teachers Who Enjoy Research

But what about those who are driven to research? There are career paths for them, too. Public and private think tanks frequently hire terminal-degree scholars to develop the next big ideas.

Many large companies also recognize the need for skilled researchers. A former colleague of mine, upon finishing his doctorate, was hired by Amazon as a data analytics scientist.

In other cases, research grants at universities allow faculty to dedicate their time to lab work. This can be a great way to integrate research-focused professionals into academic environments so that these institutions can benefit from their discoveries without requiring them to teach when their heart isn't in it.

It's worth noting that some faculty who don't enjoy teaching may feel this way for reasons other than a genuine lack of passion for the work. Some may be frustrated by a lack of training, knowledge or resources needed to teach effectively.

In these cases, it goes without saying that institutions should support instructors and give them the tools they need to do their work in a way that is enjoyable and fulfilling. But for the faculty who simply lack a passion for being in the classroom, they would better serve themselves and the universities that employ them if they were permitted to apply themselves to the work that best suits their interests.

We in higher education have the enormous responsibility of developing the next generation of human potential, so it is imperative that we do it correctly. For the sake of our students and all stakeholders in the process, let the researchers research and let the teachers teach.

About the Author

Dr. Gary Deel, SHRM-CP, is a faculty director and associate professor for the APU School of Business. He also serves as an adjunct professor of business and hospitality management for Colorado State University and the University of Central Florida, respectively. When he is not teaching, Dr. Deel runs an expert witness and consulting firm specializing in hospitality-related litigation support. Dr. Deel holds a Ph.D. in hospitality management, a JD in law and various degrees in space studies.