

A Week in the Life of a University Professor: Issues of Stress, Workload, and Wellness

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Abstract

This paper provides one example of how a university professor in counseling psychology utilizes time by describing the work activities during a typical week. This paper also describes some of the issues that relate to the well-being of university faculty, including stress, workload, and new technology. It may help administrators, politicians, students, and the public have a better understanding of what university professors actually do.

The profession of college or university professor is generally considered an excellent occupation. It has been described as the second best job in America (Best Jobs in America, 2009); teaching is the fifth most prestigious occupation in the country (Corso, 2009); and college professor is among the ten jobs with the highest level of job satisfaction (Top Ten Lists, 2012). Perks of the position include some freedom in scheduling work activities, a good work environment, and the opportunity for creativity. The work of a college professor also has the potential to be personally meaningful and socially useful. Competition for tenure-track teaching positions is intense, even though preparation for the career includes a doctoral degree (Hacker & Dreifus, 2011).

Of course, even good occupations have their downsides, and university professors face various stresses that affect their lives. Stress is common in the lives of academics, partly because they work in environments that are high-pressured, multifaceted, and without clear borders (Hagedorn, 2000). Demands on university

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professors have increased, and many experience a high level of stress and fatigue (Easthope & Easthope, 2000). One survey found that most academics (74%) rated their work as the most significant cause of stress in their lives (Abouserie, 1996). Factors reported to contribute to stress for faculty include time pressures and deadlines, continual overload of work, increasing demands from administrative and committee duties, dealing with difficult students, and keeping up with new technology (King, 2002). Ruark, Sander, and Wolverton (2010, p. A10) wrote that “academic life today is a petri dish for madness . . . that could damage even psychologically healthy people” and most universities do not have programs to promote the mental health of faculty members. It is crucial for faculty to attend to their physical and psychological well-being (Hubbard & Atkins, 1995). University employees are more likely than those in other occupations to go on disability for psychological reasons, and academic psychologists report significantly more job-related stress than psychologists in independent practice (Ruark, Sander, & Wolverton (2010).

Recent research has demonstrated other downsides of the academic profession. One-quarter of male professors at top universities said that their career kept them from having as many children as they wanted and decreased their life satisfaction; female professors who want to have a family often have to give up the goal of becoming tenured; and professors are much more likely to report suffering from major depression than people in other professions (Hudson, 2011; Jacobs and Winslow, 2004).

The profession of university professor is often attacked by politicians and others looking to cut budgets in difficult economic times. A common stereotype is the professor who teaches one or two classes a week, as if teaching is all that professors have to do, and as if one or two courses is an average load (Jenkins, 2012). Of course, professors engage in many other activities to support departmental and university missions, contribute to scholarship by conducting research, and work with students to help ensure their success (June & Mangan, 2011). Counting the number of hours a professor spends in the classroom is simply not a good measure of what the occupation requires (Buller, 2012).

Accountability is essential, but it is too easy to reduce difficult variables to meaningless numbers. For example, in 2010 Texas A&M University issued a report that stated the amount of revenue each of its professors generated by teaching. They arrived at the figure by adding up the amount of tuition paid by the number of students in each class and subtracting the amount of the professor's salary and benefits. The report concluded that some professors brought in more money than they cost, while others did not (June & Mangan, 2011). Such reports reveal that even university administrators, who should know better, may have little understanding of the actual job duties of professors. University professors need to do a better job of explaining to their various constituencies exactly what they do with their time (Winkler, 1992).

Log of a Week in the Life of a Professor

General descriptions of the profession of college or university professor are easy to access (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; O*NET OnLine, 2012), but specific information about exactly what professors do on a daily basis is hard to find in the literature. A few university professors have provided insight into their tasks and schedules by describing a typical day or week (June & Mangan, 2011). The following is the author's log of work activities for a week chosen at random during March 2012. The author is a full professor who teaches in a graduate program at a teaching institution.

Monday, March 26

8:00 to 9:00 a.m. I read 37 e-mail messages, replied to nine of them, saved four for later attention, and deleted the rest. I watched a video of a practicum student's counseling session as preparation for our supervision meeting later this morning.

9:00 to 11:00 a.m. Office hours began and the next two hours were spent seeing students who needed advising on various matters. In between students I wrote two recommendation letters for students applying for internships and I uploaded some readings to my course website. The rest of the time was spent in class preparation.

11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Spent an hour providing supervision to a counseling practicum student (this is a regular weekly meeting). We discussed his work with his clients and watched video excerpts of his counseling sessions and talked about them.

12:00 to 1:30 p.m. Read and graded several doctoral comprehensive examinations. Ate a lunch I brought from home at my desk while I worked.

1:30 to 3:00 p.m. Went to meetings with practicum students to conduct their midterm evaluations and give them feedback on their performance.

3:00 to 4:00 p.m. Prepared for my Counseling Processes course, which involved reading background articles, reviewing the chapters in the textbook, writing notes for the class discussion, and finding video excerpts to show as demonstrations.

4:00 to 6:00 p.m. Reviewed some of the 51 application files from students applying for the Masters program, in preparation for the meeting tomorrow.

7:30 to 8:30 p.m. Read a manuscript I had agreed to review for a professional journal and wrote my review.

Tuesday, March 27

8:00 to 9:00 a.m. Caught up on e-mail and completed grading the doctoral comprehensive exams.

9:00 to 11:00 a.m. During my office hours I saw several students for various concerns. Between students I began reading a dissertation prospectus, a lengthy document requiring extensive editorial work, and I also wrote the program of study documents for two new doctoral students.

11:00 to 11:15 a.m. Returned a call from a book editor at the American Psychological Association regarding writing a chapter for a new textbook.

11:15 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Attended a Counseling Committee meeting. After the regular meeting we reviewed student applications for the program and determined who would be offered admission.

1:15 to 3:45 p.m. Taught my Counseling Processes class.

4:00 to 5:00 p.m. Read and graded case study reports by Counseling Practicum students, so I could return them tomorrow.

5:00 to 6:00 p.m. Went to the Practicum Lab and observed a student's counseling session from behind the one-way mirror and made notes so I could give the student feedback.

6:00 to 6:30 p.m. Talked with the practicum student about the session.

8:00 to 10:00 p.m. Did class preparation for my Wednesday classes, including reading, revising, and updating my notes and reviewing videos to show in class.

Wednesday, March 28

8:00 to 9:00 a.m. Did some background library research for a new article I'm working on about culture-bound disorders in Native Americans. I also uploaded some of my articles to my web site so they will be available for students.

9:00 to 11:30 a.m. Taught my Counseling Practicum class.

11:45 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Had lunch with a colleague at the University Union.

12:30 to 2:00 p.m. Read a student's dissertation proposal and made detailed written comments for revisions. I also took two phone calls, and two students stopped by for advising.

2:00 to 3:00 p.m. Caught up on e-mail and spent the rest of the time reading and revising case study reports turned in by students today.

3:15 to 3:45 p.m. Attended an impromptu meeting about a special situation with a student that required immediate attention.

3:45 to 6:30 p.m. Taught my class on adult developmental psychology.

6:30 to 7:00 p.m. Met with a student in the class to help her plan her class project.

Thursday, March 29

8:00 to 9:00 a.m. Read e-mail and did administrative paperwork, such as filling out supervision confirmation forms for a past student and putting data on practicum evaluations into the online data management system.

9:00 to 10:30 a.m. There was an emergency situation with a potentially suicidal client in the Practicum Lab, so I went downstairs and talked to the practicum student briefly, and then met with the client to determine how suicidal she was and what to do about it. We talked for almost an hour. Then the three of us met together to decide what to do.

10:30 to 11:30 a.m. Had a scheduled meeting with a doctoral student to discuss her dissertation proposal and plan the next steps and deadlines.

11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Started writing an exam for my adult development course for next week. I returned a telephone call from an NPR reporter who was doing a segment

on evidence-based psychotherapies and wanted to interview me on the subject. The interview took about 40 minutes.

12:30 to 1:00 p.m. Had lunch at my desk while doing online library research.

1:00 to 1:30 p.m. Had an appointment with an advisee to prepare his program of studies.

1:30 to 2:00 p.m. Worked on writing up my expected work activities for next year (a form called the Statement of Expectations). Standard expectations include teaching courses, conducting research that results in publications and/or presentations, advising students, serving on departmental, college, and university committees, and doing volunteer work in the community.

2:00 to 4:00 p.m. Worked on Practicum by watching two student's counseling sessions they had recorded on DVD and making notes for feedback. I also read two case reports and wrote comments, and wrote e-mails to the students regarding their cases.

4:00 to 5:00 p.m. I had an appointment with an advisee to evaluate her transfer courses, and then an appointment with a prospective student from Japan who is considering applying to our program.

8:00 to 9:00 p.m. Read a dissertation prospectus and made notes for the student's prospectus defense meeting, which is tomorrow.

Friday, March 30

8:00 to 9:00 a.m. Caught up on mail, telephone messages, and e-mail, and prepared the paperwork for more mid-term evaluation meetings in Practicum. In the middle of this work a Practicum student came by to discuss a potential ethical issue regarding a client which needed to be resolved quickly. We talked until the student felt the issue was resolved.

10:00 to 11:00 a.m. I wrote a PowerPoint presentation for my adult development course and uploaded it to the course web site. Then I finished writing the test scheduled for next week. During this time two doctoral students stopped by to get their comprehensive exam results.

11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Attended a doctoral student's prospectus meeting.

12:00 to 1:00 p.m. Had lunch with a colleague.

1:00 to 2:00 p.m. Attended a meeting regarding the comprehensive exam results; met with a student who needed advising; and prepared for my 2:00 meeting.

2:00 to 3:30 p.m. Attended a dissertation prospectus meeting with one of my doctoral advisees.

3:30 to 4:00 p.m. Tried to catch up with administrative paperwork.

4:00 to 5:00 p.m. Went to the university library to find books for background for the article I am working on.

Saturday, March 21

7:00 to 10:30 a.m. Watched videos from my Counseling Processes course; the students record their counseling sessions and turn them in so I can evaluate them and give each student written feedback on their work. I filled out a rating form for each session and also wrote detailed comments as feedback for each student.

1:30 to 4:00 p.m. I read case study reports written by Practicum students and wrote comments for suggested revisions. Then I read a lengthy dissertation prospectus and also several articles I had printed out to read as background research for the article I am working on. I made notes on the articles and compiled the references.

Reflections on the Week

This description of the author's work activities is meant to illustrate the kinds of work done in a typical week. Other weeks would look somewhat different in terms of the activities, and of course other professors would have different activities. Regular weekly activities for the author include class preparation, teaching classes, advising students, reading and grading papers, viewing counseling session videos, and practicum supervision meetings. Administrative paperwork and dealing with mail and e-mail are almost daily activities. Some weeks have committee meetings while other weeks do not, and class preparation, research and writing has to be fit in whenever possible.

The week described above was a busy one, since several tasks had to be completed to meet deadlines, including reviewing admissions files, grading comprehensive exams, conducting practicum mid-term evaluations, and reading and editing dissertation prospectuses. Preparing to teach three classes could easily consume 12 hours per week, if that much time were available. Helping doctoral students

design, write, and revise a dissertation proposal or prospectus can take many hours during a semester, on top of the regular activities. Some of the activities specific to the author's role in teaching and supervising counseling practicum students would, of course, not apply to other professors. Consultation with students regarding the clients they see in practicum can be quite time-consuming one week and not so much the next; emergency situations with clients are infrequent but very time-consuming when they occur. During the week described the author worked 58.5 hours. The shortest workday during the regular workweek was eight hours long and the longest workday was 12.5 hours long.

Workload Stress

As described earlier in this paper, university faculty often experience a greater amount of stress than professionals in many other occupations (Buckholdt, 2009). While there are several sources of stress in the life of a professor, much stress results from a mismatch between the workload and the time available to complete it. One of the inherent dangers of being a professor is "workload creep" (Petry, 2011). While some academic duties have fixed hours every week, such as teaching courses and having office hours for advising, other duties have to be fit in whenever possible, such as class preparation, committee work, administrative work, research, and writing. These tasks have to be done, but it is up to the individual professor to find the time to do them. There is no real "end" to tasks like advising. Students often request assistance outside regular office hours, and most faculty want to be as available as possible, but this reduces the amount of time available for other essential tasks.

Professors typically put in very long hours; full-time faculty report working 55 hours per week on average, and over one-third of them put in over 60 hours per week (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004). Even though the great majority of university professors work at least 50 hours per week, faculty often feel they do not have enough time to finish their work; "the demands of faculty positions often feel essentially limitless" (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004, p. 157). There is no easy metric to determine when "enough" work has been done regarding class preparation, student advising, committee work, conducting research, and writing articles for publication.

Productivity in scholarship requires excellent time management skills. Creative intellectual work requires time for reflection, reading, and consultation with other scholars (Menzies & Newson, 2007). Writing a single article for publication can easily take a hundred hours of reading, thinking, and writing (beyond the time needed to conduct a research project). In order to be productive and avoid workload creep, professors must often say “no” when asked to take on new committee work, administrative work, editorial work for journals and publishers, and work for professional organizations. Sometimes professors must simply close their office doors to students and others and concentrate on other required tasks.

The successful professor must be able to discern which job duties are the most essential and give them the time and attention they require. While most university professors report overall satisfaction with their occupation, a common complaint is that the amount of administrative work and bureaucratic accountability has increased over time and actually decreased their productivity (Rosser, 2005). Another concern is that academic administrators, including department chairs and college deans, rarely have any training as managers or administrators, making them poorly prepared to deal with difficult personnel issues or impaired faculty members (Ruark, Sander, & Wolverton, 2010). Professors have to make their own well-being a priority and take advantage of resources for assistance in the areas of physical, mental, and emotional help (Gmeich, 1993).

Financial remuneration for college professors is generally adequate, although there is a wide range of salaries for professors at different universities. Determining proper compensation for academic work is quite complicated, and there are no national standards. Salary levels vary by size and type of institution, geographic location, market demand, and many other factors. Each faculty member has to decide how important salary issues are, and whether other factors, such as quality of life, outweigh low salaries. For example, at the author’s university the quality of life of the geographic location is usually considered quite good, but faculty salaries are far below the median (at the 14th percentile of doctoral institutions) (Average Faculty Salaries, 2012). Nationwide, most professors find it necessary to take work home, and many have a

second job in order to have an adequate income (Fogg, 2008). While skeptics argue that any profession where you get summers off must be easy, they forget that professors are not paid for that time off work, even if they use that time for research, writing, and course preparation.

Technology Pros and Cons

Technology has had a large impact on the teaching profession. Research has shown that many faculty (67%) report that keeping up with new technology is stressful, although almost all faculty believe that technology is educationally beneficial (Higher Education Research Institute, 2000). For university faculty in counseling psychology, technology has pros and cons. Many students take online courses, but such courses reduce the live, in person interaction considered so crucial to high quality human interaction. The human element is, of course, especially important in programs in counseling and human services.

Professors have their own office computers, but they are now expected to do the majority of clerical work that departmental staff used to do for them. Data management systems can speed up the clerical work faculty are required to do, but it takes time to learn them, and new systems regularly replace older ones. Accessing articles online is fast and convenient for students, but some of them never visit the university library to access books, videos, and other resources. One form of technology that has no apparent disadvantage is faculty web sites, which provide a good way for students to learn about and access professors' publications.

This author has noticed several ways that new technology has affected teaching in a counseling psychology program. As the number of telephone calls has decreased, the number of e-mails has increased dramatically. E-mail has the advantage of allowing the professor to respond when it is convenient, but the volume of e-mails can be overwhelming. It seems that some students who, in the past, would not have bothered to make a telephone call now send numerous e-mail messages, and students seem to expect an almost immediate reply. Many students now want to use laptop computers during class for note taking, but the clicking keys can be distracting, and it is difficult to have good eye contact and rapport with students who are staring down at their

computer screens. It is wonderful that student counselors can make video recordings of their sessions, but finding time to watch those many hours of counseling and provide feedback can be difficult. In a typical counseling practicum course the students generate 240 hours of video of counseling sessions. Obviously a supervisor can watch only a small percentage of these videos as a basis for providing feedback. While technological advances in education are definitely a net plus, they still present challenges that should be addressed.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the issues described above and the author's log of weekly activities, certain conclusions can be drawn. The profession of university professor in counseling psychology is an excellent one. It provides an opportunity to be creative, develop the next generation of counselors and psychologists, and contribute to scholarship by doing research and writing. Much of the work is intellectually stimulating and personally meaningful. These advantages tend to outweigh the negative aspects of the profession, which include excessive workloads, time pressure, stress, and only adequate financial compensation. Even with its disadvantages, the profession of university professor is a good one, and it is reasonable to expect that competition for the relatively small number of positions will continue to be intense. This paper may help graduate students who are considering a career as a professor better understand the nature of the profession.

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