

WHY I MUST TEACH

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SOMETHING was wrong. I came to work every day as before. I still met with Alumni and donors. I sat through the same budget meetings. I gave the same recruitment talks. But something this spring was missing.

It was teaching. For the first semester in the six I have served as dean, I didn't teach a course. And after my experience this spring, I expect it will be my last.

Sure, travel was less disruptive when I didn't have to cancel class sessions or find guest speakers. And, admittedly, May was a great month with zero bluebooks to grade. But still, I've come to conclude that I, at least, need to be a dean who teaches. Why?

For one thing, what I thought would be the greatest advantage to me in not teaching never really materialized—more time. Oh, I went into the semester with big plans. With those extra hours I usually devote to teaching surely I could knock out an article—or even more. No. In fact, it was more like those phantom extra hours were simply subtracted from my life. My administrative duties took all of my time. I've come to believe that administrative work, like nature itself, abhors a vacuum. It expands to fill any available space.

While I didn't experience the advantages of not teaching, I really felt the loss. There are some tremendous benefits of teaching. The first is rather obvious. It is that teaching keeps me in touch with the student body. When I teach, I share a certain bond with the students. I am more than just an administrative office holder; I am part of the academic enterprise. I am grappling with ideas just like they are. And it isn't just the 65 minutes of scheduled class. I really missed those minutes before and after class. Those are the relaxed minutes of conversation about yesterday's football game or the important minutes about a medical emergency in a student's family back home when I could console and encourage—or be encouraged. Sure I had some moments like that in the atrium and hallway this spring, but it wasn't quite the same. Instead, my main interaction with students was in formal settings or when students came with complaints or were the subject of a disciplinary procedure. Not the student experience of my dreams!

Those informal minutes with students, too, give me a good sense of the pulse of the student body. I can feel when spirits are flagging in the middle of that long second semester, and I can lighten the atmosphere a bit. I can hear the chatter when students are worried about a recent event or announcement, and I can explain or reassure.

Teaching to stay in touch with students is probably a cliché, but it is true. I missed it last semester.

Perhaps a less obvious benefit to teaching—certainly surprising to me when I missed it last semester—is that teaching strengthens my ties with my faculty colleagues. One of the most difficult aspects of deaning for me is that, to a degree,

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I feel an invisible barrier between me and the rest of my faculty colleagues. As soon as I began to have authority over salaries, teaching assignments, and scheduling, I became, to some extent, one of “them.” The problem is accentuated at our school where the building was designed with faculty offices on the third floor and administrative offices, including mine, on the second. This configuration reinforces the subtle notion that I am no longer a faculty member, I am an administrator.

The best antidote to this is frequent, informal interaction—to go to lunch or just wander around upstairs. But I found this semester, too, that camaraderie is built on shared experiences, often from the classroom. I am closest to my faculty friends when swapping humorous anecdotes from yesterday’s class, comparing colossal classroom technology failures, and griping about trying to meet the grade submission deadline (even if I set it myself!). It was subtle and imperceptible, but we were not as close in May when my friends had stacks of bluebooks in their offices and I had none. I most realized how out of touch I was in the teaching environment when a friend mentioned that we had three days left before spring break—and I had completely forgotten about it. After all, the administrative calendar just continues. No, I need to be in the academic trenches with my colleagues. I need to teach with them and grade with them—and swap stories about both.

And it wasn’t just students and colleagues, per se, with which I felt out of touch this spring. It was really the academic enterprise itself. What we do administratively as deans is immensely valuable—but only as a means to another end. That end is training men and women to think and write and analyze and solve problems—and to pursue justice through professional service. And that training takes place mainly in the classroom. It is in the classroom that the light comes on and a student suddenly understands the workings of a complicated legal doctrine. It is in the classroom that grand ideas of justice are promoted, criticized, and reformed.

That is not to deny that the administrative side of deaning is stimulating. A thoughtful and persuasive budget presentation to the President and Board of Trustees is challenging and gratifying. But let’s face it, many of our day-to-day activities as deans are meetings. That really hit home one day this spring during a meeting of the University Academic Council (deans and academic affairs deans of each school, as well as university Vice Presidents, and managers of certain university departments). For the second consecutive meeting, we spent mind-numbing time as a group wordsmithing changes to a course add/drop form. My assistant dean sitting next to me later told me I was fidgeting like a little child. Sure, I was. I wanted to be in the classroom!

Teaching reminds me why I am doing this job. It puts before me every day the purpose for our building, our budget, and our committee meetings. And hopefully it ensures that the decisions I make will better further that *academic* purpose.

This leads me to the final—and perhaps most compelling—reason why I must teach: it is simply fun. Teaching is why I came to academia in the first place. It was not to run a business, though I thoroughly enjoy trying to shape and lead this school. It was to teach.

The classroom is an oasis in what, in some weeks, can be a desert of unending meetings. It is a place to explore, to challenge, to rip apart, and to synthesize ideas. And to do it with people who, for the most part, are bright, energetic, and highly motivated. It is a place to imagine, and to play roles—and to figure out how the Oscar Mayer Weimobile relates to personal jurisdiction. It is a place of joy.

Nothing in my work life proves more satisfying (now that I no longer litigate) than a class period where everything just falls perfectly into place, where students walk in confused by a difficult topic and walk out with the light on and charged. That thrill isn't duplicated for me in a budget meeting—even a successful one.

It is what takes place in the classroom that causes a student years down the road to remember me and write a word of thanks or encouragement—it is not that beautifully written memo describing a new academic policy, and it is especially not that immaculately worded add/drop form.

It was all of this I missed when I took off the spring semester. And all of this is why I can't wait for classes to start this fall. I have to teach.