

PROFESSORS ON THE PRODUCTION LINE, STUDENTS ON THEIR OWN

Mark Bauerlein
Emory University
engmb@emory.edu

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Foreword

Is the publication of *more* research the same thing as the publication of *better, more informative, or more useful* research? How should institutions of higher education and public officials think about the balance between scholarship and instruction—and when these tasks are complements and when they are in conflict? Scholarly “productivity” has soared over time, with the number of academic publications increasing 500 percent over the past fifty years. One need not be a fierce critic of colleges or universities to question the utility of much of this additional scholarship. Meanwhile, there is cause for concern that the engagement and performance of undergraduate students has gradually declined—despite steadily increasing investments in higher education. The established hiring and tenure systems encourage young professors and graduate students to zero in on research and devote little attention to the collegiate classroom.

Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University and former director of the Office of Research and Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, examines the pressure on humanities professors to “publish publish publish” and explains why the abundance of research offers diminishing returns. He laments the consequences for undergraduate education and student engagement and suggests that students, faculty, and the broader society would be well-served if we revisited this aged and problematic compact.

What do these trends mean for the future of higher education and the role of professors in teaching and research? How can we realign the incentives and rethink the traditions to effectively serve both ends? Bauerlein’s recommendations for how to upend the existing framework challenge us to consider how we hire and reward professors, staff our classrooms, serve students, and spend our public funds. I hope that you find this essay as thought-provoking as I have.

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Frederick M. Hess
Director of Education Policy Studies
American Enterprise Institute

Executive Summary

In higher education in the United States, teaching and research in the fields of language and literature are in a desperate condition. Laboring on the age-old axiom “publish-or-perish,” thousands of professors, lecturers, and graduate students are busy producing dissertations, books, essays, and reviews. Over the past five decades, their collective productivity has risen from 13,000 to 72,000 publications per year. But the audience for language and literature scholarship has diminished, with unit sales for books now hovering around 300.

At the same time, the relations between teachers and students have declined. While 43 percent of two-year public college students and 29 percent of four-year public college students require remedial coursework, costing \$2 billion annually, one national survey reports that 37 percent of first-year arts/humanities students “never” discuss course readings with teachers outside of class, and 41 percent only do so “sometimes.”

These trends are not unrelated. Academic engagement on the part of students is a reflection of how much teachers demand it. But with the research mandate hovering over them, teachers have no incentive to push it. If the system favors publication, not mentoring, hours in the office in conversation with sophomores are counter-productive or even damaging to career and livelihood.

Universities need to reconsider the relative value placed on research and teaching in the evaluation of professors. This paper offers several recommendations, including limiting the amount of material that tenure committees will review and creating a “teacher track” in which doctoral students are trained and rewarded for generalist knowledge and multiple course facility rather than a highly-specialized expertise.

Introduction: The Drifting Undergraduate

From 1980 to 2006, enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges climbed a bountiful 46 percent, from 12.1 million to 17.7 million students.¹ The number of institutions themselves increased from 3,152 to 4,276, and the degrees they awarded went from 401,000 associate's degrees in 1980 to 713,000 in 2006, and 929,000 bachelor's degrees in 1980 to 1.5 million in 2006.² To more and more high school students, college has become a natural step after high school graduation. As an October 2005 report by the U.S. Department of Education states, "Overall, about 69 percent of the senior cohort expect to complete college with a 4-year degree or higher" (35 percent predicted an advanced degree).³

But while college attendance and ambitions ascend, another, related activity is moving in the opposite direction. Academic engagement is going down. According to the *American Freshman Survey*, the percentage of first-year college students who spent less than one hour a week "talking with teachers outside of class" during their last year of high school jumped from 44 percent in 1987 to 53 percent in 1997, and it has lingered in the mid-to-low 50s ever since. The rate of students who were "frequently bored in class" in high school rose, too, in 1990 scoring at 31 percent and in 2007 at 41 percent. Homework hours mirrored the response. In 1987, 47 percent of college-bound high school seniors studied at least six hours per week, but in 2007 the figure dropped to 34 percent.⁴

The mismatch between ambition and commitment doesn't make sense, and neither does a related mismatch from another large survey project, the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. (The Center conducts the *National Survey of Student Engagement* [NSSE] and the *Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement* [BCSSE].) According to the

Center's director, George D. Kuh, an odd discrepancy shows up when first-year students are polled on how much they expect to work in college and how much they actually work in college:

BCSSE and NSSE data show that first-year students expect to do more during the first year of college than they actually do. For example, about three-fifths expected to spend more than fifteen hours a week studying, but only two-fifths did so. Put another way, they study two to six hours *less* per week on average than they thought they would when starting college.⁵

The drop inserts a new variable into the problem, not the entering students and their high school habits, but the teachers students encounter their first semester on campus. The standard they set lowers the students' own benchmark. "More than four of every five students," Kuh continues, "expected their institutions to emphasize academics to a substantial degree." One year later, though, "most students said that their institutions did not emphasize these areas as much as they expected."⁶ And the finding that the number of homework hours barely increases for college seniors shows that the professors students face in subsequent semesters don't change the climate. Other disengagement measures offer similar findings: On the 2005 *College Student Survey*, 72 percent of seniors "came late to class" "frequently" or "occasionally," and only 36 percent of them studied 11 or more hours per week.⁷ On the 2005 *Your First College Year* survey, 63 percent "came late to class" "frequently" or "occasionally," and only 30 percent studied 11 or more hours per week.⁸ As for the quality of their work, 43 percent of freshmen admitted to submitting assignments not up to their best ability,⁹ and 60 percent of seniors "frequently" or "occasionally" "failed to complete homework on time."¹⁰

The disengagement is a reflection of, among other things, the instruction they receive. Full-time faculty members spend 62 percent of their labor on teaching, but their efforts aren't sufficiently connecting with students.¹¹ Students may be fully intelligent and qualified to handle the courses, but all too many don't realize or act upon the necessity to get involved, to talk about

readings outside of class, to make use of faculty office hours, or to plumb their teachers for knowledge and understanding. In a word, professors don't impart the conviction that learning should take place inside and outside of class. Indeed, according to the 2008 NSSE, 38 percent of first-year students "never" discuss ideas from readings with teachers outside of class, and 39 percent only do so "sometimes."¹²

The following pages examine one factor in the lives of professors that prevent them from engaging undergraduates at higher rates, namely, the demands of research. We focus on language and literature teachers as a case study, and do so because of the importance of the subject in the first year of college (at many schools, freshman composition is the one remaining required course) and because of the level of engagement demanded by literary readings (*Hamlet* solicits more discussion and debate than does integral calculus or organic chemistry). The discussion begins with an overview of research output in the fields and subfields, and then describes the pressures leading individuals to contribute to it—and to downplay their teaching duties. It concludes with a summary of the costs of research mandates to undergraduate education and offers some recommendations for policy reforms.

The Faculty at Work

In the year 2007, literary scholars and critics published 85 studies of the life and writings of William Faulkner. Nearly all of them appeared in U.S. publications, and the total included 11 books and eight dissertations. The previous year saw 78 entries on Faulkner, and the one before that 80 of them. In fact, from 1980 to 2006, Faulkner attracted fully 3,584 books, chapters, dissertations, articles, notes, reviews, and editions.¹³

It's a daunting sum, but not unusual. During the same years, 1980-2006, Charles Dickens garnered 3,437 studies, while nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson tallied 1,776. *Paradise Lost* poet John Milton had 3,969 entries in those 27 years, and towering at the top was William Shakespeare with 21,674 separate pieces of scholarship and criticism. And that sublime number didn't prevent another 569 pieces on Shakespeare from coming out in 2007. A similar increase took place in key institutions of publishing. In 1959, the Modern Language Association counted 1,139 periodicals containing items of criticism that year. In 1979, the figure hit 2,877, a 250 percent jump, and since then the total has nearly doubled to 5,500.¹⁴

Why the massive productivity?

An obvious reason lies in the size of the professoriate, which rose precipitously during the preceding decades—overall, 380,000 in 1959 to 675,000 in 1979.¹⁵ More practitioners yielded more scholarship. But the explosion in hiring at that time came about not in response to new research mandates, but to explosions in undergraduate enrollments as the Baby Boomers hit college age (there were 3.6 million students in 1959 and 11.6 million in 1979).¹⁶ Yet, even as the rate of growth among faculty members slowed in recent decades, output didn't. From 1992 to 1998, for instance, the number of full-time instructional faculty in English climbed from 37,000 to 40,000, a rise of eight percent (part-time faculty went from 37,000 to 43,000). Foreign language full-timers enjoyed a seven percent gain from 1992 to 1998, 14,000 to 15,000. Part-timers rose from 11,000 to 12,000.¹⁷

During the same period, though, the production of books rose at three times the employment gain. In 1993 (allowing a one-year time lag for peer review and production), university presses issued 417 new titles in literary history, 534 titles in English literature, 617 titles in American literature, and 193 titles in literature in Romance languages—the total

amounting to 1,761. Six years later, the tally hit 2,194—530 in literary history, 653 in English literature, 789 in American, and 222 in Romance. This shows an increase of 24 percent.¹⁸

Keep in mind two facts when considering this growth rate in the 90s. First, as noted above, literary and language scholarship had already ballooned in the preceding 30 years. So many pages of criticism and commentary had tumbled forth that the pool of under-examined texts contracted each year. In 1960, numerous works and authors across the centuries of literary history still awaited the eyes of professors and graduate students. From 1930 to 1959, for example, Milton's *Paradise Regained* received 33 items of attention—that's all.¹⁹ Lots of original research remained to be done. Scholarly editions of the collected works of seventeenth-century poets and major American novelists had to be assembled, and encyclopedias, general surveys, and reference works such as the *Masterplots* volumes were getting underway. Thousands of shorter minor texts offered virgin terrains to younger scholars searching for unplumbed materials. The edifice of literary scholarship had numerous gaps and fissures, and books and articles were bricks and mortar filling them in.

Four decades later, the “coverage” project is complete. Do any major works or authors lack editors, interpreters, theorists, reviewers, and teachers? Not that I can think of. Virtually nothing in the corpus of Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Emerson, Woolf, and other giants remains under-interpreted. From 1960 to 1989, to take the example cited above, scholars made up for the infrequent discussion of *Paradise Regained* by publishing 230 works of scholarship on it.²⁰ Lesser-known authors, too, have enjoyed the spotlight. For instance, Jack London garnered 634 entries from 1960 to 2000, eighteenth-century London poet Christopher Smart collected 192, and African-American writer/intellectual James Weldon Johnson received 104.²¹ One can't justify the continued acceleration of scholarship in the humanities, then, with appeals such as, “We

don't understand enough about Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. Too many of those poems are inadequately studied."

Fact two follows from the first, but bears upon a simple trait of the subject matter, namely, the relatively inert contents of literatures and languages ancient and modern. As opposed to the physical sciences, where advancing discoveries and technologies create new domains of inquiry, the primary materials of language and literature don't much change. Yes, we have more contemporary authors coming to scholarly attention, plus a few discovered authors and works from the distant past, but their addition doesn't nearly account for the swelling critical production. The combined scholarly output in 2006 on major contemporary American novelists John Updike, Alice Walker, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Joyce Carol Oates, Toni Morrison, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth, amounts to 272 entries—a small portion of the 6,350 entries for "American literature" that year.²² And yes, novel and provocative themes enter literary studies every few years—deconstruction, race theory, postcolonialism, gay and lesbian studies, etc.—but notwithstanding their notoriety they don't change the raw empirical existence of the texts, only the topical or theoretical angle one takes toward them (including, we should note, the angle that the text has no raw empirical existence). Shakespeare's corpus is more or less the same as it was 50 years ago, and so is Milton's, Pope's Keats's, Austen's.... In spite of gestures toward "opening the canon," we don't have all that much more material to interpret, and we can't really say that the novels of Jane Austen required nine times as much inquiry in 1990 as they did in 1960 (as actually occurred) just because of the advent of gender theory, especially given the 664 scholarly items that appeared on Austen during the 1980s.²³

Nonetheless, we have more and more interpretations and commentaries rolling off the presses faster and faster. Back in 1959, the collective enterprise of language and literature study

issued 13,757 publications. Two decades later, output soared to 47,000 units, and in 2006 it surpassed 72,000.

Consumer and Professional Demand

As those fruitful decades unfolded, we should acknowledge, no outside forces demanded that language and literature scholars supply more research findings. There were no cataclysmic discoveries propelling their work, no DNA molecule or cold fusion spurring them on, and there were no geopolitical urgencies sending money to their projects, no space race or bioterrorism or global warming crises calling upon their expertise. Nobody off-campus declared, “We don’t have enough books on Walt Whitman—we need more!”

Of course, literary and language scholarship never boasted a general audience, nor did it claim the kind of direct impact of a scientific breakthrough. Everybody recognizes that the value of it extends for the most part to professionals on campus plodding deliberately through texts and documents. While scientists might respond to a clinical study or experiment with focused attention within weeks of the published results, literary scholars might take years to absorb and respond to, say, a thoughtful reinterpretation of classical rhetoric. They labor slowly in archives and read widely in literary history, producing essays and theses that could appear a year earlier or a year later with no real difference in the discipline.

The pace is assumed to maintain a steady, if leisurely consumption of academic research, but here, too, we find dismaying trends. According to the Association of Research Libraries, the annual number of monographs purchased by research libraries rose an anemic one percent between 1986 and 2006.²⁴ The Association doesn’t break down monographs by subject area, and humanities press editors don’t like to reveal sales figures for their books, but when they do, they

estimate the average unit sales for literature and language titles in the low- to mid-hundreds.²⁵ Also, they will add, the meager market yields a fraction of the number of copies they could expect to sell for each book 30 years earlier. Back in the 1990s, the director of Yale University Press divulged, “Yale and every other university press in America ha[ve] seen the sale of the scholarly monograph ... decline by two-thirds. Where we once expected to sell perhaps 2,500, we now sell 8-900.”²⁶ For literary studies alone, sales figures looked worse. In 1995, the head of Penn State Press raised the question of who reads them and made a despondent admission in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Our sales figures for works of literary criticism suggest that the answer is, fewer people than ever before. Since 1985, the Penn State Press has published 150 books of literary criticism, making it one of the leading scholarly publishers in this field. We cannot be sure exactly how many people have read those books, but we do know how many have bought them. Of the 150 titles, 65 percent have sold fewer than 500 copies and 91 percent have sold fewer than 800. Only 3 percent (generally those dealing with American literature or gender issues) have sold more than 1,000 copies.²⁷

A few years later in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Harvard Press editor Lindsay Waters announced similar results: “In my experience, monographic studies in the humanities, and I definitely include history here, whether written to win tenure or later in a career by established giants in the field, now usually sell between 275 and 600 copies, no matter how good they are.”²⁸ One year later, in 2002, the Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Scholarly Publishing surveyed the sales problem and cited editors as estimating purchases slipping to as low as 200 to 300 copies.²⁹

Some of the loss comes from library budgets having to shift toward skyrocketing costs for serials, expenditures for which climbed 320 percent from 1986 to 2006.³⁰ But individuals, too, have reduced their buying habits. For one thing, many scholars and students can’t afford

them. According to Yankee Book Peddler, an organization that provides services for academic libraries including annual statistics on price and output of scholarly, professional, and scientific books, the suggested retail price of university press books in English and American literature rose about 18 percent from 1989 to 2000, and the same books by commercial scholarly publishers increased approximately 29 percent.³¹ For another thing, professors simply can't read all of the works published each year in their fields, as the numbers cited above make clear. An expert in Herman Melville can't cover the 11 books (2,684 pages in total), 56 articles, and 12 dissertations devoted all or in part to the novelist that appeared in 2007. And underlying those explanations lurks a disturbing possibility, that is, that literature professors feel no urge or need to monitor publications in the discipline in order to keep up with research in the area. In vibrant fields, researchers follow everyone's work because if they don't they fall behind and can't participate. In literary studies, though, scholars now pick and choose, keeping current through piecemeal browsing in tables of contents and press catalogs. If they overlook much of it, they don't suffer. Meanwhile, throngs of scholarly compositions appear each year only to sit in distribution warehouses unread and unnoticed. The fields and subfields proceed without them, and the grand vision of a community of experts advancing knowledge, broadening understanding, and closing holes in the historical record fades to black.

The Measure of a Professor

A strange economy is at work. Demand goes down and supply goes up, as does price. Added to that, the primary materials that putatively endow scholarship with value—we care about Melville criticism because we admire *Moby-Dick*—have, in a sense, long since given their value away. Because *Moby-Dick* is so important, it made Melville scholarship that saw print in 1970

important, and it made 1971's output important, too, and 1972's and 1973's. But how many critical readings, how many historical, social, racial, philosophical, and religious contextualizations of *Moby-Dick*, could spring forth before the whole enterprise reached a saturation point? The first ten books on *Moby-Dick* mattered because Melville's epic had altered American literary history forever, and its critical interpretation and positioning remained partial and uncertain. But by the 40th and 41st books, *Moby-Dick* had lost its potency as a scholarly well-spring. An early work on *Moby-Dick* might have established it as a Great American Novel and changed the syllabus of American literature. But by 1995, another book on *Moby-Dick*, however astute and eloquent, was just that—another book on *Moby-Dick*. The general value of *Moby-Dick* as a great novel that students should read and study survives, but the necessity of researching it has withered.

This indicates an economy focused not on the commodity or the consumer, but on the producer alone. Indeed, it forces a revised and far-reaching understanding of humanistic research. Scholars no longer produce scholarly goods for a community of inquirers to assess and assimilate. It seems so, to be sure, and all the trappings of a lively disciplinary endeavor operate in conspicuous display at the book exhibits of major conferences. But the distribution numbers belie them, suggesting that the activity serves another end, and it recalls the old and ordinary axiom "publish-or-perish." Ask a younger scholar or advanced graduate student, "Why are you working so hard to complete a manuscript and submit it to a press?" and the answer is blunt. She doesn't say, "I've developed an idea about Keats's odes that I must share with fellow Romanticists," or "T. S. Eliot's critical essays haven't been appreciated for their implicit religious doctrine, and they should." Instead, looking at you with a snort, she mutters, "So I can get a job." Or, "To get tenure."

There is no mystery, no pretense. Publication is a fact of survival, the foot in the door and the seat at the table, and nobody imagines otherwise. Hiring committees at the entry level want to see a candidate with a few articles out in the quarterlies and a book project under review with a scholarly press, or at least close to submission. They have hundreds of applications to scan, and a quick glimpse at the books and articles on the Curriculum Vita gives them a sure criterion of worth. Job seekers know how it works and act accordingly. As the MLA Ad Hoc Committee put it:

More and more graduate students applying for initial academic appointments have published one scholarly article or more in the belief that hiring committees at research institutions regard publication as an essential prerequisite for acceptable candidates.³²

The MLA Committee questions whether English and foreign language departments do, in fact, require publications for entry-level positions, but truth or falsity doesn't matter. Graduate students and post-docs and adjuncts believe it, so the print production continues. They take their cue not from senior faculty and professional organizations reassuring them that they don't need to publish so much so soon, but from recent hires and the qualifications they sported. If unsuccessful applicants for a position hear that the person hired had three articles out already, well, word gets around and raises the bar for everyone.

At the next major threshold in an academic career, tenure, expectations leap forward and the same upping-the-ante transpires. Senior professors considering a junior colleague for tenure want to see a book on the table plus several shorter peer-reviewed works. The MLA Committee states:

Another matter of concern is the increasing emphasis that tenure and promotion committees place on the scholarly book, at a time when constraints on academic publishing make it more and more difficult to get such books published. Schools that once considered a group of articles acceptable evidence for tenure now

routinely demand a published book; other schools have begun to make the transition from requiring one book to requiring two.³³

Once again, it doesn't matter whether these assertions are accurate or not. I have asked professors at Yale, Arizona State, Emory, Northwestern, Brandeis, University of Vermont, University of Iowa, University of Colorado, and elsewhere what they generally expect of tenure candidates, and all agree on the baseline: a book and a few articles. Departments don't put that minimum in writing, and they leave wiggle room for exceptional cases of one kind or another. But the fuzziness of the provision makes it all the more insistent. Not knowing exactly how much they should publish, uncertain as to whether five superb scholarly essays but no book will suffice, junior professors overcompensate and publish all the more.

Everyone acknowledges that the system is nonsensical, but nobody knows how to stop it. The MLA Committee report ended with the recommendation that "departments should work vigorously against the tendency toward increasing expectations with regard to quantity of publications in tenure and promotion decisions."³⁴ Harvard Press editor Lindsay Waters takes a harder line, his impatience sparked by being burdened with deciding the future of junior professors (by accepting or rejecting manuscripts): "We have put the cart before the horse," he complains. "People should not be given tenure because they have written books; people should be given tenure so they have the leisure to develop big projects that make good books."³⁵

But institutions can't follow the advice, however much individuals within them concur. A department's prestige and ranking depend too much on the research productivity of the faculty. No dean or department chair wants the department to slip in the next National Research Council rankings of graduate programs, which rely heavily on the scholarly reputations of faculty members. And what university with research aspirations wants to be the first to declare, "We no longer require assistant professors to publish books"? In the status-obsessed world of

the top 200 to 300 universities in the U.S., such a pledge would signify sliding standards and non-competitiveness. For Yale to do so would suggest that it doesn't expect as much as Harvard and Princeton. Peer institutions would take notice and work it into the rivalry equation as they jockey for higher rankings and compete for students and dollars. No matter how much university press editors, professional committees, and insiders deplore the system; no matter how many scholarly studies on the same subjects see print over the years; and no matter how few copies of books sell; in the department meeting to choose a new colleague or tenure a junior one, the publication mandate stands firm.

That's the bottom line for graduate students and junior and adjunct faculty. Who can blame them, then, for flooding the scholarly market with unwanted goods? From their vantage point, the road to success runs straight and true. Choose some topical novels, authors, and themes, craft an edgy approach to them, and publish publish publish as much as you can. All the other circumstances of professional life give way to adding more lines on the vita.

The Neglected Student

As graduate students trudge toward filing their dissertations, as adjunct teachers struggle to win a permanent position, and as assistant professors march toward that glorious or catastrophic tenure decision, one thing stands perpetually in their way: undergraduates. Graduate students often serve as teaching assistants in large freshman and sophomore survey classes. They lead discussion sections, administer quizzes, grade papers, and, at large state universities, they can be saddled with 60 or 70 underclassmen. Or, along with adjuncts hired from semester to semester, they teach freshman composition, a course that at many schools remains the only required one in the undergraduate curriculum.³⁶ They must spend hours in student conferences

going over rough drafts, mending comma splices, and fixing diction, labors usually far from their research specialties. In other words, graduate students and adjuncts teach what may be the most essential course in an undergraduate's formation—and they are the instructors who are the *least* motivated to do it well. They have their own work to complete, more research to conduct, and scholarship to compose into chapters and journal submissions.

A simple calculation drives them to curtail the teaching and stress the writing. What gets them ahead? What secures favor? Not great teaching evaluations and not measures of how much their students learn. Yes, the profession resounds with calls for more classroom focus, but graduate students and adjuncts can't record on the vita how many hours they spend tutoring freshmen in Emily Dickinson's metaphors or coaching them in paragraph transitions. Hiring committees across the country won't much track their teaching performance. All committees need is some evidence of conscientiousness, a letter in the dossier by someone who observed their class one day plus some student comments, for instance. For graduate students and adjuncts to labor any harder than necessary to secure those perfunctory documents is counterproductive.

Assistant professors face even bigger stakes. They join a department in their late 20s or early 30s, and by the time they come up for tenure they're no longer young and eager. "This is it," they think—a paycheck for life or unemployment in middle-age. The job market is tight and other departments don't like to hire cast-offs, so an unsuccessful candidate may end up bouncing around from one adjunct post to another before leaving the profession entirely. From day one, then, assistant professors fixate on tenure qualifications. They observe that the teaching standard rises more or less to the level of reasonable competence and geniality, while the research standard ascends to that intimidating book-in-hand-plus-three-or-four-articles gateway. The

imbalance charts a work schedule for the subsequent five years, a zero-sum game in daily campus life. Undergraduates become duties to manage and minimize, research a duty to secure and prolong.

Both tasks are labor-intensive when performed well. Nineteen-year-old minds need patient mentoring, and acquainting them with literary traditions and critical reading takes hours of one-on-one conversations throughout the semester, not just three 50-minute class sessions per week. And scholarship not only demands months and years of broad reading, archival digging, and meticulous citation, but also implicates scholars in a secretive, cloudy process of peer review. Manuscripts submitted to quarterlies and presses are sent out to specialists who in confidence deliver an opinion, and the submitter has no control over the judgment. Peer review also affects the tenure evaluation when departments send the candidate's work to professors at other universities who are experts in the field. They scrutinize the research and offer a recommendation—thumb up or thumb down.

The cryptic nature of peer review only aggravates a junior professor's research anxiety and downplays the classroom. The intellectual needs of students in English 300 pale before the peremptory eye of a distinguished scholar in the field who reviews manuscripts for the best presses. Students come and go in 14-week semesters, but distinguished scholars can dominate a field for decades. Sure, the occasional student captures a professor's attention, but often because the student expresses an interest that jibes with the professor's research. Students who don't are a distraction, a drag on time and energy. Assistant professors don't want to neglect them, and some feel a residual devotion to the vocation of teaching, but the prospect of losing a livelihood, of wasting six years of graduate training and six years of junior professorship, turns them into

subtle fugitives. They assure students they care, but they need time alone. The half-written manuscript awaits.

How do students react? Sad to say, all too few of them register the disengagement, much less object to it. On the 2005 *Your First College Year* survey, 62 percent of first-year students stated that they were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the “amount of contact with faculty,” while only 8 percent chose “dissatisfied/very dissatisfied.”³⁷ On the 2005 *College Student Survey*, college seniors raised the “very satisfied” or “satisfied” figure to 84 percent.³⁸ In the 2007 *National Survey of Student Engagement*, when asked to rate the “quality of relationships with faculty members” on a scale of 1 (“unavailable, unhelpful, unsympathetic”) to 7 (“available, helpful, sympathetic”), 81 percent of seniors majoring in arts and humanities disciplines—NSSE doesn’t break the fields down any further—gave their professors a score of 5 or higher.³⁹ They like their teachers and believe that teachers will respond with time and attention if solicited. First-year students showed equally strong confidence, with 77 percent of them assigning 5 or higher. (The slight drop we may attribute to first-year students taking courses in areas they have no intention of pursuing.)⁴⁰

But other findings in several surveys run against the good feelings. We’ve seen how bad the disengagement problem is with entering students, and it persists straight through to graduation. On the 2005 *Your First College Year* survey, 30 percent of freshmen in college claimed that they “never” “interacted with faculty outside of class or office hours,” and 32 percent came in at only 1 or 2 times per term.⁴¹ On the 2007 NSSE, when asked how often they “discussed ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class,” fully 37 percent of arts and humanities first-year students answered “never,” and 41 percent checked “sometimes.”⁴² Seniors in arts and humanities lowered the disengagement factor, but not by

much. Twenty-two percent of them stated, “never,” and 44 percent stated, “sometimes.”⁴³ Students may like the professors, but they don’t care to ponder ideas and opinions with them outside of class, and professors don’t force them to show up. Instruction occurs inside the classroom and nowhere else, and both sides seem content with the arrangement. On the 2007 *Faculty Survey of Student Engagement*, when faculty members in arts and humanities rated “quality of student relations with faculty members,” they yielded almost exactly the same positive numbers as the students did, 79 percent choosing 5 or higher.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, these positives signify one of the worst effects of the research mandate. That four-fifths of first-year students and two-thirds of seniors make so little contact with their teachers, while feeling more or less comfortable with them, indicates that something worse than neglect has happened. The absence of teachers outside the classroom has become normalized. Students don’t even know they’re being shortchanged. Without the institution and its faculty representatives insisting that liberal arts lessons may extend after the bell, students won’t believe otherwise. And with publication pressures rising and tenure looming, few teachers are inspired to breach custom.

This is the real calamity of the research mandate—10,000 harried professors forced to labor on disregarded print, and 100,000 unwitting students missing out on rigorous face-to-face learning. Humanities tutelage should involve inquisitiveness on both sides, with teachers demanding that students face the Big Ideas, moral cruxes, emotional force, and verbal beauties of great writing, and with students querying teachers on what it all means, bringing their own curiosities and quests to classrooms and office hours. *The Brothers Karamazov*, *King Lear*, and *Middlemarch* command more than a test-taking and -correcting, grade-getting and -giving approach. Literature and criticism involve values, beliefs, judgment, and taste, and coursework

should form a well-read individual and a sensibility and understanding to go with liberal arts knowledge.

That won't happen without lengthy conversation and attentive mentoring. But as long as the productivity demand holds, professors and advanced graduate students can't afford to promote them. The teachers don't like it—I haven't met a single professor happy with the set-up—and the undergraduates suffer for it.

The damage extends beyond the literary education undergraduates don't get. It touches on their very survival as students. When we scan data on college readiness, we see the importance of direct out-of-class interaction of faculty and students. Each year, ACT calculates college readiness rates by calculating the percentage of ACT test-takers who were capable of handling college demands (“capability” defined as “likely to earn a ‘C’ or higher”). In 2008, only 53 percent of test-takers reached readiness in reading, 68 percent in English.⁴⁵ In other words, nearly half of test-takers would probably earn a D or F if they took a reading intensive college course, and one-third of students in English courses would do so.

Their un-readiness translates into two discouraging outcomes. One is the level of remediation needed in reading and writing. Last September, in a dire report entitled *Diploma to Nowhere*, Strong American Schools analyzed U. S. Department of Education data and determined that 43 percent of two-year public college students and 29 percent of four-year public college students require remedial course work, the cost exceeding \$2 billion annually.⁴⁶ In Missouri in 2006, 17 percent of students took English remediation and 10 percent needed reading remediation. In Kansas from 2003 to 2006, fully 40 percent tested into English remediation, 29 percent into reading remediation. In 2004 and 2005 in Maryland, 21 percent of students were

assessed as needing writing remediation, 23 percent as needing reading help. In Kentucky in 2004, 32 percent needed help in reading, 25 percent in English.⁴⁷ And so on.

These difficulties help explain a second outcome, namely, the alarming number of dropouts. In an article for the American Enterprise Institute last October, Mark Schneider calculated that “American colleges graduate only about half of their students in six [years].”⁴⁸ For black students, the rate drops to 37 percent, for Hispanics to 44 percent.⁴⁹

How many of them might be retained and transformed into productive and diligent students (with no loosening of academic standards)? That isn’t clear, but we do have data that identify a prime factor in the process. In a 2002 article in *Peer Review* surveying several studies of undergraduate education, Ernst Benjamin summarizes, “These basic studies of undergraduate learning agree that faculty involvement with students is a critical factor in student completion and success.”⁵⁰ And in his outline of NSSE and BCSSE findings, George D. Kuh states, “Providing students frequent feedback in the first weeks and months about the quality of their work will also help them succeed in college.”⁵¹ The ingredients include “a course specifically designed to enhance their academic skills or social development” in which students:

- were more challenged academically;
- reported more active and collaborative learning activities;
- interacted more frequently with faculty
- perceived the campus environment as being more supportive⁵²

Obviously, teachers pressed by the research mandate are inclined to foster neither one. To the degree that it reduces student/teacher interaction, then, productivity demands in the language and literary studies levy a grave cost on higher education. Students need mentoring, and when they don’t get it many drift away permanently. The university has invested in them by admitting them, providing institutional financial aid, housing them, enrolling, remediating, and grading them, and the investment is lost if they depart. If teachers don’t follow through on the

investment, their focus on research not only diminishes the classroom experience, but also affects a student's academic future.

Conclusion

We need to intensify the pedagogy. Teachers must raise the engagement rates by command. For instance, they could require one-on-one conferences, add more and steadier homework assignments, build a consultation component into the syllabus, and track student progress closely during the term. Students should be made to recognize their enrollment in a course as a participatory process.

The incentives will have to change, too, of course. One way or another, schools and departments have to lower the research productivity demand. We need leaders and organizations to come forward and advocate a resolute shift from research to teaching. We need people making decisions on hiring and promotion to shift their criteria accordingly. We need funding agencies and foundations to provide grants and awards for schools and individuals that counter the publish-or-perish decree. Some specific possibilities:

- The Modern Language Association should convene a committee to follow up on the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on Scholarly Publishing. The Ad Hoc Committee's report regretted the productivity requirements, and a new committee made up of distinguished scholars, teachers, and administrators would pursue the problem to its source. That is, it would address parties fomenting the problem, such as organizations that rank universities mainly by the research output of faculty, administrators who evaluate their own faculty mostly by

research output, and tenured faculty members who do the same with junior colleagues and job applicants.

- Foundations such as the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, which fund humanities research, should shift some of their grants and awards away from research activities and toward undergraduate teaching activities.
- Three departments in prominent institutions of similar type (for instance, three large flagship public universities) should announce collectively that they no longer require a book for tenure. Instead, these literature and language departments will review a maximum of 100 pages of scholarship in the tenure file. Assistant professors will soon realize that doing more counts for nothing, and they'll slow the research pace. It will also make the teaching record loom larger in the professional profile of rising faculty members. If three schools do it simultaneously, they could not be accused of lowering standards. Instead, the revision would appear a case of advanced practice.
- Most importantly, language and literature departments in research universities should hire professors on the basis of teaching capacity, not research expertise. On the model of small liberal arts colleges, job descriptions foreground undergraduate teaching, and annual reviews and promotion follow accordingly. No publishing pressures, no research demands, just solid teaching and close mentoring. Professors are judged on learning outcomes and contact hours, and their labor stands proudly alongside research efforts across campus. To meet the new hiring criterion, graduate schools create a “teacher track” program in which doctoral students don't specialize in a research area but instead develop generalist knowledge and multiple course facility. In other words, graduate students acquire broad learning and the capacity to apply it to many settings—freshman comp, freshman seminars, sophomore

literature surveys, upper-division courses in the major, and language and literature courses outside the department, for instance, in the undergraduate business school. Their value to the institution lies in the ability to handle different courses each semester, which answers one of the central challenges of administration today, namely, a tenured faculty workforce that isn't flexible enough to adapt to shifting undergraduate enrollment patterns. With research identities loosened, teachers aren't so tied to certain niches (as in "I can't teach Introduction to Literature for Non-Majors, I'm an expert in Renaissance drama"). Students count more than articles in quarterlies.

These proposals run against entrenched attitudes and habits, to be sure, but the system can't continue. The prevailing productivity demand has little justification any more, and too many students are passing through the precious years of college in perfunctory exertions. We need honest and open public acknowledgment that the scholarly enterprise has lost its rationale, that central parts of the humanities are in real trouble, and that the surest way to restoration lies in a renewed commitment to the undergraduate student.

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