

Testimony on restructuring faculty workload

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As an undergraduate at a small liberal arts college, I spent hours every semester with my advisors who offered me guidance, support, encouragement and opportunities to develop academically. It was there that I decided to become a professor—envisioning myself giving my own students this kind of attention.

I came to BCC 13 years ago after teaching at a number of other colleges. My first few years, I routinely worked as much as 80 hours a week to prepare for my classes, teach, grade, advise and contribute to the efforts of our department and the college. Despite that, I stayed—in large part because I fell in love with our students and developed a deep passion for helping them reach their goals.

I'm now the Department Chairperson and it has given me a broader perspective on faculty workload and a deeper appreciation of the dedication of our faculty and the sacrifices they make to provide the best academic experience possible to our students.

For example, our department offers a several specialized programs for students: Horticulture, Animal Care and Management, Medical Laboratory Technology, and Biotechnology. The faculty members who coordinate these programs do so on top of their full teaching workload. Their work includes advising and mentoring hundreds of students each semester, conducting recruitment and outreach, organizing internships, assessing the program, conducting advisory board meetings and much more.

Over the last five years, our department has lost several faculty who, after trying to juggle the demands of teaching, service and scholarship, realize they'll fare much better at an institution which adequately supports faculty doing this important work.

We'll be conducting a search soon, and the anxiety of the search committee is whether we'll be able to select a large enough pool of viable candidates because many will choose to go elsewhere. And who could blame them? I'm torn between my desire to bring in more talented and passionate faculty and being honest about what a difficult and demanding job this is. Our workload severely limits our ability to recruit and retain talented faculty from diverse backgrounds and fields.

Community College teaching workload is on par with other institutions, but unlike the vast majority of these institutions, faculty at CUNY CCs must also produce evidence of scholarship and publications on par with that expected of faculty at the senior colleges. The heavy burden of our teaching workload, coupled with a severe lack of research support (in terms of facilities, time and financial support) means that for many members of the faculty, their research plans wither.

The personal costs of our workload are significant. Many give up time with their families in order to keep up with the minimum demands of the job, and those that choose to go the extra mile to help students often do so at great personal sacrifice. I can speak to this personally as I've been raising two children on my own while juggling the demands of my job, and several times have reached the point of absolute physical collapse.

Our students need more than 15 minutes a semester for course selection, but the constraints of our workload means that this is precisely what many students get. Those amongst the faculty that give more, do so out of a profound sense of obligation to our students, who without a doubt, need much more of our attention than many undergraduates. This is what drives us.

The vast majority of our students come to BCC needing remediation in one or more areas, don't adequately understand the expectations of being a college student, don't have support networks of family who have gone to college and can offer advice and support, and many have full time jobs and are raising children. If our commitment to these students is to provide a solid education and a leg up in the world outside our gates, we need the time and resources to support them all the way through.

Perhaps one of the things that saddens me the most is that our students are accustomed to having to wait, to being put off, to not getting attention, to being forgotten about. This by and large defines many of their life experiences outside of CUNY. Their sentences routinely start with "I know you're terribly busy..." or "I'm sorry to bother you..." I want to see a CUNY where students do not feel like they're intruding on faculty time, where students feel like they belong and are welcomed and are entitled to the sorts of interactions with faculty that will help to ensure their success.

There are few things more profoundly frustrating than having a desire to help without the ability to do so. Despite seeing hundreds of students, I can't help but see how many more there are that fall through the cracks. Our students need and deserve to have the sort of undergraduate experience that I did—for which I am extremely grateful. Our students, and the people of New York City need your help to fill in those cracks.

I thank you for hearing my testimony and hope that our students and faculty can count on you to support this important initiative.