

**Testimony of Sigmund Shen, Associate Professor of English**  
**LaGuardia Community College**  
**Before the Board of Trustees at Queens Public Hearing**  
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Thank you for hearing our testimony on the need to restructure faculty workload. This is really a discussion about the quality and depth of the education we are choosing to give our students. Being a teacher means you need time to truly know each student, care about him or her, understand the level of preparation he or she has come in with, which is not obvious or even necessarily visible in a classroom setting. But it's not enough for the instructor to know the student. It also means having time to seek new ways of reaching that person, of making sure the student knows her own hidden strengths, as well as her own frustrating, unnamed internal barriers to success.

But none of this is possible without the time for repeated, one-on-one conversations between that one student and his or her instructor. In our first-year composition courses, routinely about 20% of my students will not pass the semester. This discussion of faculty overwork is partly a story about that 20%. With the current teaching load, I'm providing them primarily written feedback on their work, hand scrawled in a rush on their paper and handed to them at the end of class. If the University chooses to fund enough time for us to give individual attention to students, that same 20% would have substantial verbal feedback, in authentic discussion. Instead of waiting days or even a week to get answers to their questions, they'd be able to have their questions answered right away, and of course, that encourages deeper questions.

For many of that 20%, academic preparation is not what's standing in their way. In only the last few years, I've gotten to know students who have been arrested and are dealing with Legal Aid. Victims of street violence, sexual harassment, and domestic abuse. Being homeless and unemployed. Struggling with mental illness and family dysfunction in a society where most people don't or won't understand what they're going through. When I can identify such issues, I can cajole them into walking to the counseling center, or write letters to their employers, or public defenders, or social workers. But often I don't have time to know them well enough to even recognize such problems until it's too late.

As a writing instructor, I also see the traces and subtle consequences of lifetimes they have spent battered by microaggressions and insidious humiliations: their subtle apologizing, their knee-jerk self-deprecation, their airtight, guarded self-protectiveness and vagueness. These symptoms of oppression are stunting their intellectual development. I can point out to them where they are doing it in their writing, but I can't draw them out in personal conversations about why it's a problem or where it's come from. The result is that they blame themselves, as they have been conditioned to do. If I don't have time to talk with them about that journal, then they'll focus instead on memorizing, on passive consumption instead of thoughtful digestion.

There is no pedagogical defense for the current workload. The only reason for it is to save money. The only reason to keep saving money in this perverse way is to regard CUNY as a business. But that's not why we're here. The only reason to build and defend a public higher education system is because we acknowledge, we know, that we are responsible for the next generation of leaders, and if we fail in that responsibility we will all pay the price.

A three-hour reduction would also enable me to spend more time and more consistent, sustained, consecutive hours on scholarship. I'd be more excited about my field and more up-to-date, and more excited and better able to articulate that excitement to my students, treating them as potential scholars themselves rather than simply as customers. I served on the hiring committee in the English department for two years, and more than one of our candidates, during the interview, very candidly expressed incredulity when we notified them of the workload. As the teaching workload currently stands, our claim to being a research university is an empty one. When workload suppresses active scholarship, the most invisible cost is the experimental, the unorthodox, and the attempt to step out of the paradigm. The invisible cost is the minority voice, perspective, or methodology. People don't have time to innovate or investigate, let alone waste time building arguments and evidence for the validity and need for emerging fields. This leads to an essential conservatism and timidity in scholarship, at a time in American history when, more than ever, we need to serve our diverse, hard-working students, and protect the production of academic knowledge in the humanities and the sciences.