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My Work and Welcome to It

Stephen Hilliard

"I want to go to graduate school in English," said my student Peter, then blurted out, "and be a professor, like you." I bit my lip not to say something deflating--at the end of the semester I didn't feel my life should be anyone's goal. I knew that he pictured the life of a professor as reading interesting books, talking about them with enthusiastic students like himself, doing research one loves, and serving on a few committees. And being paid for doing this!

I didn't warn Peter that the scholarly life he aspires to is seen as a scam by critics of higher education. They accuse the faculty of neglecting teaching, resisting new ideas, and indulging in useless research at taxpayers' expense. They predict (and hope) that many of our functions can be replaced by computer programs. We can address the specific charges well enough, but they reflect a growing distrust of universities that is seriously eroding our support and undermining our efforts.

This past fall was one of my roughest semesters as a professor with three difficult classes and a host of complex assignments that consumed the time left over after teaching. An October storm that left me cold and in the dark for five days didn't help. In all honesty I can assure Nebraska taxpayers that I worked at least 60 hours a week (for a time by candlelight). Given how hard I worked and the stress I experienced, I feel resentment toward the more outspoken critics. The job is hard enough without the hostility of a bunch of ignoramuses.

In the name of "accountability," the suspicion that we are not working efficiently has added to the stress since we are asked to evaluate each other and our programs in what seems an endless regression. In theory all this evaluation feeds back into improved performance but it feels as though we are continually looking over each other's shoulders to make sure no one is getting away with anything. Meanwhile, the real work piles up.

Ironically, one of my time-consuming assignments is co-chairing a Nebraska Network-21 Action Team on "Scholarship, Evaluation, and Reward." Nebraska Network-21 is a university project on the future of the land grant university funded by the Kellogg Foundation. Our particular group is looking at what academic work includes, how it is changing, and how it is evaluated, encouraged and rewarded. It has made me aware that both the criticisms and my own stress are responses to changes in the university as a workplace. I am trying to adjust to new structures and frameworks that my graduate education did not prepare me to face.

Many of you will sympathize since your own educations probably didn't prepare you for the rapid rate of change in your workplaces. We are all trying to learn how to perform

effectively in an information society where the sheer volume of data is overwhelming. Our work has become more complex and more dependent on technology and on cooperation with others rather than individual effort. Faculty stress is just one symptom of the struggle of society to learn how to work effectively in new contexts. The hostility toward the faculty is in part evidence of how much society is depending on us to help it learn to work in new ways.

Universities struggle to adjust an individualistic model of the work--the lone scholar in the library or lab--to a more "managed" set of cooperative tasks. At the same time, businesses are talking about moving from top-down managerial structures to the more open model of a "learning organization." Our goal is apparently to be more like a business corporation and the goal of corporations is to be more like us. The resolution of this paradox will help decide the future of work in our society.

I believe solutions to the work pressures academics feel will also be solutions to the fears citizens have that we are abusing their trust. Our goal should be to make the academic workplace closer to my student Peter's dream; a place where a satisfying sense of personal accomplishment meshes with meeting the needs of students and citizens. And if we can do this for ourselves, we will also help society solve the analogous problems that contribute to its anxiety. In spite of my occasional griping, academic work has been a pleasure for me rather than a burden, and I want to do what I can to keep it that way for Peter and other future professors. Even if it means more work.

Stephen Hilliard is a professor of English.