

Amid Growing Enrollments and Rising Expectations, UVM Faculty Maintain Student Focus—But at What Cost?

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Something's got to give.

That's the overwhelming sentiment expressed by faculty who participated in last month's "Week in the Life of a UVM Faculty Member" survey. Faced with a 30-percent jump in undergraduate enrollments, new initiatives intensifying the need for individualized student attention, plus new programs spreading long-term faculty very thin across the campus and curriculum, UVM's full-time faculty—whose numbers have not kept pace with the university's rapid growth—continue to provide students with the premier small research university experience promised on admission tours. But for how long? And at what cost?

These are the questions raised by responses from the 72 faculty who participated in survey. Sponsored by United Academics, the union representing most full- and part-time faculty at the University of Vermont, the survey asked respondents to record for up to one week their work activities under the categories of teaching/educational mission, advising, service, research, and on-the-job travel. All ranks—lecturer, senior lecturer plus assistant, associate, and full professor—were represented among survey respondents who hail from four of UVM's colleges plus Extension and Libraries.

In all, 255 days of work activities were recorded, including 36 weekend days. In addition faculty could record a day's "accomplishments" and "frustrations." One associate professor, for instance, noted that "Substantive conversations with students about research projects were very rewarding." This same professor also recorded at the end of each day a mounting frustration: "I would have liked to have had some time with a paper I'm writing," "No time for research," and "Still no time for research."

"Once again, research is taking a back seat"

For many faculty, excellence in research is needed for continued employment and advancement. Indeed, UVM prides itself on being the rare example of a public university that provides students with meaningful access—in classrooms as well as through internships and research projects—to teacher-scholars who are active researchers and skilled practitioners in their fields. Typically, these faculty are expected to divided their time equally between teaching and research.

But despite attempts by faculty to make more time—including with late-night returns to the office and working on the weekends—survey responses show that research is being squeezed out.

“Many valuable things I did take time and have to be done immediately,” explained an associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences who was attempting to revise an article for publication while also responding to student research paper drafts, work one-on-one with an honors thesis advisee, and shepherd another student through a fellowship application.

“Once again,” this professor concluded, “research is taking a back seat.”

Even when faculty do manage to make time for scholarly work, it may not be enough to make headway on significant projects. “I have long projects to do which are hard to accomplish when I have half-hour snippets of time,” wrote a professor in Extension. With a work week already packed with undergraduate teaching, honors thesis mentoring, graduate student advising, plus presentations for and correspondence with state agencies and partners, this faculty member “couldn’t get to the bigger things.”

In the College of Education and Social Work, an associate professor conceded that “These weeks in the semester I simply give up trying to get my own work (writing, research) done, as the level of student need and anxiety typically increases and I make myself available to respond to it and support students to finish up strongly.”

This professor warns, however, about the compound consequences as one’s research agenda is not just postponed but also scaled back: “The demands on my time that are focused on undergraduate teaching and, within this, advising, are just too great. This limits my thinking and, in essence, my ability to commit to any substantial research projects.”

What these faculty describe are the challenges of growth felt at the University of Vermont. Over the past five years long-term faculty have grown at less than half the rate of the student body and as a result face tough choices: Cut back on attention to students? Or try to extend the work day and work week to pack everything in?

Burning the midnight oil

Assistant professors, considered “probationary” during their first six years as they establish themselves as teachers and as scholars, must opt for latter, putting in days as long as 14 hours and frequently working seven or more weekend hours. “I had to squeeze in something by the end of the day,” wrote one assistant professor, trying to finish a presentation for a scholarly conference, “and given family commitments at dinnertime, I had to begin the task at 10 pm.” Wrote another, “I returned to campus at 8:30 pm to work on my research presentation again and didn’t leave until 10:30 pm.” “Too many interruptions at work,” concluded a third faculty member. “I will try to work from home tomorrow to avoid this.”

Yet following these faculty home are students’ needs. “Why do I feel compelled to work all day on Sunday?” asked one assistant professor whose 62-hour work week included thirteen

weekend hours spent grading seminar papers, reading an honors thesis draft, and preparing the next week's classes. "Because otherwise the weekly workload becomes insurmountable."

"Exam is going home with me," wrote an assistant professor in Nursing and Health Sciences who had struggled all week for time to grade the exam given that Monday. "And preparation for class on Monday."

While one survey respondent noted that "[President] Fogel tells us 55 hours or more is expected," faculty emphasized the difficulty of keeping up such a pace over two semesters and for many faculty, particularly in Extension and the Libraries, year-round.

"Despite good intentions to work more when I got home," wrote a faculty member in Nursing and Health Sciences after an 11-hour day, "I was too tired." The same sentiment was echoed by an Arts and Sciences faculty member after 11 ½ hours with students, a visiting scholar, and meetings related to a program director search: "Too tired to write anything substantive." Another had this to say after working 9 ½ hours: "Research articles, dissertations sitting on my desk for my reading. I keep thinking I'll get to them as well as my writing. Not enough hours in the day. I'm fried!"

For faculty working together on research projects, there is an added challenge: "I was hoping to have time to do some writing," reported a professor in Education and Social working with a colleague on a paper for an international conference, "but I spent more time assessing student work than I anticipated." The next day the roles were reversed: "Was supposed to meet with my colleague regarding our research presentation, but she was caught up in advisee meetings all day."

Where does the time go?

While the survey found most faculty hours going to teaching, including preparing classes, supervising clinical students, and responding to many hundreds of pages of students' writing, respondents also described mounting advising commitments.

"Absolutely typical workload," stated one faculty member whose 14-hour day included not only preparing for and teaching two classes and rewriting a grant proposal but also writing recommendation letters, answering "dozens" of emails from advisees, and taking a prospective student on a department tour. Another, whose 12-hour Monday included three hours with advising students in person and via email and 2 ½ hours meeting with prospective students at Admitted Students Open House events, called on the UVM administration to be "a little less naïve (willingly ignorant?) about the amount of time we spend teaching and advising the ever-growing number of students at UVM."

Chunks of valuable time are lost, too, on administrative and technical tasks for which UVM's support staff are in short supply. One faculty member spent more than five hours photocopying, scanning, and loading readings for students onto the WebCT classroom system. Similarly, a professor whose courses depend on high-quality slides spent most of a 10-hour day

preparing slides for the next day's lectures. Listing "Technology" as the day's big frustration, this faculty member added, "I feel as if my time has been poorly used."

"Tedious" and "frustrating" were the words faculty commonly used to describe the pile-up of technical and administrative tasks, especially those associated with the new PeopleSoft system that appears to have greatly multiplied the time faculty spend reporting expenses and tracking grants. But more, worried one survey respondent, the loss of support staff could also mean loss of research dollars: "I really miss having an IT person that can help with computer stuff. I am also concerned about what this may mean for my grants since the NIH may not like the idea of a . . . lab without any specialized support."

The pedagogical price

Given the long hours, the increased demands, the tedium of PeopleSoft, and the ever-present anxiety about when there will be time to make headway on research, it is remarkable how dedicated faculty remain to students' learning well beyond preparing for lectures and grading exams. One associate professor in Arts and Sciences cooked dinner for students, faculty, and guest speakers participating in a symposium. A senior lecturer in the College of Engineering and Mathematics spent a weekend at UVM men's baseball and women's lacrosse games to cheer on current and former students. A senior professor was "moved almost to tears" by the accolades from students and colleagues in an awards and recognition ceremony, describing the event as "one of the highlights of a professional life!" Another faculty member said about taking students to an evening performance of a play they had studied: "My students were bubbling over with strong responses, eager to write and talk about it . . . This felt like the culminating event of the semester."

Nevertheless, these and other faculty were mindful of the price of such pedagogical devotion. "I am worried about [an unwritten] conference paper," wrote the professor who took students to the evening theater performance. "I leave for the conference mid May, and between now and then I have papers to grade, exams to set and assess, and grades to work out and submit, in addition to many outstanding service tasks [such as a department study abroad program this faculty member administers]."

As the Spring semester came to a close, some faculty were looking ahead and considering that either the university must increase its investment in faculty or else faculty must decrease their investment in each student. After a week of responding to 90 student papers and helping students rehearse their class presentations, one assistant professor reflected, "I write a lot of comments on papers, which I've been told many times by students has been really helpful; I also spend a lot of time with students on their presentations . . . And yet both of those sound pedagogical choices end up making it difficult to maintain the other side of my life: writing and researching."

A senior lecturer, upon learning of a workload increase for next year, drew the obvious—and, for UVM's future as a quality small public university, troubling—conclusion: Although "writing is the best way for my students to make sense of the literature they are reading," with two more classes and 25 percent more students to teach, "I'll have to assign significantly less."