

Chapter 1

It's Just Like a Real Job

“Well,” my friend Bernie said smugly as we settled into the hard wooden bleachers, preparing our delicate backsides for a numbing umpteenth three-day swim meet. “How many classes are you teaching this semester?”

We had been through this conversation more than a dozen times before, at the start of each semester where I taught at Top Technical University, and I knew, sadly, where the conversation was heading.

Bernie was a mid-level manager at Big Motor Corporation, the largest heavy equipment company in the world, where he worked with parts suppliers over a multistate region. He knew what real work was, and could spot a slacker. Starting right out of high school, he had worked for this company for over 30 years, beginning as the lowest of the low—cleaning up metal shavings after machinists—and progressing, against all odds, to a position of considerable responsibility. The man certainly was no dummy. But he had never gone to college. His knowledge of what a professor did was based totally on folk legend, rumor, and stereotype. I didn't have a chance.

“I'm teaching my normal load,” I proffered, sheepishly. “Three classes with two separate preparations.” Like he knew the difference between three classes with three preparations and three classes with one preparation. Actually, he should have. I'd tried to explain this before.

“How many hours in class is that each week?” He got right to the point, his rapier finding the vulnerable soft spot of professorhood: hours in class.

He had me right where he wanted me. I was a fly stuck in his web, a tasty morsel.

“That’s fifteen hours a week,” I admitted. He knew very well how many classes, how many hours I taught at Top Tech. It was always three classes; it was always fifteen hours a week, nine of lecture, six of lab. I turned slightly, ready for the verbal whack up beside my head. I wasn’t disappointed. He paused for effect. He leaned back on his elbows, glanced to the right and left, like he expected an audience for his pontification.

“Must be nice!” he sighed with practiced melodrama. “So what are you going to do with the rest of your time?” It was the mantra he’d chanted at each semester’s start with that familiar voice of real-world superiority.

After thirty years teaching in higher education, I find that my friend’s ignorance isn’t unique. Nothing I did even remotely looked like what he did. In fact, almost nobody knows what university professors do—including state legislators, university presidents, and, unbelievably, many university professors themselves. As a young teacher who gave up on being a professor recently told me: “When it’s good, it’s the best job in the world. But when it’s bad, it’s worse than the worst possible job in industry.”

Why is that? Partially because, very often, people become professors for the wrong reasons. Or worse, the wrong people become professors for the wrong reasons. It's also because a professor's job is usually ill-defined, with performance inconsistently evaluated and rewarded. And it's because the very trailing data model on which higher education is based sets the entire process up for failure.

Higher education is, actually, the antithesis of the "new economy." There is no venture capital, there is no initial public offering of stock to capitalize a new program, and since there is no profit for the goods and services provided, there can be little reinvestment to expand or bring out new product lines. Because the employees of higher education don't share in their increased efficiency (other than by teaching more and more students with less and less resources), there is no external motivation to be better, to be more efficient. It all has to come from inside the professor.

If you are outside the university community, this professor's story may bring you to ask yourself why anyone, especially anyone with even average intelligence, would opt for a career as a professor. If you are thinking about a career as a university teacher or researcher, it may cause you to think twice. And if you're currently a professor, I'm sure you'll see yourself many times in the pages that follow. Still, many optimists out there will turn the last page and remember: "When it's good, it's the best job in the world."

When all is said and done, the best that can be hoped for is a keen interest in making the job that good.