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Essay about the importance of college presidents teaching undergraduates

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Hundreds of years ago, college leaders were faculty members who regularly taught undergraduates alongside their administrative duties. Even a century ago, someone might go from full-time professor to president, with teaching experience fresh in mind, and then return to the faculty.

Today, college presidents' time is easily consumed by a wide range of responsibilities: fund-raising; media, community and government relations; routine and crisis communication in a world of social media and a constant news cycle; cheerleading for the institution to a diverse constituent base; showing up at countless campus events; managing budgets; improving morale and reputation; providing strategic leadership and vision; and more.

Because the work of presidents has grown exponentially, taken on relentless speed and become increasingly distant from the classroom, many believe that presidents no longer have any place as professors. Although I had been an award-winning, tenured full professor for many years, and more recently as a dean and provost guided doctoral research and taught a graduate seminar, I had to persuade my faculty union to approve me to teach at my current university. And, once approved, even though my only experience teaching freshmen was well before our current class of students was born, I was limited to a 100-level freshman class (designed to teach critical thinking, analysis and effective communication). No problem -- I wanted to teach a first-year seminar because I suspected I would learn a great deal from doing it, and I did.

Freshmen feel vulnerable. I developed a new course with attention and care, and took it through the steps of the curriculum review process, but walking into a classroom with 17- and 18-year-olds, I felt like they did. I was nervous and uncertain of my ability to succeed even though I interact regularly with freshmen in formal and informal settings outside the classroom and even became a student and took a bagpipe class with undergraduates last spring [1]. What if I couldn't create with them the safe but challenging learning community I envisioned? What if no one participated willingly in discussions after I made them move the rows of desks into a circle and posed well-designed, thought-provoking questions? Or if they hated the book I selected? What if their entire experience of school had programmed the freshmen not to think for themselves, not to look at their own experiences objectively and not to consider others' views? At some point in the semester, each of these what ifs and many other unanticipated challenges occurred, forcing honest reflection and ongoing revision of plans.

Lesson learned: As presidents protected by layers of institutional bureaucracy, we forget how

vulnerable our students feel and how much their uncertainty displaces engagement with learning. Standing in front of a class strips away the layers of protection and develops empathy that is important when we are confronted in the president's office by students in crisis and frustrated families.

Freshmen need hope of success. Characterizations of traditional-aged freshmen can be disheartening -- they are always plugged into devices, have limited face-to-face social skills, are overprotected by hovering parents and care only about their future earnings. Indeed, these characterizations were true of some of my students some of the time. More importantly, as I was trying to guide them into the lofty ideals of liberal education that underpin the first-year seminar, they were still developing cognitively and emotionally. This often masquerades as a lack of commitment - at times they misjudged, couldn't anticipate consequences, didn't perceive others' perspectives and seemed incapable of self-regulation.

Although there were many moments when I questioned it, they taught me that freshmen do, in fact, care deeply about college. They care because college costs a lot, even at a public university, because they understand the role of higher education in preparing them for better professional and personal lives, and largely because they are trying to convince themselves that they can succeed socially and academically in college and in life. This was not easy for my students (half of them first generation and from low-income families), who have seen too many counterexamples of college graduates working low-wage "high school jobs" and teenage single-parent dropouts.

Lesson learned: Presidents worried about retention should not overlook the importance to freshmen of simply nurturing the tenuous hope that they can succeed in college.

Many freshmen aren't prepared for college. The first-year seminar is intended to guide students into understanding college expectations, thinking critically and analytically, problem solving, communicating effectively, and handling difficult and challenging material. At Edinboro University, like many other colleges, these outcomes are approached through various topics that engage freshmen because they are "relatable," as my students were so fond of saying. My seminar topic was *College: What, Why and How*, and we read pseudonymous anthropologist [Rebekah Nathan's book](#) ⁽²⁾, *My Freshman Year*, as our core text alongside higher education and popular news and social media. These texts launched honest conversations about the purpose and culture of college and about national issues in higher education, and students enjoyed reading and talking about topics so close to their daily lives. But they also got bogged down in more difficult sections of the book.

They found the related research, statistics and other contextual information to be "boring" and "useless," missing the way in which this information illuminated and provided insight and texture for their lived experiences. In high school, many had learned to "just skip the hard parts" and one admitted he had never read a book before, relying on plot summaries instead. Later in the semester they laughed when I said that I expected "a short essay answer, not just two or three paragraphs" on the final exam. In high school, they explained, three paragraphs constituted a full essay. By "essay" I was suggesting the deliberate construction of a coherent, well-reasoned argument, and they saw it as a demand to pen three paragraphs.

Lesson learned: Faculty concern about current freshman students' poor preparation is not just nostalgic grumbling; these concerns are valid and presidents need to understand how intensely challenging and time-consuming it is to work with students who may be capable but whose high school preparation is sorely lacking.

Freshmen learn a great deal outside the classroom. We read about how the students Nathan studied balanced academic and social activities, and we talked about achieving the balance. When I asked my freshmen to go around the circle and state the percentage of time they spent on classes, homework, projects, studying and the like, the overwhelming majority stated that they spent only

about 25 percent of their waking hours on anything academic (some even less), and this was probably inflated given that the question was asked in a classroom setting.

They dedicated their time primarily to social and occasional extracurricular activities and relaxing with Netflix. "Hanging out with friends most of the time" was justified as allowing them to "network for future jobs." I cringed at these revelations, which too often were reflected in the quality of some students' weekly writing assignments. But I also noted that even though they said they had come to college primarily to pursue a major that would prepare them for a good job, most also observed that they learned more outside of the classroom than in it. And, of course, that's an important benefit of face-to-face residential college education. Learning to get along with strange roommates from unfamiliar places, to be a member of a much more diverse community than they were comfortable with and especially learning to manage their time wisely were all significant and necessary tasks for the freshmen.

Lesson learned: As an academic I had always assumed that what happened in the college classroom was primary. Presidents need to be reminded that what students learn in college is much broader than their classroom performance.

Freshmen change and grow dramatically. Managing their time in the context of extensive freedom and responsibility (they had, for the first time, to do their own laundry or control spending on entertainment) was a major stumbling block for my freshmen. And then there were new friends -- for many the first peers they had ever met who, unlike high school classmates, were "geeks" or "artists" or "different" like them and understood and accepted them for who they were. Even though the freshmen knew they should set aside time to study, many didn't have the motivation and self-regulation skills to manage the pull of the social and were always behind on schoolwork. More than once I received a weeks-late assignment from a student with the message, "I know this is too late to count but I wanted to do it anyway."

At the beginning of every class I had students do a brief informal written assignment related to the reading for the day, because I knew they needed a lot of practice with writing and because it signaled for them that they had to do the reading assignments and show up on time. And it gave everyone a chance at success -- if you were in class and had done the reading, you could do this assignment and do it well. Informal writing also allowed them to see that they could think and respond critically and thoughtfully to the reading and that they had something to say, so it laid the groundwork for overcoming an aptly misnamed "hate dread" of speaking in class. For nearly all, in their writing and in class discussions, opinion was conflated with fact and critical analysis of ideas and acceptance of complexity were new. Still, throughout the semester many openly, sometimes with shame, recognized and tried to shed their own stereotypical and ungrounded notions and develop academic habits of mind and inclusive attitudes.

Lesson learned: As presidents we talk a lot about the transformational impact of an education at our universities. Teaching freshmen lent credibility to what I say. They do grow and change significantly over even one semester -- we are, in fact, changing lives.

Freshmen do some of their best work for peer audiences. I worried that my freshmen's long-term project presentations might be a disaster, because as hard as I tried to structure their presentations by requiring them to meet with me to discuss topics, submit information resources and determine a mode of presentation well ahead, multiple students' project topics changed a day or two before they were signed up to present. Yet over the course of four full class sessions, they surprised me with very creative and interesting presentations that were courageous, honest and powerful, on topics that were very close to their hearts and minds, including suicide, sexual health in college, being LGBTQ on campus and being physically disabled as a college student. I was surprised to discover that presentation to an audience of peers is a powerful motivator that resulted in some students doing their best work of the semester.

Lesson learned: It is easy for presidents to question the motives of professors who devote significant amounts of class time to group work and presentation by students rather than “actually teaching,” but for many students the goal of presenting effectively to peers drives engagement and success. Further, they have surprisingly high standards when evaluating peer presentations.

Teaching a first-year seminar was an enormous amount of work on top of my “day job,” but I relished it. As a university president, I miss the challenges and rewards of teaching. Many of my freshmen regularly came to class 20 minutes early just to talk. They worried if I wasn’t there early myself and once sent a student looking for me five minutes before class started. They asked if I’d teach another course for them next year or continue the class into the spring -- flattering, but I worried maybe I wasn’t challenging them enough. They even reflected with empathy on what they read in the assigned text about professors planning extensively and then feeling like failures when students don’t participate in class. Still, I experienced a recurring feeling throughout the semester that I was working a lot harder than my freshmen.

In some ways I was, because I insisted on providing specific written feedback on all of their weekly assignments and because I wrestled constantly with what to do about cell phones in class, how to engage the perpetually disengaged, and similar challenges. It was difficult to give a poor grade to students I liked and cared about even when that grade was indisputably earned. And when I faced an instance of plagiarism, I felt like my trust was violated to its very core. I worked hard because I cared deeply, but my students worked hard, too, and I saw it demonstrated in so many ways throughout the semester. That made the planning, responding to writing, emotional and academic support, and personal investment not only worthwhile but also essential.

Essential to remembering why we choose to work with college students to begin with, essential to respecting the depth and intensity of faculty work when you haven’t done it in a while, essential to appreciating the striving and the dreams of even our most aloof undergraduates, and essential to recognizing how important it is to have professors who simply but genuinely care about their students. “Going off that,” as my freshmen often said, I’m now a better professor and a better president because of lessons I learned from the undergraduate classroom.

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