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Teaching involves more than classroom time

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Guest Opinion, by Katherine Tachau

In his provocative column, "Iowa's state universities need to change quickly," Michael Gartner repeats a common notion that faculty do not do enough teaching: "The teaching load -- six hours or less of classroom teaching per week (up to nine at UNI) -- must be increased."

This might be a useful suggestion if he were correct in thinking that classroom time equals workload.

Imagine the frustration a farmer who raises dairy cattle would feel if fellow Iowans routinely insisted that the only work dairy farmers do is milk their cows once a day and that this means that such farmers are overpaid and are simply being lazy and arrogant for resisting non-farmers' calls to increase their workload.

Or imagine how irritating a farmer who plants soy and corn would find the assertion that she is only working when she is actually selling the corn at a farmers' market.

Or how a carpenter would mind being informed that he is not really working but wasting time while he plans and calculates the costs of the rooms he will build; measures the space; selects and purchases the wood, nails, and drywall; and marks where he will drive nails.

Or how difficult it would be to find a lawyer willing to represent someone who refuses to pay for any time except the actual hours spent in the courtroom, on the grounds that this is the only "real work" the lawyer does.

Few of us would make the mistake of thinking that the work of farmers, carpenters and lawyers is only what those of us who are not in these professions can see them doing when we encounter them.

Yet, a surprisingly large number join Gartner in holding just such a mistaken understanding of what university faculty do and should do. Just as farmers who raise cattle and who grow corn both work hard, day in and day out, a variety of tasks that must be done for their farms to succeed some of the chores the same but others varying both by season and purpose so teachers of high school, community college and universities all work hard, with some aspects of their work common to all three and others that are not.

The difference between the former two and university professors is like that between lawyers and judges: both deal with and apply the law, but how they do so differs and therefore so does what work they are paid to do.

Unlike most high school and community college teachers, university professors are hired to do many things in addition to classroom teaching:

- » Some are hired to care for patients.
- » Some to carry out research in laboratories.
- » Some to perform and to teach students to do so.
- » Some to do other kinds of research and to teach the next generation of teachers and researchers.

The research that faculty and their students do results, directly and indirectly:

- » In the textbooks used in elementary, middle and high school as well as college.
- » In the technological and scientific discoveries from which patients and farmers benefit.
- » In state and federal legislation.
- » In the plays, novels, poetry, art and music that enrich the lives of hundreds of thousands of readers and audience members.
- » And in much else.

Faculty throughout a university's undergraduate colleges incorporate their research discoveries into their classroom and non-classroom teaching, and they engage students in joint projects to encourage them to discover the excitement of creating new knowledge.

Most of this work is as invisible as is the work of farmers when they are not in the barn or the fields or the carpenter when he is not hammering, or the lawyer when not in the courtroom. But for them, as for university professors, the labor we don't see for ourselves is what makes possible and successful the work we do recognize when we encounter it.

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