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SPECIAL REPORTS

Can Faculty Workload Be Captured in a Database?

Professors say an accountability effort ignores many of their job duties



Darren Hauck for The Chronicle

Nicholas Hillman (right), an associate professor of education at the U. of Wisconsin at Madison, meets with Malachi Alvarez, a student he is mentoring.

By Audrey Williams June | JULY 15, 2018

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Three years ago, Rebecca M. Blank, the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, wrote a blog post to the university community outlining, in detail, the workload of professors at a major research university.

She described how faculty members — whose main responsibilities are teaching and research — also juggle outreach, service activities, and, many times, administrative work. She highlighted a Madison survey of faculty members across 10 academic departments in which professors reported logging 63-hour work weeks. And she wrote of the extensive faculty work that takes place outside of the classroom, such as advising, mentoring, writing grants, running labs, and guiding students through independent study.

Blank also alluded to the impetus for writing the blog post: Gov. Scott Walker had called for each professor in the system to teach one more class per semester to offset state budget cuts.

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"It's our job to better communicate to those outside the university what we do at UW-Madison and how we do it," Blank wrote.

It's a job that's unremitting. In response to the governor's demands, the system created an "accountability dashboard" — a website designed to showcase how well its 26 public colleges met various performance markers. It went live in 2015, but the governor and others believed it didn't go far enough in documenting professors' work, and the latest efforts to do so have led to even greater tensions.

In what was surely a moment of *déjà vu*, last year Blank again found herself pushing back against misleadingly narrow characterizations of faculty work. This time Walker's latest budget proposal recommended that universities be required to track how much time each faculty member spends in the classroom, make the information public, and then reward those who teach more than the standard workload. Despite resistance from professors, administrators, and system officials, the measure was approved in December, and took effect soon afterward. To comply with the new law, the UW system quickly revised its dashboard to include what may be the most controversial data points yet.

"The idea that we would be evaluated by how much time we spend in the classroom makes no sense whatsoever," said Dorothy Farrar Edwards, president of PROFS, a faculty-advocacy group at Madison, at the time. "I felt they could have spent a bit more time to understand the complexities of these roles and how they work at different schools," said Edwards, a professor of kinesiology

Colleges have long been under pressure to prove that their faculty members work hard, pressure that has grown in recent years. Politicians and others looking for ways to cut waste in higher education often home in on faculty productivity, or the lack thereof. Indeed, lawmakers are known for contrasting stereotypes of academics — they teach once or twice a week, take summers off, and escape to far-flung locales to do research — with those of lower-paid employees who work in office jobs or do manual labor to earn a living.

In 2011, the governor of Florida drew the ire of faculty when he made it clear that he wanted to overhaul higher education in the state to make faculty more productive and emphasize teaching over research. That same year, the University of Texas system created an online database to be "transparent" about what taxpayers were getting for their money.

Before January, the only faculty-teaching data on Wisconsin's accountability dashboard showed the average amount of time faculty members spent teaching each week, by institution or type of college. For instance, the site shows that instructors at UW-Madison spent six hours a week, on average, in the classroom, compared with professors at "UW Comprehensive colleges," such as UW-Whitewater, who on average teach 12 hours a week.

The new database, however, lists nearly 12,000 instructors by name, and specifies whether they teach full time, the number of credit hours they spend teaching groups, and the number of credit hours they have been assigned for individual instruction.

The system does what it can to stave off the image of faculty member as freeloader. Users of the searchable database will read right away that "some faculty spend more time in the classroom, while others are more focused on research which brings millions of dollars to

our state's economy each year."

The website continues with several paragraphs of explanation about the differences in faculty teaching load. For instance, disciplines such as art, music, health, social work, and teaching are more likely to have a high number of hours in the classroom because they involve lots of individual instruction or supervision of students doing clinical work or teaching, the site says. It also provides a list of additional responsibilities that faculty members have — most of which mirror what Blank and faculty have repeatedly explained.

For the most part, faculty members say the existence of the database reflects higher education's unhappy role as a political battleground in Wisconsin. Nan Enstad, a professor of history at Madison, wrote in an email that professors want to engage in a public conversation about pedagogy, educational access, and how to promote the benefits of public higher education to individuals and society alike. But the accountability website, she wrote, "is a terrible foundation" for such discussions.

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"The website is not about accountability," Enstad wrote. "Rather, it was designed cynically to score political points and marginalize our voices in this conversation. It goes hand-in-hand with the destruction of faculty governance that accompanied the assault on tenure a couple of years ago."

Nicholas Hillman, an associate professor of education, says the database has the faculty legitimately concerned, but that he has put it out of his mind. With so many shortcomings baked in to the database, he says, "I don't see the utility of the tool."

Faculty are judged on performance all the time, he says — and that's just part of the job. Yet having to navigate the "politics of resentment" shouldn't be, Hillman says. When a database like Wisconsin's is being used as a "political tool to foster this kind of resentment, that's a problem. We're just not getting a fair shake."

The plan was for future iterations of the Wisconsin teaching-load database to include information about each faculty member's academic activities outside the classroom. But a system spokeswoman says its provosts decided that the explanatory narrative provided by the Office of Policy Analysis and Research — the dashboard's creators — was sufficient.

When lawmakers were pushing the move to track faculty classroom time last year, Hillman urged people to think about faculty work in the same way that they think about Wisconsin's storied professional football team, the Green Bay Packers. Hillman wrote in a tweet: "The Packers don't just work 3 hours on Sundays."

He has found that nonacademics can relate to that analogy.

"It's all about finding common ground," Hillman says. "That's what I hope that quote will do."

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