



# Secrets of the Guild: Rules Professors Live By

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I want to conclude this book by giving you a look into the lives of professors and the rules we live by. I am not doing this to win your sympathy, but to show you that our own behavior is shaped by real incentives and structures within the university and that we try to do our best within a given set of constraints just as you should. More pointedly, it is our situation that produces your situation. Our ability and will to give you the best education possible is shaped by the circumstances we work in. Maybe your education would be better if universities were set up differently. But there are also reasons why things are the way they are, which I will try to explain here as well. What follows then are some rules we live by.

## **RULE A**

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### **Reduce Thy Teaching Load**

Most professors view teaching as something they have to do to earn their salary, not as something that they see as the core part of their being. At least at selective colleges they view their primary activity as doing research or mentoring graduate students (see Rules B and C). They are biologists or musicologists first and teachers of biology or musicology second.

As a result, most professors will search for ways to reduce their teaching load (or alternatively to increase their discretionary time). At a typical selective university or college, professors will teach what is known as a 2-2 load, two courses in the fall and two in the spring. As you move further down the academic food chain, these numbers rise, first to 3-2, then 3-3, and then what some would consider the equivalent of high school teaching, 4-4.

It is probably natural that professors seek to reduce these numbers. In what profession do employees seek out extra unpaid work? If professors can receive a full salary for teaching a 2-1 or even 1-1 load, then why shouldn't they take it? What is noteworthy is that professors do not typically seek teaching reductions for their own sake. They do not spend their newfound leisure time watching daytime television (at least I hope they don't). Rather they use it to devote more time to research, which is what gives them the most pleasure and the highest rewards (see Rule B). Many professors are able to negotiate such course reductions. Particularly talented researchers who are in great demand usually negotiate with their deans for less teaching (as well as higher salaries, bigger research budgets, and other perks).<sup>1</sup>

This doesn't mean that professors hate teaching or view it only as a chore. Most would say that there are moments of joy in teaching. However these joys come only in certain situations. For most of us, it is enjoyable to teach subjects we care about to small groups of smart and motivated students. Who would not want to share their deeply felt interests with others who feel likewise and in the process help them become better thinkers, scholars, and citizens?

Yet these situations are less common than you might expect. Most professors are required to teach large lecture courses where they are reciting more for themselves than engaging in genuine interaction with students. Few professors enjoy teaching massive introductory or survey courses, but these are the most profitable ones for the university. Professors are also often required to teach outside of their academic specialization because there are not enough professors to cover all the courses a department wishes to offer. A specialist in African politics, for example, might have to teach a course on European politics. Again doing this is more work and less fun.

While professors could probably suck it up on these grounds, almost all of the joy disappears when students are lazy and unmotivated. Facing a classroom full of students who have neither completed the readings nor thought about them critically, who stare mutely during class discussion, who turn in their assignments late or ask for extensions, who only want to know what is on the test, and who care only about their final grade, most of us throw up our hands. Maybe part of the fault is ours—perhaps we fail to motivate or inspire our students to care about the subject. But too often our enthusiasm is blunted by a roomful of blank faces.

1. Professors may also receive course reductions for having a baby or for taking on administrative duties like department chair.

Most of us believe that students should be treated like adults. We think that if we tell students to do something, then they will do it promptly and conscientiously. After all, they are paying us to teach them. It turns out that many of our students do not respond as adults. They force us to use discipline—grades for class participation and even attendance—to get them to do things that they should do for their own benefit. If there is something that we hate above all, it is having to play the heavy—to enforce rules like a high school vice-principal. This removes just about all the icing from the cake that is teaching.

Finally, much of the work of teaching is administration rather than interaction. Particularly despised is grading exams. This is drudgery not only because one has to read answers to the same questions over and over again, but because the answers are often ill-thought-out and poorly written. Even more annoying is dealing with complaints about grades.

This all said, I would point out that most professors are not indifferent to their performance in the classroom. Who could feel good about knowing that they were boring a classroom full of young, talented minds? All else equal, professors would like to do a good job, though they are not always sure how to go about this. Just as a matter of pride, they will give it the old college try. Indeed, rather than be depressed by college teaching, I am surprised that professors are as conscientious as they are given the leeway for slacking that they have.

To get the most out of your professors, show them that you care about the material and are willing to devote your best effort to it. When professors see students like this, they are more than willing to give it their all. Further, seek out those professors who devote their energies to undergrads out of the kindness of their hearts, who go the extra mile no matter what. Do, however, try not to take advantage of them just because they are going above and beyond the call of duty. A thank you for a job well done will hopefully inspire them to continue doing good work.

#### THE CAMPUS NOVEL

The more you know about your professors, the more likely you will have effective and productive dealings with them. The present chapter describes some of the motivations of professors, but you might get a more rounded understanding of what makes us tick by reading fictionalized

accounts of our lives. Novelists are the real experts in conveying a felt sense of life as a professor.

Fortunately, there is an entire literary genre called the campus novel (or sometimes the *Professorroman*), which covers this ground.\* What all these novels have in common, as the novelist David Lodge puts it, is that “the high ideals of the university as an institution—the pursuit of knowledge and truth—are set against the actual behavior and motivations of the people who work in them, who are only human and subject to the same ignoble desires and selfish ambitions as anybody else.”†

There is one caveat though. In the interests of fiction, many of these works have exaggerated the more lurid aspects of our lives, particularly our willingness to sleep with undergraduates or persecute each other for sins against the gods of political correctness. As Elaine Showalter puts it, “Usually . . . professors are more concerned with whether the book we need will be in the library than with disciplinary hearings or extramarital affairs or murder plots.”‡ That said, if you wish to learn more about our lives, consider starting with some of these novels.

David Lodge, *Changing Places*. Virtually all of Lodge’s novels focus on academic life, and they are particularly popular among professors. Though most are set in England, this one describes an American and a British professor who switch jobs for a year. It thus allows Lodge to look at both university systems through a fresh pair of eyes. Particularly compelling is the American professor Morris Zapp, who represents a certain kind of academic superstar. As is always the case with Lodge, the prose is fluid and funny, the plot carefully constructed, and the observations spot on. Returning to Morris Zapp in the novel *Small World*, Lodge lampoons the often hilarious, ego-driven, back-biting conference circuit that we all participate in.

Richard Russo, *Straight Man*. This novel relates the near breakdown of an English professor at a small public university in rural Pennsylvania. What it gets right—and what many students forget—is that professors have private lives not to mention administrative responsibilities

\*The campus novel can be contrasted with the varsity novel, which focuses on the student side of life.

†Aida Edemariam, “Who’s Afraid of the Campus Novel,” *The Guardian*, October 2, 2004.

‡Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 121. Her book also provides a list of campus novels along with an insightful analysis of the genre.

that often take up most of their mental energy. The novel is also good on the budgetary woes that plague state and some private universities and the perpetual fear that positions will be cut and hence colleagues and friends will lose their jobs.

C. P. Snow, *The Masters*. § One of the first campus novels, it describes the intrigues of a group of Cambridge dons who jockey for the post of new master (something like president or dean) of their college. The depiction of university life is fairly idyllic—Snow viewed college as the place “where men lived the least anxious, the most comforting, the freest lives”\*\*\*—but the characters, the thirteen diverse fellows of the title, cover most of the species of professors you will encounter from the washed-up to the hugely successful, from the buttoned-up to the flamboyant.

James Hynes, *The Lecturer’s Tale*. This recent addition to the genre tells the story of a visiting adjunct lecturer—the very bottom of the academic hierarchy—and the slights that he must endure from that position. As more and more universities rely on part-timers for their teaching, this novel will give students a sense of the sort of precarious lives that many of their professors lead. As an added bonus, the novel is heavily allusive and “covers all the literary material of an introductory survey in English literature.”††

A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*. While most campus novels focus on the private lives, loves, and scandals of professors, few take seriously the main animating force of their lives: research. In this novel two academics come upon a mysterious correspondence between two Victorian authors and through clever detective work solve the mystery of their secret affair, all the while falling in love with each other. And after reading the novel you can watch a film version with Gwyneth Paltrow in the leading role.

§ Snow is also the originator of the two cultures idea described in Tip 24.

\*\* Showalter, *Faculty Towers*, p. 18.

†† Ibid., p. 136.

## RULE B

### Publish or Perish

This is the most infamous part of a professor’s existence. We need to publish articles or books in order to be successful. However the application of this rule is fairly limited. Its strongest force is felt by junior (that is, untenured)

faculty at major research-oriented universities. To get tenure and thus keep their jobs, they are expected to produce a major contribution to their chosen field. As a result, they focus their efforts on publishing articles in the top journals and books at the most prestigious presses.<sup>2</sup>

The same imperative is felt in other parts of the academic world, but to a lesser extent. At all levels, publication is associated with prestige and resources. Therefore all professors at any school and of any rank gain from publication. Indeed, it is the surest way to move up the academic food chain—to get a job at a better university or a higher salary and lower teaching load from one’s dean.

But while the rewards for publishing always remain, the negative sanctions become weaker at nonresearch colleges and for tenured faculty. Getting tenure at primarily teaching colleges or at nonselective colleges does not depend as much on a strong publication record (though this has been changing). Tenured faculty at all universities are also not under existential pressure to publish though again it does improve their lives and most have been socialized whether at graduate school or as junior faculty to put publishing first.

How hard is it to publish? Most fields have a handful of top journals where publishing carries the most prestige. These journals will typically accept less than 5 percent of articles submitted to them. Bear in mind too that only the best articles are submitted. There are of course also less prestigious journals that accept a higher percentage of articles but at the same time do not help one’s career prospects as much.

The prospects on publishing a book are less clear.<sup>3</sup> At one time, university presses (publishing houses run by universities) took it as their obligation to publish a large number of specialized monographs even if they lost money. They could at least count on selling the overpriced hardcover copies to university libraries. Today, university presses do not tolerate losses the way they once did, and university libraries are less willing purchasers.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there are more academics out there trying to publish as lower-tier

2. Every field has a set of A-list, B-list, and C-list journals and publishing houses (see Tip 52). Some departments even create a numerical score of each professor’s productivity by assigning points to each article or book published in a certain class.

3. See the Modern Language Association’s report “The Future of Scholarly Publishing” at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org).

4. Libraries deal with the problem of rising acquisitions costs by buying fewer books and relying more on interlibrary loan. Publishers in turn try to make up the revenue by raising prices, which in turn discourages libraries from purchasing.

colleges are requiring faculty to do more research. You do the math on this one. In short, most of your professors—particularly the younger ones whose future depends on it—feel considerable stress about publishing and devote most of their energies to it.

How long does it take to write a book or an article? The typical gestation for a book is anywhere from four to ten years, which takes a professor from the initial idea through applying for grants to fund the research, data gathering and analysis, presentations in front of peers, and revisions, up to submission to a press. Add on another year to get the reviews back and respond to them and a second year if the manuscript is rejected. A journal article will probably take more in the two to three year range from start to acceptance provided things go well. But note that many professors are working on multiple articles and a book simultaneously and sometimes the tasks overlap. Given these long time frames, it is no surprise that professors are constantly thinking of their research.

The message for you is to try to get into the research game at your university. This is where professors are most passionate and giving. The more you can link up to their research, the more personal attention you can receive from them and the more they will view you as partners in the enterprise of learning. And for the reasons mentioned earlier (see Tips 43 and 60), getting involved in research has its own benefits.

## RULE C

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### Pamper Grad Students

For a variety of reasons, graduate students—at least at universities that have them—occupy a privileged position in most professors' hierarchy of priorities. In the first place, graduate students are interested in the same things as professors are. They are devoted to the same field and often even the same subfield or subsubfield. This makes them valuable conversational and research partners. They are useful for testing out new ideas or as research assistants and collaborators.

Professors also enjoy teaching graduate classes.<sup>5</sup> Not only can they assign the technical works that they know the best (including their own), but grad-

5. Universities in turn try to limit the number of graduate courses that an individual professor can teach. PhD students after all are usually not paying tuition and rarely become big donors.

uate students meet them halfway. They work hard, always do the reading, and strive to impress during class discussions. In short, they do everything that most undergraduates do not. Graduate classes approach the teaching ideal where the professor serves as a moderator among well-informed students struggling to understand complex ideas (see Tip 34). If undergraduate classes were more like this, professors might like teaching them more.

Finally, with graduate students professors get a chance to form someone in their own image. They are creating future scholars. This gives professors a warm fuzzy feeling because they care about their field and want to inject new, creative blood into it. This is their way of giving back what they have taken from their own mentors who most of them greatly admire. More selfishly, they can win the battle of ideas by placing more of their followers in the frontlines of debates. Even when they do not produce clones of themselves, professors improve their own standing in the profession by training future academic stars.

This is not to say that graduate students have it made. Usually they work quite hard at impressing their professors in class while at the same time serving as TAs and RAs and also writing their own dissertations. While I think they may complain a little too much, my colleagues and I still view them with sympathy (after all, we were all graduate students once).

The takeaway point for you, the undergraduate, is that the more you become like the typical graduate student, the larger claim you will place on your professors' attentions. If you are seen as someone who can offer something to professors—whether as a passionate conversation partner interested in their work, a hardworking research assistant, or best of all a future member of the guild—you can win their trust and attention and receive the personal attention reserved for grad students.

#### **RULE D**

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### **Limit the Effort You Devote to Undergraduates**

There are few incentives within the modern university for faculty to devote extra effort to undergraduates. It is part of our contracts that we must teach classes and advise students. But aside from a good feeling inside, professors gain little from becoming better teachers. While better research gets them resources, salary, prestige, and the opportunity to move up the academic food chain, better teaching gets them only the gratitude of their students.



Most universities do claim to consider teaching excellence in promotion and salary decisions, but these claims are mostly rhetorical. There may be some sanctions for terrible performance and this can become a consideration during the tenure decision, especially at small, liberal arts colleges, but usually it only matters if the professor is already a borderline case. It does not hurt those who do top-notch research. Absent total dereliction of duty—failure to show up for class or submit grades on time—there are few punishments for treating undergrads with indifference.

Similarly, there are few tangible rewards for going above and beyond the call of duty. Most schools do offer awards for teaching excellence, but they are limited to a small number of faculty and are not accompanied by much financial compensation (usually a few thousand dollars in one's research account). Universities do encourage professors to attend teaching workshops and develop innovative courses, but again the incentives are small.

The main motivator of faculty—the desire for prestige—is not much affected by their success in teaching undergraduates. Faculty want to be well thought of by their peers—other professors in their field—but solicitude for undergrads does not earn them this respect. The reason is that teaching is an eminently local endeavor; its benefits are seen only by undergraduates at a particular university. Indeed, I would be hard pressed to name the professors in my field who stand out for their success in teaching undergraduates.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, research success can be seen around the world by all those who professors do want to impress.

You may be saying to yourself that this is scandalous. Universities are not giving professors the incentives to perform their most basic duty to the best of their abilities. My reply is that things are not so simple. First, if teaching were to play a large role in the incentive structure, it would have to be measured. But how? Student evaluations are one way, but they are biased in several obvious respects (see Tip 20). Moreover, they can be gamed. Higher grades and more entertainment (not to mention better looks) get you better evaluations, but are not tantamount to better teaching. And how would we make hiring decisions among new faculty who have no teaching experience? One alternative is faculty evaluations. But faculty tend not to agree on what constitutes teaching excellence. This subjectivity may lead them to help

6. There are awards for excellence in teaching given out by the relevant professional associations, but few follow who wins them. The prestigious awards are for research.

their friends and hurt their enemies (unfortunately, we are not above that) rather than consider the best interests of undergraduates.

A further concern is that putting more emphasis on undergraduate teaching necessarily implies putting less emphasis on something else.<sup>7</sup> The obvious place for cuts is research, the main alternative occupation for faculty. But is this in students' and society's interest? Would students be happier if their university was staffed with talented teachers who were not experts in their field? Would they be willing to trade brilliant, creative, and original thinkers for talented expositors of those ideas? Moreover, where would the ideas to be taught come from if there were not researchers there to produce them? Nobody has claimed that the top research universities are anything other than collections of outstanding researchers with mixed teaching abilities or that hiring decisions are based on anything other than ability to do high-quality research. Despite this, students choose to apply to and attend such universities in droves.

This may not be proof that the system is working—what alternatives do students have?—but consider another benefit. Most of the world functions on a market basis. What the market wants gets produced. But shouldn't there be some place where smart people produce ideas for their own sake? If universities did not exist to hire the best Jane Austen scholars or the best string theorists, the work that they do would probably not get done or would be done only by amateurs in their spare time. Without such a place free from the dictates of the market, the world would be considerably poorer. At worst professors expand the range of human thought and at best their breakthroughs in pure, noncommercial theory one day become the basis for products or ways of living that benefit us all.

Could the system be adjusted on the margin? It probably could. I am not saying that the current balance between teaching and research is the ideal one. Slightly more emphasis on undergraduates would probably yield a net benefit. And in fact even major research universities have been moving in this direction. The difficulty is in finding the right incentives. One might consider, for example, reserving certain faculty positions for great teachers as opposed to great researchers; but this would create a two-tiered department and might hurt faculty morale. One could institute raises for teaching excellence, but then how would one judge such excellence. Basing

7. I would personally suggest cutting the administrative responsibilities of faculty. Most universities are self-governing, meaning that most administrative posts are held by professors. I wonder if they might be more profitably held by trained businesspeople freeing up more time for teaching.

raises and promotions on student evaluations would probably be the easiest way to motivate faculty and is already in use, but the incentives need to be increased considerably for it to have an effect.<sup>8</sup>

8. One economist has recently proposed the following policy: Graduating seniors would be allowed to distribute \$1,000 among the faculty members of their choosing. These raises would replace the merit pay that the university currently awards on the basis of evaluations by deans and department chairs. The main question is whether it would lead to pandering or to better teaching. See James D. Miller, "Beyond Merit Pay and Student Evaluations," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 7, 2007.

### HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR PROFESSORS

In the following excerpt, the sociologist Fabio Rojas responds to the question, "How should students approach beginner lecturers when their class isn't going too well, attendance has dropped, and the lecturer hasn't yet considered there may be a problem with their teaching style? Should one of us approach the lecturer individually, or should we collectively do something? Should faculty be informed, especially considering the early stage in their career?"\*

This is his response:

First, if you are near the end of the semester, it's probably best to be brutally honest, but constructive, in the evaluations. There may not be enough time for anything else. Be specific: "I was confused by the lectures." "You didn't explain the readings enough." . . . If enough students do that, most instructors will get the hint.

Second, if there is still enough time in the semester, you can go to office hours or send email. Once again, be nice but specific. "I really want to learn, but I am having severe problems with X." Once again, if multiple people do that, then most folks get the hint.

Third, depending on the class and the nature of the problem, you could just raise your hand during class and say "we like the class, but we are having an issue with X."

Fourth, if the instructor is completely out of whack, then you should definitely consult the [department] chair, the [undergraduate] chair, one of the [undergraduate] advisers, or even the dean. You should only do this if the problem is really severe.

\* Fabio Rojas, "How Can You Tell the Prof That They're Horrible?" [orgtheory.wordpress.com](http://orgtheory.wordpress.com).

## RULE E

## Play the Market

It is not for nothing that professors have been referred to as “rootless cosmopolitans.” We do move around a fair bit from university to university. Of my current colleagues, a clear majority has taught at more than one university. Like those in just about any line of work, we also play the market. We try to improve our positions whether moving to a more prestigious school, getting more research funds, lightening our teaching load, or even just increasing our salary.

How do we do this? Mainly by becoming more productive researchers. If we put out a book or article that is widely read, we can expect job offers from other schools who wish to bask in our new-found prestige. We can then either accept their offer or bargain with our current dean for a better contract. The dean may call our bluff, or he may do everything he can within his limited resources to keep us. Before you start feeling sorry for the poor dean, be aware that he makes the same calculations. If he knows that we are not getting outside offers, then he will not give us raises, added benefits, or promotions.

These forces have become even more powerful in recent years. While academic life may once have been a nice quiet corner of the labor market where professors were guaranteed a job for life and rarely moved around, today there is much more competition and mobility. Not all PhDs get full-time jobs—many are forced to work part-time for low pay and little job security—and others have to devote so much energy to teaching that they lose sight of scholarship. Meanwhile the top universities are always head-hunting at lower-ranked schools for scholars on the rise. Academic life is much more of a free market than it used to be. This is mostly a good thing. Professors now compete with each other and work harder in order to better their lives.

This market has also created a few pathologies. Because the key to upward mobility is success at research, professors concentrate much more energy on it than they used to.<sup>9</sup> Whether teaching has suffered as a result

9. This may have negative consequences for research itself. Professors may concentrate more on trendy topics where it is easy to score articles and on short-term projects with a quick payoff over deeper, less sexy, long-term projects with greater payoffs for society. Academia has also become more of a superstar market, where the stars rake in most of the resources and others are left with the scraps. Of course even our stars are modestly rewarded relative to law, medicine, or business.

is unclear. In the old days, professors were under far less pressure to satisfy their students than they are today. They did not receive student evaluations, and universities did not see students as customers. My sense is also that professors did not work as hard as they do now, though my older colleagues may disagree with me.

In short, your professors play the market. The point of this book has been to teach you how to play the market as well. To show you how universities work and how you can navigate them to get the sort of education that you desire. Most professors have learned the rules of their profession well. It is after all their livelihood. Students, however, only spend four years at college and so lack the time and incentive to learn how universities really work. The intention of this book is to explain these rules, so that from your first day at university you can play the market and be a savvy consumer of the education that universities are offering.

