



Complaining about your job? Not me!

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I always find it interesting whenever I hear my colleagues complaining about their jobs as faculty members. Personally, I've never understood what there is to be upset about. I think we've got it made.

For those of you who have never worked in higher education - and I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume that's most of you - you might find that declaration a little hard to understand.

Could I make more money in business and industry? Of course. But I didn't go into education because I wanted to get rich quick.

Dr. Frederick P. Frank, my doctoral advisor at Northern Illinois University put it this way: "Being a tenured professor is about as close to being independently wealthy - without actually having any money - as you can possibly get."

Having been in this role for around 35 years, I tend to agree. I'm not saying every day is a day in paradise. But consider the following:

I've never punched a time clock. Ever. I show up whenever I want and leave whenever I feel like it. To be fair, I'm usually in the office from around 8 am until 4:30 pm most days – unless I'm teaching an afternoon/evening class or have other commitments.

But seldom is anyone looking over my shoulder – which is no doubt better for some of my colleagues than it is for me.

Moreover, if I decide I don't want to come to the office I don't have to let anyone know (unless I have a meeting to attend). I make doctor's or other appointments whenever I feel like it and take as long as I want for lunch.

I generally work on whatever I want. And although I have several projects going at any given moment, I typically have complete control over how I spend my time. I obviously have to prepare for the classes I teach each semester, but I also have complete control over how I do that.

In my department, we are expected to maintain five office hours per week. Think about that for a moment. I remember once, several years ago, we got into a huge debate about whether faculty should have five or ten office hours per week. We eventually settled on five.

Additionally, several of my colleagues have virtual office hours. They don't even have to come to the office. Students can meet with them via Zoom during their designated times. Even so, no one ever checks to see if we are there during our scheduled hours.

Yes, I do have to attend a few committee meetings as that's how we do most things in academia. Most of them are in person whereas a few are held virtually. The challenge for me is staying awake. Occasionally we get things done, mostly in between the 20-minute discussions about whether a sentence calls for a comma or a semi-colon.

I do love meeting with students. Unlike some of my peers, I see this as the most important thing I do in my role as a faculty member. I always allow 30-45 minutes for each appointment as I genuinely enjoy talking with those who represent our collective future.

I mention this only because I have a few colleagues who I suspect would rather be conducting research, presenting their research, applying for grants, writing articles and books, attending conferences, serving on advisory boards, and giving keynote speeches than spending quality time with students.

Call it a personal bias, but when you're in the education business, students should be your main focus. For me, all the other stuff is just a necessary yet annoying distraction.

Finally, there's job security. Although tenure doesn't protect faculty as much as it once did – if they really want to get you, they'll find a way – I still feel more secure than most of my friends who work in the private sector.

Still, being a faculty member is arguably not as much fun as it used to be. I remember the days when we'd wander into each other's offices and spend an hour or two drinking coffee and dissecting the major issues of the day – or just talking about what we had planned for our next class.

That doesn't happen much anymore. Somewhere along the line we all got too busy pursuing our own agendas and focusing on our own careers. Informal conversations, which used to be synonymous with being a faculty member, are now few and far between.

Bottom line: I went into higher education because I wanted to make a difference in the lives of students, help them reach their full potential, and change the world. That's still the case.

So there you have it. I'm not quite living the dream – but pretty darn close.



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