

The Most Fulfilling Part of Being a Professor

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What's the most fulfilling part of being a professor?

When Ben Y. Zhao, a professor of computer science at UC-Santa Barbara answered the question at Quora ([later republished at Slate](#)), he listed some of his “most fulfilling moments.”

“Watching a (nearly) finished student receive that coveted job offer, whether it’s a faculty position she’s worked so hard for, a position at that top research lab, or a lucrative offer from that hot startup everyone wants to join.”

“Watching one of you students deliver a fantastic talk at a premier conference in front of a packed room of attendees from all over the world.”

“Getting an unexpected thank you note in the mail or an email from a former student, thanking you for that class you taught her six years ago and detailing how it’s changed the trajectory of her life and career.”

“Meeting up with a former student at an academic conference and being introduced to his or her current students getting ready to present their work.”

Of these four items, I have experienced only one, the unexpected thank you note. For a variety of reasons the other three are entirely foreign to me^[1]. They sound awfully good, though. Reading Prof. Zhao’s accounting one can feel the palpable pride he must take in these moments.

In aggregate they show the deep pleasure of sustained and productive mentorship, a way of leaving a legacy in one’s chosen field through the scholars and workers a faculty member has influenced. Zhao says, “I personally find the role of teacher most satisfying, and that’s why those moments are the most fulfilling and memorable to me.”

It is telling, however, that his framing of his own teaching is bounded by those who have followed his path. The satisfying parts of teaching as expressed by Prof. Zhao are exemplified by pointing to the “successes,” as defined by professional impact at the highest levels.

Despite nineteen years in the college classroom, I cannot point to any similar successes. I have never seen myself replicated in my students.

A significant reason for this is despite having spent nineteen years in a college classroom, I’ve never been a “professor.” Three of those years were spent as a teaching assistant. The others, a mix of lecturer, instructor, adjunct, or whatever other names we attach to non-professors who teach college classes. I have also been itinerate, with work at five different institutions over that period. This still makes me less itinerate and more connected to the institution than many other contingent faculty who may work for several institutions *simultaneously*.

My work with graduate students has been relatively rare and fleeting, filling in when the tenured faculty are

otherwise occupied. At Clemson, I did have the chance to work with the same cohort of students for three consecutive semesters, and I continue to view the [subsequent successes](#) of those people post-graduation with a certain amount of admiration and pride, but I cannot say that it is the same as what Prof. Zhao describes.

Some of this may also be rooted in what I teach, writing, including lots of first-year writing and other introductory courses. At best, my work puts students on a productive path, but they have so far to travel after leaving our class I am barely connected to the end of the journey.

Additionally, I recognize that I am less invested in “school-related” success than maybe some others. An obvious bias, and at least partially rooted in my lifetime contingent status. It is hard to fully embrace the system that holds you at arm’s length. I have to find my pleasures and connections in other ways.

Doing well in school qua school is usually a good thing, but I often see student behaviors incentivized that may be good when it comes to what matters in “school,” but are less connected to what I believe is more important, “learning.”

This may sound perverse, but for me, one of the most fulfilling parts of being a (sort of) professor has been not the successes, but what others might call “failures.”

My favorite part of teaching has been the freedom to experiment and explore to try something, see it fail (or at least not completely succeed), and have the opportunity to change my approach and try again. This is very much the same experience of writing, a perpetual falling short of the ideal that is nonetheless fueled by incremental progress.

These are pursuits that feel worthy to me, failing and trying again.

In fact, if I was granted a single wish, it would be to make failure more central to school and learning. If we could demystify failure, and drain it of both its (very) real and imagined negative consequences, I think we may be able to reorient school away from “success” – which is often narrowly defined – and more towards learning.

Some of my favorite moments as an instructor have actually been in seeing students “give up” by dropping a course, or accepting a grade lower than an A, or in one memorable case, deciding to leave school; quitting as a kind of success.

By the standards of school, these are failures, but for each of these individuals, the choices were actually moves towards agency and freedom. One student I recall taking 21 hours per semester for three consecutive semesters in an effort to double major and double minor. They were deeply curious about all of the subjects, but simultaneously also very concerned about studying those subjects in a way that resulted in a credential on the transcript. Eventually, however, the sacrifices necessary to maintain that pace (while also working 15 hours per week in this student’s case) proved unsustainable. One major was dropped to a minor and another minor dropped entirely. Exercising these choices might’ve been one of the most important experiences of this student’s education.

My memorable “dropout” is one of the most talented and capable students I’ve ever had. School is what this kind of student is meant to do, but the student also recognized they were not in a proper state of mind to take advantage of what school had to offer and that their original choice of college may not have been the right one. It took a lot of courage to leave a path that would’ve been easy enough to follow. In this case I was merely a sounding board for the ideas the student already held, but still, it felt like a necessary service.

Is this still mentorship? Have I been undermining the academy all these years, the call coming from inside the house. I wonder if I am too suspicious of what lurks inside of academia, its potential to corrode freedom and co-opt spirit.

Or maybe it’s just self-protection. I read Prof. Zhao’s account and realize, that will never be me.

It's a hard thing to desire something you know you'll never have.

[1] I've only been to two academic conferences in my life, so the odds of seeing a student present something at one go down precipitously.