

What is a Professor at a Research University?

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Educators like to emphasize the continuous nature of formal education. It begins before kindergarten and extends through college and sometimes beyond. Although there is value in seeing education as a continuous process, it is also clear that there are some key points along the continuum where students experience profound changes that are unlike anything that has come before. None of these instances is more dramatic than the transition from high school to college, especially for students enrolled at large research universities.

Of the many changes students confront, one of the most significant is the difference between high school teachers and university professors. Understanding how professors differ from high school teachers and knowing what makes professors tick can contribute to the success of a first-year student.

To understand more about professors, it is first necessary to understand the nature of a research university. There are nearly 4,000 American colleges and universities. Of those, fewer than 160 are classified as Research Extensive Universities. These universities offer a wide range of baccalaureate degrees and confer 50 or more doctoral degrees across at least 15 different disciplines each year. In addition, each of these universities has an explicit mission, which for public institutions is often mandated by state government, to advance research and creativity through the work of professors. Everything from the curriculum and facilities to organizational structure reflects this mission. More important, it is a major part of the job of being a university professor.

Unlike high school teachers, university professors have three primary aspects to their jobs. In addition to teaching undergraduates, they supervise and train graduate students who are pursuing masters or doctoral degrees. They also engage in original scholarship within their area of expertise. In essence, university professors are in the idea business. They are expected to generate, create, develop, evaluate, criticize, and implement ideas. That process may involve discovery in the natural or social sciences; achievement of new understanding in history, philosophy, literature or other disciplines in the humanities; development of new ways to apply knowledge in agriculture, engineering, business, communications or other applied fields; or generation of original creative contributions in the arts and performing arts. As a part of this process, professors typically work collaboratively with graduate students, which is how professors mentor these individuals to become future professors.

How do these faculty responsibilities matter to undergraduate students? First, it means that your professors have been specially educated and trained to perform as scholars. Most professors have earned a doctoral degree after having spent four or more years of advanced study in a particular field beyond their baccalaureate degree. In the sciences and social sciences, it has also become typical for professors to serve as a post-doctoral fellow for 2-4 years after receiving their doctoral degrees and before becoming a faculty member at a research university. Consequently, faculty at a research university are deeply committed to their scholarship, and that commitment is reflected in at least two important ways that affect their teaching. (1) University professors spend a considerable part of each day involved in their research. Unlike high school teachers, university professors do not spend their entire day teaching. Accordingly, university faculty must be quite disciplined and budget their time to accomplish both their teaching and research responsibilities. Professors manage this challenge by posting office hours: days and times reserved for meeting with students. At other times, professors may be engaged in their scholarly activities and not available to meet with students. (2) Faculty are deeply committed to learning and deeply committed to academic values. Accordingly, professors revere academic honesty and integrity; there is no such thing as a little white lie or a trivial sin when it comes to plagiarism or academic dishonesty.

Second, professors are passionate about learning, and they expect to see similar passion in their students. What may seem unimportant and harmless behavior by students is often regarded very differently by faculty. For example, university professors expect all students to attend all classes unless there is some unusual and valid reason for them not to be there. Similarly, professors expect students to be diligent and inspired about their class work. Professors take it as a given that students will complete assignments on time and study when appropriate.

Because of significant differences in the structure of learning between high school and a research university, a failure to appreciate professors' expectations can be a profound obstacle to a new student's

academic success. For instance, professors may not outline explicit actions to be performed by students, remind students of reading assignments, or provide more than general guidance about time management beyond the information provided by a course syllabus. Accordingly, students need to read and refer to the course syllabus throughout the course. Many professors will anticipate that students will invest the time and energy needed to do well without prompting; e.g., professors might expect students to “keep up” with the readings for a course without ever stating when to read specific pages or sections. In short, professors will likely provide less nurturance and less individual attention than is often provided by high school teachers, especially in courses with large enrollments. The ultimate strategy for academic success, therefore, is for each student to exercise self discipline, demonstrate initiative, and assume individual responsibility. Interestingly, these same attributes aptly describe professors.

Finally, it is important to appreciate that some your teachers will be graduate students: academic apprentices. Not only are graduate students involved in learning to generate scholarship in their chosen specialty, they are also learning to become college level teachers. It is critical that undergraduates understand this aspect of university teaching and realize that all teachers at a university, whether they be a professor or a graduate student in training to become a professor, are competent, dedicated professionals.

Although there are similarities among professors (e.g., a common set of values and professional integrity), students at a research university should also be prepared to experience vast differences among their professors. There is perhaps no profession that is as cordial toward individuality, as tolerant of eccentricity, or as encouraging of independence as that of university professor. In order to be successful scholars, professors must think independently and must develop confidence in their own ideas. One consequence of this extreme individuality is that you should not expect all professors to look alike, act alike, or teach alike. Each will bring his or her own vital force and worldview into the classroom, which is one reason that universities are such exciting places.

All organizations are composed of different personalities and people who reflect diverse ideas and characteristics, but the research university is unusual in placing extreme value on that diversity. Accordingly, a very important academic value expressed by all professors is academic freedom. This principle does not mean that professors can do whatever they want or say whatever they want in or out of the classroom; it does imply that faculty have great latitude, far more than high school teachers, in choosing their teaching style and conducting their classes. Even the curriculum is less rigidly controlled at research universities than in high school. By appreciating this difference between high school teachers and university professors, students will be much better prepared to succeed.

In the end professors are human beings. The kinds of expectations we all have for promoting effective social engagement in our private lives should also guide our interactions in the university setting. Courtesy, kindness, respect and all of the other attributes of civil society should be expressed by students and professors alike. Consequently, talking when one should listen, sleeping when one should be attentive, letting cell phones ring when they should not, and arriving late or abruptly leaving early are all examples of failed classroom decorum. Out of respect not only for professors but also for fellow students, classroom decorum should be strongly embraced. Thoughtful attention to these simple ideas can help you experience the kind of positive and rewarding learning experiences that universities afford.

The key to all successful learning is to establish a positive relationship between student and teacher. By appreciating what professors are like, what they do, and what they value, and by understanding the world of the research university, students are better prepared to form the kind of relationships with professors that enhance academic success. In the end, student learning at a research university entails a considerable challenge and demands significant effort and commitment. It offers, however, one of the most exciting, enjoyable, productive, and important opportunities of a lifetime.