THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

FACULTY

# The Best and Worst Part of Being a Professor: Students

*By Audrey Williams June* | SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

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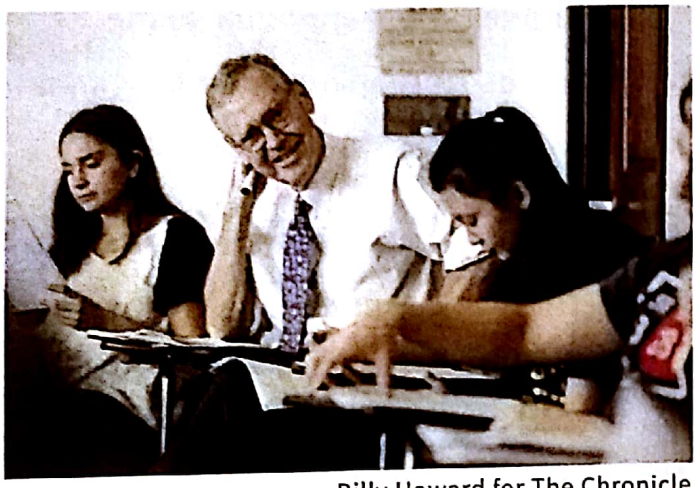

Billy Howard for The Chronicle

"I ask myself, would I rather be in meetings or would I rather be in the classroom?" says Patrick Allitt, a professor of history at Emory U. "Teaching is really the best part of my job."

During his 30-year career as a professor, Patrick N. Allitt has passed up chances to pursue administrative jobs. Even though those positions can quickly advance a career, Allitt sees them as having a fundamental drawback: They limit the amount of time he can spend with students.

Allitt, a professor of history at Emory University, has a simple way of weighing a career move: "I ask myself, would I rather be in meetings or would I rather be in the classroom? Teaching is really the best part of my job."

Many faculty members share Allitt's love for the classroom, according to a new national survey about faculty job satisfaction. Nearly 1,000 professors across the country responded to questions that asked what they liked best and least about their work and how respected they felt by students, administrators, and people in the community. The survey, commissioned by *The Chronicle* with support from TIAA, was conducted in July and August by Maguire Associates.

Teaching was the aspect of the job that the largest share of professors found satisfying, with 91 percent feeling "somewhat" or "very" satisfied" with that work. Mentoring students or junior faulty members was a close second, at 87 percent.

Many expressed pleasure at having the opportunity to help shape the minds of the next generation. Professors wrote about the joys of helping students discover an "aha!" moment, feeling that they can make a positive difference in students' lives, and preparing students for life beyond the classroom.

At the same time, the survey shows, students are one of the clearest sources of stress. Among the frustrations of being a professor, respondents said were students' being unprepared for college, unwilling to read required texts, and unmotivated to participate in class.

Nearly two-thirds of the faculty members agreed with a statement that students are harder to teach than students of years past. Respondents overwhelmingly said they believed that student engagement had gotten worse, with only about one in five agreeing with a statement that today's students are more engaged than were students of years past.

Such sentiments, however, don't appear to chip away at faculty members' passion for their jobs in general. At a time when public skepticism about higher education is running high, those who were surveyed still believe that their jobs gain them a fair amount of respect — from students, from the community, and from family and friends. More than half, 54 percent, said that if they were beginning their careers anew, they would still definitely choose to work in higher education.

A career as an academic often spans a lifetime, and 45 percent of respondents said they expected to stay in their line of work that long, with a larger share of professors at public colleges than at private colleges holding that hope. Faculty members are on the fence, however, about encouraging their own children or family members to follow in their footsteps. Only one out of five said they "definitely would"; about one out of four said they either "probably would" or were "unsure."

That's to be expected as fundamental shifts in higher education continue to alter th academic workplace. Life as a professor these days is likely to offer only tenuous employment, a reality reflected in the fact that about 70 percent of faculty members work outside of the tenure track. Researchers, for their part, have had to deal with limited growth in federal funding for more than a decade now. And job demands have many faculty members doing more with less, making work-life balance elusive.

Still, according to the survey, professors believe that their jobs matter, and they feel lucky to do the work. Finding ways to connect with students whose attitudes and classroom behaviors shift from generation to generation is just part of the job.

"There are some problems that persist," says Allitt, author of *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). "But I think most of us count our blessings that we get to teach."

Max Whittaker for The Chronicle

Saundra Wright teaches linguistics at California State U. at Chico.

Saundra K. Wright, a professor of linguistics at California State University at Chico, can relate. She describes a childhood of "pretending to hold class" during playtime and knowing that, for her, teaching "was just meant to be from the start."

"The classroom really invigorates me," she says, especially during moments like one recently when a discussion helped a bilingual student learn that her struggles with recalling the word for something is common to people who toggle between two languages.

Of the faculty members in the survey, nearly all believed that their teaching benefits students and their lives in ways big and small, similar to what Wright saw in that moment.

"It was exciting for her to think about who she was in a different way," Wright says. "And it was exciting for me to see that."

Those kind of teaching moments fuel Wright's passion about her work, but like the survey respondents, she finds today's students more challenging in some ways than in the past. After teaching for nearly two decades, Wright says, she's noticed that students in general need more guidance to facilitate their learning. When she assigns a chapter for students to read and then discuss in class, she now makes sure to tell them what parts of the chapter are key.

"I have to admit, in the beginning I was sort of against doing that, but I've learned over the years that they just need parameters to be very clear," Wright says. "If I want class to go well, I need to help them get there. Once that anxiety is lowered, they really rise to the challenge."

For professors like Satina V. Williams, part of the appeal of teaching is being the person who can help students who need an extra push. Williams, a former accountant who made a career switch to become a professor, went to graduate school at Virginia Tech, where she earned a Ph.D. in 2003. Since then she has taught at three other institutions before landing at Bowie State University, in Maryland, where she is now an assistant professor of accounting.

"I had one student at Bowie who, at first, was just being lax about getting her work done," Williams says. "I talked to her about it and kept encouraging her, and she ended up doing a good job in the class. I knew she could do it. Sometimes you just have to push them."

Williams is like the professors in the survey who said students have arrived less and less prepared over the years. But at the same time, she enjoys helping them. "You just have to meet students where they are."

Faculty members in the survey reported that they find their jobs exciting. Calvin James can relate. He's been teaching science at Ohio University since the late 80s. But James, an associate professor of virology, knows that just because he's

passionate about the subject matter, students may not be, at least not right away. It's his job, he says, to bring them along.

"You're moving people along as a group, and that's a challenge," he says. Repeating information is a way to give some students another chance to absorb it, he notes. He talks with students about how what they're learning applies to everyday life, and he uses visuals to draw them in.

"They love to see things," James says. "When we talk about how DNA replicates, I'll show a clip of that actually happening. Most people can relate to that."

After so many years in the classroom, it's still exciting to "watch them get it," says James, who is also director of programs in Ohio's Office of Inclusion. "The most rewarding thing is when at the end of a lecture I hear, 'This makes sense to me' or 'I didn't get an A in the class, but I enjoyed it.' "

For Shawna Shapiro, many rewarding moments in teaching writing and rhetoric at Middlebury College involve students' opening up about topics, like their own biases, that might be tough to talk about elsewhere.

The associate professor also gets to see how students improve their writing over time, and how that sometimes pays off in ways they didn't expect.

"When I'm working with first-generation students who don't feel competent about their writing, and then they come back and tell me, 'I'm writing for the school newspaper' or 'I'm helping other people with their writing as a tutor,' I like being able to see that," Shapiro says.

The potential for immediate gratification during teaching goes a long way even for longtime professors like Allitt.

"When you're doing research and writing it up for publication, the pleasure from that is deferred for a very long time," he says. "When you're in front of a class of students who don't understand something, and then you can explain it so they do, you can see that right away."

When students fall short of his expectations, Allitt says, his teaching experience gives him the perspective he needs to deal with it. Two things haven't changed, he says, since he started teaching as a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. There will always be students who won't do the reading. To deal with that, Allitt calls on every

student in class during discussions. And most students don't write as well as he would like. (He blames schools that rely on multiple-choice exams much more than did the schools in his native England, where he wrote in school every day.)

"Although there's plenty of repetition in teaching, there's a slightly different mood in every class, and the pleasure comes from the unexpected quirks of personality that come out both individually and collectively," Allitt says. "I know I'm going to have to nag them about the reading and the writing. But there's always going to be a great deal of enjoyment about interacting with them that never gets old."

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*A version of this article appeared in the* October 5, 2018 issue.