Office Hours

Kids in classrooms longing to be free

(A Harvard Professor and Harvard College Student walk into a therapist's office.)

THERAPIST: What brings you in today?

PROFESSOR: Nobody comes to my office hours! I think some students just feel bashful.

THERAPIST: Student, is that true?

STUDENT: Not really. I know a few bashful students, but Harvard isn't a terribly bashful place.

T: Have you attended office hours?

S: No. I guess I just haven't had relevant enough questions. But I invited my favorite Professor to the student-faculty dinner!

T: How did that go?

S: It was awkward, really. The professor I invited was hard to talk to and didn't seem that curious about me.

P: Can I respond? Students seem distant to us too. They only care about their grade and have no intellectual interest in the material. And given how busy they are, no wonder! Clubs, societies, sports, choirs, orchestras, you name it. They're all doing fifty other things and class is their last priority.

S: Well, since we're opening up, professors around here make their priorities very clear! Talk about busy! First it's research, grant-writing, and supervising graduate students. After that, they're starting companies and consulting to augment their already generous salaries, appearing on television, and writing books. I pay tuition and what do I get? Last year's warmed-over lectures and one office hour a week. What a rip.

T: It's clear you're both upset. Let's step back for a minute. Professor, do you feel like there are opportunities to meet students on campus?

P: Definitely! I can eat at the dining hall, attend extracurricular events, join one of the House Senior Common Rooms or even become a House Master. I even heard one professor applied to be a Resident Tutor.

S: (Really? What happened to him?)

P: (Nobody hired him! I think they thought he was a bit crazy.)

T: Professor, have you tried any of these things?

P: No. But nobody cares! I'm up for tenure soon. I have to crank out publications and degrees. I don't get any credit for any of this student contact stuff, everyone knows that! My only interaction with undergraduates that matters is having halfway-decent CUE scores, and as long as I crack a few jokes and grade generously I'm set. I want to spend more time with College students. It's just not part of my job description.

S: I mean, I want to believe you, but I've had some really inspiring teachers here. David Malan. Tim McCarthy. They seem to be able to do it.

(Professor looks uncomfortable.)

P: Yeah, those guys are great, but they don't do any research and don't have full appointments.

T: Perhaps research is the problem then?

P: No, no! Research is what makes Harvard so great!

S: But I'm trying to get an education. So while you're busy in the lab, I'm learning from my peers, in those clubs, teams, and extracurricular organizations you mentioned earlier.

T: Professor, do you think things will change after you get tenure?

P: Yes! Then I'll be able to completely change the values that have been instilled in me during my first six years here. I'll definitely spend more time with students.

S: C'mon. Isn't after tenure the time when you slow down, spend more time with your family, and start a company on the side?

(The two sit in silence for a minute.)

T: Let me summarize. Professor, you claim you'd like to spend more time with students but the research orientation of Harvard prevents you from doing so. Student, you feel ignored by faculty and have responded by building your own community centered around interacting with your peers through extracurricular activities. You're happy for the main part but wonder how much of your tuition is going to fund the community of scholars who seem largely uninterested in you and a growing number of administrators hired to pay attention to you when professors don't.

S: That's a fair assessment.

T: I can't say that this seems like a healthy relationship. I think you two have reached a stable but unhappy cohabitation. Let me make a suggestion.

P: Sure.

T: You two need to decide whether you really want this relationship to work.

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