SHEEDY REMARKS

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I want to start by thanking everybody who had anything to do with my getting this award. It means a great deal to me. I was absolutely shocked to get it, primarily because the competition is so fierce. I can think of so many MANY Arts and Letters professors who absolutely deserve this award. Normally I feel like I'm desperately trying to keep up with all the other wonderful teachers—that is, with all of you.

This is especially true of my colleagues in the history dept, which rightly prides itself on outstanding teaching. I'm so honored to be listed on the plaque with the previous history department Sheedy winners—both the retired but unforgettable Bob Kerby, whose hand-drawn chalk maps and vivid lecturing style brought American and Byzantine history to life for generations of ND Students, and of course, Bill Miscamble, who manages to make all of the students in even his largest class feel they have a personal relationship with him. In addition, I particularly need to thank two ND historians who have influenced me the most, and who I have long tried to emulate: First, Doris Bergen, who is unmatched in encouraging undergraduates to see themselves as scholars; and second, Laura Crago, who has left Notre Dame for the Claremont Colleges, but whose teaching remains absolutely legendary. Laura's office was only two doors down from mine, and for years, I watched long lines of students waiting to talk to her about their papers and dropping by for advice on every conceivable academic matter. For years, Laura Crago has been the teacher I have most tried to emulate and I want to acknowledge all that I've learned from her, here.

Today, I want to talk about a valuable, but frequently underappreciated resource. We teachers absolutely cannot do without it. Many of us (myself included) tend to act as if it is almost limitless. Yet it's far scarcer than we think. Like any rare but valuable item, we teachers need to control and plan our use of this resource wisely, so that we can get the best possible 'mileage' out of however much of it we actually have.

The resource I'm talking about is our **students'** time—specifically the time that they are able to devote to doing the work we assign in our classes.

Every prof I know complains about his or her own lack of time; yet I would argue that our students' time is probably stretched even thinner than our own. We often act as if we think our students' class preparation time is almost infinite. It's not. Yet the time constraints facing our students is something I've only recently come to appreciate; and it's not something I often hear my colleagues talking about.

So that's what I want to talk about today. My talk has two parts. First, I want to talk about how scarce our students' class preparation time really is. Second I want to talk about a few things I've tried to do in the face of these time limitations, to help my learn what I want them to learn, in the time that they have.

(Let me stipulate, before I start, that I am not complaining about our students. On the contrary Notre Dame has outstanding undergraduates. If we all assign more work than our students can effectively handle—then there is a problem, not with the students, but with the amount of work we are assigning. We are one of the most selective schools in the country in terms of admissions. Our students do not lack diligence, talent, or skills. The time problem is structural—stemming from the many demands of college life.)

How much time can we reasonably expect students to devote to our classes?

When I was just starting out teaching, a professor from Brown named Susan Smulyan gave me a valuable piece of advice. "Always remember," she said, "that n*o student will ever care as much about your class as you do*. They *can't*. You have only two courses to prepare for. Your students have *four*." (That was at Brown. At Notre Dame, students have *five*, and sometimes *six* if they're taking an overload.) Students simply can't put in ten or fifteen hours of work every week preparing for class, as we do.

After a few years of trying to ignore this fact, I called the A&L Undergraduate Studies office and asked whether I couldn't demand the students put in ten hours per week on my homework. They said no—quite rightly. They said the most I could reasonably expect students to devote to class preparation, over the course of the semester is **two hours outside class for every one hour spent in class**. If this sounds unreasonable, do the math. Students take 5 courses—or 15 class hours per week. If they devote two hours out to homework for every hour in class, they can be expected to average 30 hours per week to homework. Together, that's a total of 45 hours per week spent on academics.

(At Brown and other places where students take only 4 classes per semester, faculty can ask students to prepare more extensively: three hours of outside work instead of two, per classroom hour.. Here at Notre Dame, we have chosen to make up in extra courses what schools with fewer courses gain in intensive reading and study.)

If 45 hours a week on academics seems too little, please remember that this is only the beginning of the urgent demands on our students' time.

About 40% of our undergraduates are on work-study; these students work an additional 10-12 hours per week on campus. Many other students have paid part-time jobs off campus. ROTC is another type of paid work (scholarship); and it too is time consuming.

In addition, Notre Dame rightly prides itself on educating the "whole person." We encourage our students to volunteer in the community; to participate in student government; to be active in their dormitories; to join student clubs and organizations. And they do so, in large numbers. They also join the choir or the band; they participate in intramural or extramural athletics; they become active in committee work, or write for student publications, or become RA's, or take on other sorts of special projects. We, as a university, brag about our students' achievements in social service, athletics, the arts. And rightly so. But all this takes a great deal of each student's time, every week.

And there are other time demands, too. As a Catholic university, we want our students to have a rich spiritual life—to go to mass, participate in the activities organized by campus ministries, etc. Then, there are the demands of daily life—eating, exercising, sleeping. (Our students skimp on a lot of the latter, especially sleep.) Even the activities of daily living have to be carefully timed not to conflict with academics, paid work, extracurricular activities.

On top of this, there is the "Notre Dame experience." That is, most of the students themselves see their circle of friends and life in the dorms as the heart of what they've come here for. They enjoy socializing, football games, and "partying." This is not because they are lazy, but because—oddly enough—they didn't come to Notre Dame to learn how to turn live the lives of middle-aged college professors. Which is as it should be. Their adult lives are just beginning; and most of them find this new and exciting aspect of their lives more compelling than writing papers or reading books.

If you do the math, you'll find that if our students actually DO two hours of preparation, reading, or paper-writing outside class for every hour they spend inside our classroom, we would actually doing pretty well, given the many other demands on their time. (A lot of them actually do put in these study hours; which is why they sometimes fall asleep in class. They're exhausted.)

When I tell my colleagues that we can only demand our students spend two hour preparing for each class meeting—or six hours per week, including all studying, reading and writing—they are often shocked or outraged. Yet this is one of the most fundamental truths of student life. It's easy to expect students to do put in the kind of work on our course that we do—but they simply can't. There are not enough hours in the day; and our university has far too many other worthy aims and beloved traditions ("educating the whole person") that rightly and beneficially compete for their time.

In short, we as individual professors can reasonably aspire to fill only 9 hours of a student's time per week—3 hours inside our classroom and 6 hours outside our classroom..

This leads to part two of my talk: How can we get the maximum advantage of this very scarce resource? <u>How can we best use the six hours per week, on average that we have a right to demand each student devote to our courses, outside the classroom</u>? I'm still working on this; but I want to mention a few thoughts.

Main point: don't pretend that these time constraints don't exist. Don't assign more reading than any human being can possible finish in six hours, without telling the students how to get through it. They won't necessarily tell you it's too much; but you're leaving them floundering, and that wastes time and hurts classroom morale.

Here are a few specific things I try to do to address the time problem head on, and not pretend it doesn't exist. First, I try to help students work around their other commitments, so that they can do the best possible work in my class. For example, during the first two weeks of class, I encourage them to take a look at all the other assignments they have for all their classes over the course of the semester, and then to ask me for extensions on any of our major papers, if they are going to have a conflict with work due in their other classes.

But conversely, I tell them explicitly that I do expect them to give me my six hours of work---no more, but no less. And if they put in less than six hours or so, they shouldn't be unhappy with bad grades.

Second: I try to be as explicit as possible about precisely how I want them to do my reading and writing assignments. That way, they don't have to waste scarce time trying to read my mind and figure out what kinds of things are important to me.

One thing it took me a long time to realize is that our students are bombarded with contradictory messages from their different professors about how to write papers and read assignments. The kind of writing necessary for a history essay is entirely different from the kind of writing desirable in a sociology or economics or philosophy assignment. Even within departments, different profs demand different kinds of writing and reading skills.

Our students are good students. If you tell them exactly what you want, they'll try to give it to you. So, for example, I tell them want their short essays to include a clear thesis statement spelled out in a short introduction; strong topic sentences; a logical argument; concrete evidence; polished writing; originality, and a conclusion. Every prof doesn't want that in an essay. I found if I ask for what I want, as clearly and explicitly as possible, I'm more likely to get it.

It's the same with reading. Different profs expect students to use the assigned reading in different ways. So tell them how I want them to read the assignments, and we spend the first three weeks working on how to read in this way. I give them a short list of things I want them to be able to identify about each scholarly article I assign--the author's thesis statement, and so forth. If you tell students exactly what you want them to DO with the material you assign them to read; and you work with them so that they understand both how and why to do this, they will use their time outside class much more efficiently.

Third and last—when it comes to reading assignments, less can be more. Assigning **less reading** can actually encourage students to think more deeply, creatively and productively about the course material.

For example, I have learned that if I give our students too much to read—say, a whole monograph to read in a week-- they are likely to dutifully slog through it, quickly, efficiently, without much thought, and forget about it afterwards.

But say I want to assign a history monograph—a whole book, which I know they can't read effectively in six hours: One useful technique is to divide it up. Each student reads the introduction and conclusion (so they get the book's summary and thesis statement). Then each student reads two chapters, and takes responsibility for explaining the argument of those chapters to the rest of the class—first, in small groups, and then to the class as a whole.

In short, there are ways to address the very limited number of hours the students can devote to our courses. I'm still working on trying to find the best ways to do this. But I do know that I will fail to get the most out of our student's very limited time if I don't face the problem directly.

My last point: this of students lack of time to spend on academics is not unique to Notre Dame. According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, students at Columbia and many other universities regularly take Adderall, Ritalin, and other ADHD drugs in order to go without sleep, so they can finish their work and maintain a high GPA.[1] Conversely, when a tenured, middle-aged anthropology professor went under-cover as an ordinary first year student at her own university, and took five freshman classes in a semester, she soon found herself behaving like all the other students--cutting classes, skipping assigned readings, and abandoning her normal practice of rewriting her papers. Like the other students in her classes, she just didn't have the time to do otherwise.[2]

I conclude with the statement with which I began: The scarcest, but most valuable resource at our command is the time our students are able to spend doing our assignments. Given the other demands on their time, we can reasonably demand they spend only about six hours, per week, on average, for a three-credit course. We therefore need to respect our students' very limited time, and learn to make the most of it. I'm still trying to figure out the best ways of doing that. If any of you have any suggestions or techniques to share, I'd love to hear them.

Thanks for listening.

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[1]Andrew Jacobs, "The Adderall Advantage," *New York Times*, July 31, 2005; viewed online at www.nytimes.com on November 16, 2005.
[2] Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Cornell University Press, 2005); Elizabeth F. Farrell and Eric Hoover, "Getting Schooled in Student Life: An anthropology professor goes under cover to experience the mysterious life of undergraduates" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 29, 2005