Demystifying Academic Life

As an undergraduate student, it is easy to see professors only for their roles as teachers in the classroom. Life in higher education, or academia, however, is complex and is strongly rooted in tradition. Like many organizations, academia can be a complicated system of politics and policies. This module will introduce you to the structure of academia so that you can reflect upon your role as an undergraduate researcher.

Learning Objectives:

1. Familiarize yourself with the structure of higher education, or the academia
2. Comprehend the multiple responsibilities of a professor

Academic Classification: Four-year academic institutions can be broadly categorized as research institutions or teaching institutions. As the name suggests, many faculty at research universities conduct research, yet teaching and service to others is equally important with faculty enhancing teaching and service with their research activities. At a teaching university, faculty spends the majority of time teaching and implementing effective teaching practices. Although faculty at teaching universities may apply for research funding, the emphasis on obtaining research funding is not as great as at research institutions. Neither type of institution is better than the other—just different in their missions.

In the United States, academic institutions are classified according to the Carnegie Classification created by the Carnegie Foundation (Carnegie Foundation, n.d.). According to the Carnegie classification, Purdue University is classified as a Doctorate-granting university which means that the university is considered a Research University and has a very high-level of research activity.

Academic Structure: According to Purdue University’s Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Effectiveness, Purdue professors or instructors serve as Deans, Department Heads, Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Instructors, Clinical/Professional, Research Faculty, Visiting Faculty, Non-tenure faculty, post doctoral, continuing lecturers, limited term lecturers, and Adjunct Faculty. Differences in instructional ranks depend upon factors such as the amount of time that instructors have held their positions and the daily work responsibilities of instructors.

In addition to faculty, student staff such as teaching assistants and research assistants are also important members of departments and colleges. Although administrators and staff are vital members of the academic community, we will focus primarily upon the relationships between faculty and students. Overview of each are presented in the next few slides.

1. Undergraduate Students: Students at Purdue can be classified as undergraduates or graduate students. Undergraduate students primarily attend the university to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Although such degrees may be completed in four years, it might take longer depending upon a variety of factors. The primary focus is on educational
breadth and not necessarily depth. While many fields allow students to acquire a job after obtaining an undergraduate degree, other fields may require advanced study or attendance at a professional school prior to entering the workforce.

2. **Graduate Students:** Graduate students may be pursuing a Master’s degree or a doctor of Philosophy degree or Ph.D. Graduate level coursework develops a deeper level of knowledge in an area of study. Graduate students are expected to develop strong research and writing skills as they work towards becoming an expert in their field. Publishing papers and presenting them at conferences is common and quite desirable. If a graduate student decides to pursue an academic career after completion of a PhD, prior teaching experience along with the research experience is recommended. PhD graduates may get hired as postdoctoral researchers, or post-docs, to further their research and publish their work.

3. **Faculty:** A PhD graduate hired as a faculty member usually starts off as an Assistant Professor. A faculty member in this position is in a pre-tenure phase where the department and colleagues evaluate the assistant professor’s performance based on their research, success in securing grants, and teaching. This type of position is also known as a tenure-track position. An assistant professor is offered tenure after a number of years of service (usually 5 or 6 years), is based on a variety of criteria including the department and the college satisfaction with the performance of the faculty member. The criteria includes quality teaching, excellent research, successful grants, a large number of publication in prestigious journals, and administrative and committee responsibilities (Purdue University, 2014). If an Assistant Professor is selected for promotion by the department, and college, it is then referred to the Office of Provost for promotion to become Associate Professor with tenure. Being granted tenure means that the professor can keep his/her position indefinitely until they retire or if there is just cause for dismissal (Collegexpress, 2014). In most cases, when Assistant Professors do not earn tenure or are not promoted, they may seek another position outside of the university. The progression of an Associate Professor to be considered for promotion to a Full Professor is similar to the assistant professor criteria. An international reputation in their field is typically expected for Full Professor.

4. **Administrative Hierarchy:** During their careers, professors may also serve in administrative positions such as a Department Head or Dean. These positions could be either in addition to their current teaching and research position, or could be strictly administrative. All the professors (assistant, associate, and full) are overseen by the department head and the department head reports to the dean of their college. All Deans from each college report to the Provost, and the Provost works under the president of the university (Hierarchy Structure, 2013; Collegexpress, 2014).

**Duties of a Professor:** Many undergraduate students think professors only teach (University of Georgia, n.d.). Professors, however, have three main responsibilities in academia: Research,
Teaching and Service. The relative weight of each of these responsibilities depends on the university type and departmental expectations. Descriptions of each area follow.

1. **Research**: When it comes to research, a significant portion of time is spent acquiring funding for the research by responding to Requests for Proposals or RFPs or submitting grant applications to funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) or the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Research funding may be used to pay for numerous things, including graduate or undergraduate student salaries, supplies, travel, or research equipment. Professors conduct research, advise graduate students on their research, and publish their findings in professional journals. (University of Georgia, n.d.). These publications are usually required by the department and count towards the promotion.

2. **Teaching**: There are two aspects in Teaching: teaching in the classroom and teaching outside of the classroom. Classroom teaching involves activities such as designing courses, maintaining grades, conducting examinations, engaging in other forms of assessments, holding office hours, and helping students with the coursework. Teaching outside the classroom may involve developing workshops or presenting information to professional conferences or to nonacademic audiences.

3. **Service**: Professors are usually involved in some professional service to their discipline, which may include reviewing papers, sitting on committees, or editing journals. Professors often serve the university in an administrative capacity, or they may be selected to work outside the university in their area of expertise. Service may include participation in committee meetings, department meetings, advising or mentoring undergraduate and graduate students in their careers and writing recommendation letters (University of Georgia, n.d.).

Activities that may involve all three areas include being part of a graduate student’s thesis committee, helping graduate students to conduct research, editing thesis drafts, and participating in oral defense of graduate thesis (University of Georgia, n.d.).

Due to the many responsibilities of a professor, you might find yourself working primarily with a graduate student. In such cases, remember that these graduate students are just as capable of mentoring and guiding you in your researcher role.

This module has given you a general idea of the roles of professors and students in academia. It has also made you aware of all the different responsibilities a professor has to fulfill in addition to serving as your research advisor.

References:


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