

A Common-Sense Look at UNC Faculty Workloads

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper measures the teaching loads of faculty in the University of North Carolina (UNC) system.

The impetus for the paper was a statistic provided by the UNC system to the North Carolina legislature's Fiscal Research Division. It claimed that the system-wide average teaching load is 3.37 courses per professor per semester.

Based on the Pope Center's knowledge of the UNC system, 3.37 courses seemed extremely high. So we conducted our own study.

Determining faculty workloads is not a simple process. Faculty members' duties are usually divided among teaching, research, service and administration, and other activities. Arriving at a single number that provides a meaningful account of a professor's production can be an exceedingly complex task.

However, the central purpose of a university is to teach; this study focuses solely on the amount of teaching that faculty do. As a result, the Pope Center has created a quick, simple, and meaningful measure of teaching loads that can be used for policy purposes.

We applied our method to data taken directly from the UNC system's online course enrollments. We used a sample of different schools and different types of departments—some for the Fall 2010 semester and others for the Spring 2011 semester—to approximate the mix in the entire system.

This report is not intended to be a definitive empirical study on the topic of faculty teaching loads. It is instead intended to illustrate approximately how much teaching is actually done by professors in the UNC system, based on a representative sample of faculty.

II. BACKGROUND

In the 1990s, the UNC system had a method for determining faculty workloads (not just teaching). It created "course equivalents" for various non-teaching activities, from "service to the public" to "externally-funded research" to "reading to stay current in one's field."

But in 2001, the UNC system dropped it and shifted to a study conducted by the University of Delaware "because of the cumbersome nature," according to UNC's website. This study led to UNC's claim of 3.37 courses

per professor per semester. The UNC system called the Delaware Study methodology “a more simple and accurate method.” UNC provided the Pope Center with the results of the Delaware Study, but not its underlying methods.

The Pope Center requested the methodology but did not receive it before publication.

III. METHODOLOGY

The main concern of the Pope Center’s study was to determine the average number of courses that UNC faculty members actually teach. It assumes that professors must spend additional time outside of the classroom, and makes no attempt to determine that additional time. Even so, there are several complexities to surmount to arrive at meaningful measures:

- Faculty positions are differentiated.
- Instructional units (courses) are differentiated.
- Universities are differentiated.

Because these complexities determined how to handle the data, this section on the Pope Center’s methodology is organized around them.

1. Faculty positions are differentiated.

Faculty positions include tenure-track professors, adjunct (part-time) professors, visiting professors, contract lecturers, and graduate assistants serving as teachers in universities. Further clouding the picture are the many private contracts and agreements made by individual professors.

But tenure-track professors form the core of the faculty: they are usually the highest paid, have the most power,

and are the last to be laid off when budgets get cut. Restricting this examination of faculty workloads to tenure-track professors greatly reduces the paper’s complexity and eliminates many of the problems that would occur if all types of professors were included.

Because faculty members sometimes perform extensive administrative duties, while continuing with teaching functions, this study also exempted most faculty members who serve as department heads or above. Those with lesser administrative duties were included (as were two department heads whose departments were small—with only five and seven professors in their departments).

2. Instructional units are differentiated.

They include: large lecture courses (often composed of hundreds of students), traditional-sized lectures, recitations, doctoral dissertations, independent studies, direct-readings and non-thesis options, and more. Each type of unit had to be looked at individually to determine whether it constitutes a course.

- Lectures can range from one to several hundred students. Large lectures often require less work for the professor than ordinary-sized lectures, since the professors for the larger courses have teaching assistants to perform tutoring, grading, and clerical functions. In this study, all lecture courses are counted as one course, no matter how big or how small they are.
- Recitations are part of large lecture courses, almost always conducted by teaching assistants; they are eliminated, not counted as courses.
- Labs are usually connected to lectures, and are

either taught by the same professor or by a graduate assistant under the professor’s supervision. Such labs are therefore not counted as courses. A lab that stands alone, without a lecture, is counted as one course.

- The other types of courses are generally one-on-one interactions between a professor and student. They include doctoral dissertations, independent studies, theses, non-theses options, research projects, and direct readings. These types of instruction are problematic for a study of workloads, as the amount of time spent by a teacher with a student can vary widely.

In order to prevent the bias that is often inherent in producing a single statistic, we created two measures of faculty teaching loads. Such biases can happen unintentionally, particularly in a subject like this where there are so many arbitrary decisions to be made.

Method 1

This method counts every group of students in a single course number as a course. If a professor is supervising three different doctoral dissertations with different course numbers, they count as three courses.

However, if there are two or more students with doctoral dissertations with the same course number, they are counted as one course only. This is because dissertations or independent study projects frequently require little supervision—no more than an hour or two a week. To count each dissertation or independent study project in the same subject area as an individual course would present an inaccurate picture of faculty workloads.

To illustrate in concrete terms, assume that Professor X supervises two doctoral dissertations. One of these doctoral candidates has signed up for Course #5555; the other has signed up for Course #5666. These count as two courses, since the professor must keep current on two different topics.

Professor X	Course #	Doctoral Students	Courses Taught
	5555	1	1
	5556	1	1
Total Courses Taught			2

In contrast, if both students sign up for Course #5555, the dissertations are counted as one course.

Professor Y	Course #	Doctoral Students	Courses Taught
	5555	2	1
	5556	4	1
Total Courses Taught			2

The Pope Center considers this is an extremely lenient standard. It provides the “high” measure for faculty workloads.

Method 2

The second method counts doctoral dissertations and similar course types only if at least three students are enrolled.

Professor A	Course #	Doctoral Students	Courses Taught
	5555	1	0
	5556	3	1
Total Courses Taught			1

However, in this method, if a professor has doctoral students in three different courses, or two students enrolled in one course and one enrolled in another course, he or she is considered to be teaching one

course. (Under Method 1, the example below would count as two courses).

Professor B	Course #	Doctoral Students	Courses Taught
	5555	1	0
	5556	2	0
Total Courses Taught			1

This standard of at least three independent study or dissertation students counting as one course was chosen after consulting with both experienced professors and current doctoral candidates. This provides the “low” (or more rigorous) measure. Although it may not appear to be as statistically correct as the high measure (Method 1), it may very well express a more accurate account of the amount of time a faculty member spends in instruction.

3. Universities are differentiated.

Universities and even departments within universities have different research requirements for tenured faculty members, and thus have different expectations for their teaching. Under UNC’s current guidelines for faculty teaching loads, the minimum standards depend on the universities’ Carnegie classifications (which measure how research-intensive a school is; see Table 1). Depending on the school’s classification, there is a wide variation of teaching loads, from two courses to four courses per semester per professor.

To conduct this study, it was important to know the number of students enrolled in each course section (and thus how much work is actually placed on the professor). Only six schools in the system include in their online course registrations the number of students enrolled for each course.

Three of the six schools (Chapel Hill, UNC-Greensboro, and N.C. State) are in the highest research category and thus have the lowest teaching load requirements (two courses per teacher per semester). No doctoral school with a standard of 2.5 courses per teacher had the necessary information, but two master’s-level schools with a standard of three courses per teacher (Appalachian State and N.C. Central) and one baccalaureate school with a standard of four courses per teacher (Asheville) listed the number of students enrolled in each course.

Table 1: COURSES PER SEMESTER, BY UNC CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION

Category	Campuses	Courses per Semester
Research University I	Chapel Hill, NC State, Greensboro, A&T	2
Doctoral Universities	East Carolina, Charlotte	2.5
Master’s	Central, Western, Appalachian, Wilmington, Pembroke, Fayetteville	3
Baccalaureate I	Asheville	4
Baccalaureate II	Elizabeth City, Winston-Salem, School of the Arts	4

This study tried to match the overall mix of the different teaching-load standards in the UNC system, which were shown in Table 1. In Table 2, we list the percentage of students in each category of school in the UNC system. We also provide the percentage of professors at each type of institution used in this study. Because course enrollment figures for doctoral schools with a standard

of 2.5 courses per teacher are missing, findings for Appalachian State (a master's-level school) and Chapel Hill and UNC-Greensboro (Research I schools) are overrepresented with additional professors to achieve the proper mix, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: PERCENTAGE OF UNC STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS FOR EACH CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION

Category	Percentage of Students in UNC System	Percentage of Professors in Study
Research University I	42.1	54.1
Doctoral Universities	23.8	0
Master's	27.5	38.9
Baccalaureate I +II	6.5	6.9

III. DATA and RESULTS

The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4. The data for this study were taken from actual course enrollments from four universities' online directories of courses for either the Fall 2010 semester or the Spring 2011 semester. The schools are UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC-Greensboro, Appalachian State University, and UNC-Asheville. The departments were chosen to reflect the variety of degree programs within the UNC system. Table 4 arranges our findings according to the Carnegie classification of the schools we looked at.

Table 3: COURSES TAUGHT, BY DEPARTMENT AND SCHOOL

Campus	Department	Faculty	Courses Taught	Courses with Fewer than 3 Enrolled	Courses per Faculty by Method 1	Courses per Faculty by Method 2	UNC/State Standard
Chapel Hill	English/Literature	49	107	28	2.18	1.61	2
Greensboro	Nursing	32	71	16	2.22	1.72	2
Greensboro	Sociology	14	37	5	2.64	2.29	2
Appalachian	Economics	17	41	0	2.41	2.41	3
Appalachian	History	26	92	17	3.54	2.88	3
Appalachian	Biology	25	89	45	3.56	1.76	3
Asheville	Environmental	7	20	3	2.86	2.43	4
Asheville	Philosophy	5	12	0	2.40	2.40	4
Totals		175	469	114			
Method 1 System Average – Courses per Professor					2.68		
Method 2 System Average – Courses per Professor						2.03	

Table 4: COURSES TAUGHT, PER CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION

Classification	Faculty in Sample	Courses Taught	Courses with Fewer than 3 Enrolled	Courses per Faculty by Method 1	Courses per Faculty by Method 2	UNC/State Standard
Research I (Chapel Hill, Greensboro)	95	215	49	2.26	1.75	2
Master's (Appalachian)	68	222	62	3.26	2.35	3
Baccalaureate I & II (Asheville)	12	32	3	2.67	2.42	4

IV. CONCLUSION

Our methods provide a reasonable estimate of how many courses tenure-track professors teach in the UNC system. An attempt was made to have the correct proportions of Carnegie classifications that exist in the UNC system, and a wide assortment of disciplines was chosen to reflect the actual variety of courses that exist in the system as well. Rather than trying to compute a single precise estimate that could be prone to unintentional bias, we chose to provide a range between a lenient methodology and a more restrictive methodology. If anything, we tried to err on the side of leniency.

As the final table shows, under the more lenient methodology, representative teaching loads are 2.26 courses per semester at the research-intensive universities, 3.26 courses at the master's-level universities, and 2.67 at the baccalaureate universities. The first two exceed the legislated standards, but the third falls far short of its four-course minimum. Additionally, none reaches the 3.37 load presented by the University of North Carolina, based on the University of Delaware study.

On the more restrictive standard, none meets the legislated standards: teaching loads are 1.75 at research-intensive universities, 2.35 at master-level universities, and 2.42 at baccalaureate universities.

Overall, faculty teaching loads in the UNC system are likely to be somewhere between 2.67 courses per semester and 2.03 courses per semester for tenure-track professors who do not have extensive administrative duties.

Our findings lead to several conclusions:

- UNC-Asheville's low measures suggest there is a lack of monitoring and enforcement of the current standards at some schools in the UNC system. At Baccalaureate I schools like UNC-Asheville, professors are expected to teach four courses per semester. But the combined averages for two departments—one in the humanities and one interdisciplinary subject—are only 2.67 using the high measure, and 2.42 using the low measure. These results are worse than those for Appalachian State (3.26 and 2.35), even though professors are only required to teach three courses per semester at Appalachian.

- Although it cannot be seen from the above charts, six professors in Chapel Hill’s English department have a total teaching load of only one lecture course. For another five professors, their entire teaching load is the supervision of one doctoral dissertation. Such low teaching loads in the humanities are an extravagant luxury.
- UNC officials have suggested for several years that there is a shortage of nursing faculty. Nursing is a high-intensity teaching subject, requiring small courses. Yet nursing professors do not necessarily conduct a lot of research, since most health care research is performed by faculty from other disciplines, such as biochemistry and medicine. But—perhaps because its Research I classification allows it—UNC-Greensboro has teaching loads in its nursing department between 2.22 and 1.72 courses per professor per semester. That, too, seems extravagant.
- UNC-Chapel Hill’s English department slightly exceeds its Research I standard of 2 courses per semester using the high measure, but fails to satisfy the requirement using the low measure. The real question is why an English department’s requirements are the same as a chemistry department’s. The only valid reason for assigning such a low teaching load to Research I schools (two courses per semester) is because professors ostensibly perform valuable research that advances useful knowledge, often with economic implications. However, research in the humanities and many of the social sciences is not equally “useful” as that produced in technical and scientific subjects. This suggests that the teaching load standard should be differentiated among departments at Research I schools to account for the difference in utility.

UNC’s current standards for teaching loads are based on an era of rapid growth in academia, when funding was plentiful, and when there was intense competition (including with private industry) for top academic talent in many disciplines. But that rapid growth is proving to be unsustainable.

Furthermore, many reasons cited in the past for professors’ light teaching loads are no longer valid. The market for faculty has changed; rapid growth has caused the overproduction of Ph.D.s in many disciplines; and the competition from private industry has diminished. Every public higher education system in the nation is undergoing the same pressures; nationally, faculty wages are likely to fall, teaching loads are likely to increase, unprofitable research is likely to lose importance, and talented faculty are likely to be readily available for the next few years.

A new reality calls for new thinking; it is the dawn of a new era in higher education, in which traditions and standards developed a long time ago—when only a small percentage of the population attended college—must be cast aside in order to educate greater numbers of students more efficiently. Faculty productivity is one area where great financial savings can be found. It’s time to reorder teaching loads (and monitor and enforce existing regulations) in ways that reflect the new demands.

References

Appalachian State Course Schedule

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North Carolina State Law [SL 1995-324](#), Section 15.9

UNC-Asheville Course Schedule

<http://rocky2.unca.edu/registrar/classes/schedules/schedules.asp?term=201160>

UNC-Chapel Hill Course Schedule

<http://regweb.unc.edu/courses/Fall2010ScheduleofClasses.pdf>

(Click on “UNC-Chapel Hill Semester Section Book for Fall 2010”)

UNC-Greensboro Course Schedule

https://banweb.uncg.edu/prod/hwzkcoff.P_UncgSlctCrOff

UNC Policy Manual

400.3.4 Monitoring Faculty Teaching Workloads

<http://www.northcarolina.edu/policy/index.php?pg=vs&id=393>

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