It's summer at last in Ithaca, New York. At Cornell University, the lawns have turned emerald, ancient sycamores and oaks are flourishing, sunbeams glance off the bronze head of Ezra Cornell. Most of the undergraduates have left for internships or summer jobs—but what are the faculty doing?

There's a popular perception that professors don't work in the summer—and don't work as much as they should during the rest of the year. From time to time legislators make political hay by portraying academics as elitists who teach a few hours a week, scribble jargon-filled essays, take cushy trips to do “research” or deliver papers on irrelevant topics, and take the whole summer off.

Two years ago the Board of Regents of the University of Texas system required the university to compile hard evidence of faculty productivity, including number of hours in the classroom, number of students taught, grants awarded, and average student-evaluation scores. The ensuing report said the university required too little of professors, whom it memorably classified as Dodgers, Coasters, Sherpas, Pioneers and Stars.

We won't get into the lengthy debate that followed, with competing views of what should be measured and how much value taxpayers get for supporting a state university. Nor will we comment on all types of higher education institutions, since the expectations for faculty can vary widely. But in terms of major research universities—like Cornell, and like the University of Texas at Austin—we think the report left out a lot of what professors actually do.

For one thing, many professors, like K-12 teachers, are on nine-month salaries. Although they receive no additional pay, they spend a significant part of each summer catching up with developments in their fields, revising courses they have taught, and preparing new courses.

For some specifics on faculty work we checked in with Professor Ross Brann, the Milton R. Konvitz Professor of Judeo-Islamic Studies and winner of...
Cornell’s most prestigious award for undergraduate teaching excellence, the Weiss Presidential Fellowship. This summer he’s doing research and writing (he is the author of two books and editor of four others). He’s preparing courses and organizing special events for the fall semester. He’s teaching an intensive, week-long adult course on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He’s serving on a book award committee. He’s reading masses of material in order to make recommendations on the promotion and tenure of other faculty. Some of these activities continue during the academic year, when he also teaches two courses each semester. He meets regularly with and mentors teaching assistants, graduate students and undergraduates working on honors theses. He advises undergraduates on academic and sometimes personal matters. He serves on committees for his department, his college and the university. And he spends time with students, in the evening and on weekends, as a house fellow for one of Cornell’s living-learning residences.

Another winner of the Weiss Fellowship, Professor Ronald Harris-Warrick of the Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, spends most of his summer doing research on topics including spinal cord locomotor mechanisms and the consequences of spinal cord injury. In the summer, he notes, “I am able to find time to do my own experiments,” while during the academic year most of his research time is spent supervising the experiments of graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and undergraduates and also guiding them in analyzing and interpreting the data.

Harris-Warrick spends about 40% of his time during the school year on teaching—introductory neuroscience, an advanced course on psychoactive drug actions in the brain, and seminars on special topics. For each hour in the classroom, he spends 10–20 hours preparing. “A course is never the same from year to year, since there are new discoveries to be included, and new ways of thinking about the course material,” he says.

He goes to conferences and reads extensively to keep up with new research in his field, serves on committees, writes and edits research papers and submits grant proposals—he has received two major grants in the past year from the National Institutes of Health. On average, his work week runs over 60 hours and sometimes as much as 80.

Is there deadwood on university campuses? Of course. As in any line of work, a few people cut corners, do the least they can get away with, and mail it in.

While Brann and Harris-Warrick are extraordinarily dedicated and successful professionals, there is nothing extraordinary about the kinds of work they perform. The tasks should not be reduced to easily quantifiable metrics like the number of courses and number of students taught—but they are essential to the mission of research universities, which includes not only teaching and advising but discovery, creativity, economic development and technology transfer.

The Cornell campus is lovely in the summer, and we hope our faculty have some time to enjoy it. But you probably won’t find them stretched out in hammocks under the trees, dozing away the long hot afternoons.

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