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Tasks and responsibilities of graduate professors at public and private universities

Tareas y responsabilidades de profesores de posgrado de universidades pública y privada

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ABSTRACT

Universities are trying to provide material, physical and human resources to enable them to meet the three functions established by national and international organizations in different national meetings: teaching; research, which involves the production, dissemination and socialization of knowledge; and outreach as a form of communication between universities and society, whether through the dissemination and development of culture or social programs that generate social projection. However, although there has been a preponderance of efforts to improve the conditions of higher education, the demands that the university community, and in particular the professors, must meet are such that it is difficult to do so completely. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study with narrative biographical method was to approach, through interviews, the tasks performed by graduate professors. From the analysis performed with Atlas.ti, it was found that the diversity of tasks performed by these professors is due to a characterization of teachers proposed in this work. It is concluded that the tasks performed by professors go beyond the depth of the three functions indicated at the beginning; there are other responsibilities that should be included in the professional identity of graduate professors.

Keywords: higher education, professors, qualitative analysis.

JEL Classification: I2, I21, I23

RESUMEN

Las universidades intentan solventar recursos materiales, físicos y humanos que les permitan atender las tres funciones que han establecido organismos nacionales e internacionales en distintos encuentros de naciones: docencia; investigación que implica la producción, difusión y socialización de conocimiento; y extensión como forma de comunicación de las Universidades con la sociedad ya sea a través de la difusión y desarrollo de la cultura, o programas sociales que generen una proyección social. Sin embargo, aunque se ha preponderado y promovido mejorar las condiciones de la educación superior, son tales las exigencias que debe cumplir la comunidad universitaria y en particular los profesores, que hacerlo a cabalidad resulta difícil. Por ello, el propósito de este estudio cualitativo con método biográfico narrativo fue aproximarse a través de entrevistas, a las tareas realizadas por profesores de posgrado. A partir del análisis realizado con Atlas.ti, se encontró que la diversidad de tareas que realizan estos profesores se debe a una caracterización de los docentes propuesta en este trabajo. Se concluye que las tareas que realizan los profesores van más allá de la profundidad de las tres funciones señaladas al inicio, existen otras responsabilidades que deben incluirse en la identidad profesional de los profesores de posgrado.

Palabras clave: enseñanza superior, docente, análisis cualitativo.

Clasificación JEL: I2, I21, I23

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s and early 1990s, the prevailing economic conditions in Mexico forced university graduates to integrate into the educational workforce, lacking a teaching and pedagogical foundation (Hirsch, 1990). They also had to combine their activities with others related to their initial training or work in different institutions, which entailed double workloads as they attempted to accommodate different administrative and pedagogical models. To address these shortcomings, some higher education institutions established bodies responsible for designing and implementing administrative, disciplinary,

and pedagogical activities, neglecting other areas such as the analysis of their practice, qualitative evaluations, content quality, inadequate scheduling, dispersed offerings poorly related to their needs, access to content, and other pedagogical aspects that needed to be, and still need to be, addressed.

By formulating questions such as "What are the tasks performed by graduate instructors?", "What is the difference between the responsibilities of graduate instructors at public and private universities?", and "What is the assessment these instructors have of these activities, and how do they approach them?", the objective of this text is to analyze the assessment of graduate instructors regarding the fulfillment of the various tasks they perform in addition to teaching. This is based on the assumption that graduate instructors, whether at public or private universities, perceive and resolve the activities entrusted to them differently due to their conception of the subject. This allows us to delve deeper into the assessments held by those in charge of teaching in higher education.

Teaching

Teaching is a concept that has depended on the figure of the teacher and the drastic changes it has undergone throughout history. Along with the definition of teaching, there are those of teaching, the educational act, or the action of teaching, all of which are directly related to the teaching-learning process. Although it focuses on teaching, it cannot be understood without the presence of learning, and vice versa. The components of this act are the person who teaches, identified as the teacher; the individual who learns, known as the pupil; the content being taught; and the method or strategy followed during the teaching-learning process. These components are influenced by the context in which communication is used as a means to share knowledge, feelings, beliefs, or values specific to the culture of a particular group (Guajardo & Rivera, 2018).

The act of teaching in teaching not only encompasses teaching itself but also aspects related to the profession, knowledge of educational practices, and pedagogy, characteristics that stand out for their technical and disciplinary nature in the eyes of the staff (Lucia, 2018). In this framework, teaching can be described in three ways: as an action carried out through the existence of a person in charge of the teaching process and another in which learning takes place; as a change resulting from something; as a process that requires the preparation of something or someone; and as a methodological procedure or one that follows a method to achieve an end.

The 21st century is characterized by a teaching approach that seeks to move beyond dependence on the student and develop their autonomous thinking and creativity as fundamental elements of teaching. Therefore, the aim is to replace memorization as the main learning strategy with a series of actions, taking into account social and political characteristics (Byrd, 2015). However, the educational act described and the relationship between the teacher and the students are distanced by the tasks that teachers must perform at different educational levels, and higher education is no exception.

Teaching practice and quality

Because higher education is becoming a terminal point in the academic life of many people and because contemporary society is constantly changing, students at this level of education become builders and protagonists of their education, with cognitive autonomy that allows them to develop attitudes, critiques, and reflections on their actions and decision-making. Therefore, university teaching encompasses teaching for research, through which students are expected to develop critical reflection and the ability to problematize (Jarauta & Bozu, 2013; Lucia, 2018).

Thus, both national and international official documents have expressed concern for students, faculty, innovation, and teaching at this level of education. However, these concerns have been directed and focused on institutional, regulatory, accreditation, and competitiveness aspects related to expanding the curricular offerings of undergraduate and graduate programs. Thus, higher education began to experience a turning point in the late 1960s, as the number of students in tertiary education increased worldwide (Rué, 2015). Higher education shifted from a privileged to a public education, which consequently generated a diversification of academic offerings and an increase in the teaching staff. The latter, in turn, led to the specialization of faculty knowledge.

Although this faculty specialization could have opened up the possibility of improving the characteristics and skills of university professors, they were overwhelmed by the conditions they faced at the time. The teaching staff increased, so overcrowding affected not only students but also professors. As the 1990s arrived, new technologies were firmly established in higher education, becoming a part of the local culture, an infinite universe of possibilities, and a key tool for emerging knowledge societies. This left aside the rest of the university's challenges, including teaching, which remained on the list of lesser-known topics.

When it comes to quality assurance, it is not always related to teaching but rather to administrative and superficial aspects related to the teaching and learning processes. This means that the names of subjects change, but at no point do their academic requirements. Thus, teaching continues as it was several years ago, but with the basic and substitutional use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and now even Artificial Intelligence (AI). Higher education courses involve several tasks, such as using a competency-based approach, using ICTs, promoting project-based work, implementing collaborative practices, offering tutoring, evaluating, fostering exchanges, and developing service-learning experiences (Zabalza, 2011).

As can be seen, teaching is a complex task that requires specific skills because, in many cases, being a professor only represents a minimal percentage of work and personal activity. University teaching suggests that the professor's priority is the students, so their commitment is directed toward providing the necessary tools and resources relevant to the subject being taught. Therefore, professors must develop both disciplinary competencies, as experts in the professional scientific field from which they graduated, and pedagogical competencies to educate students and foster their learning (Zabalza, 2011).

University teaching is viewed as a complex and multidimensional process in which experience teaching similar courses and knowledge of the discipline are secondary due to a series of requirements demanded by the institution where they work. For the university to fulfill its assigned tasks, it must have the financial and human resources to support the teaching-learning process, facilitate self-training and teacher training in the disciplines, and specialize in the training offered (Imbernón, 2011).

Administrative and management activities have become central to all daily activities because they allow them to carry out the teaching and research functions described above. Academic work is disconnected from the real needs of their work, and management and administration are core activities of academic work. These activities have increased over time and are essential to continuing their work as members of the university, where they must evaluate their work, plan, request financial support, develop programs, and participate in bureaucratic activities.

Credentialism (Collins, 1989) is a phenomenon that arises in response to the need for updating and training, as increasingly more certificates, diplomas, certificates, degrees, or any other document are required to obtain employment (Hirsch, 1990, p. 26). Credentialism is strengthened by the demand for admission to the educational system, and education is perceived as having a commercial value, coupled with the existing unemployment and underemployment of professionals. Within the university field, teacher training based on obtaining credentials that allow them to access better administrative, research, and/or teaching positions has spread. Such training is positive as long as it is not only undertaken to accumulate courses and postgraduate degrees but also seeks to acquire knowledge that will allow them to improve their teaching practice.

To be a university professor, one must have obtained at least a bachelor's degree. It is in the interest of each university to ensure that its faculty has the largest number of credentials to demonstrate the quality of the education offered and, in turn, access greater financial resources for both faculty and the institution. This is objectively measured, on the one hand, through the credentials obtained and, on the other, through lists of competencies.

In this framework, and from the perspective of academics working in different types of institutions training professionals or dedicated to research and postgraduate training, the knowledge society is expected to impact higher education in its various activities: teaching, research, outreach, and academic values. The dynamics of today's society require that generic learning skills and flexible competencies be fostered at this higher level, enabling the understanding and anticipation of change in addition to the competencies specifically related to the discipline (David & Foray, 2002).

Undoubtedly, different lists of competencies required of the university professor will arise around the figure (Saravia, 2011; Valcárcel, 2005; Zabalza, 2013); however, these will ultimately depend on the tasks they perform, their preferences, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, needs and the phase in which they find themselves in their professional career.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research study was designed to explore the study subjects' assessments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2015; Sandín, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1996; Vasilachis, 2006). The narrative biographical method (Bolívar, Fernández, and Molina, 2005; Pujadas, 2002) was used, using life stories (Bertaux, 1981). According to Arjona and Checa (1998), life stories are a subgenre of life history that highlights the aspects

of greatest interest to the researcher. The technique used was an in-depth semi-structured interview (Buontempo, 2000), which was used to retrieve information. The instrument used was an interview script.

Twelve professors were interviewed, six of whom worked at a public university and the other six at a private university. The selection criteria were seniority, professional training, postgraduate studies, the program in which they taught, professional and work experience, as well as accessibility and willingness to provide information.

Three separate pre-interviews were conducted for the 12 interviews to assess the interview guide and make necessary adjustments to improve its application during the final interviews. The interviews were conducted in the context of the pandemic, using the platform suggested by the interviewee for easy access (Microsoft Teams or Google Meet). The interviews were recorded for later transcription and with the corresponding informed consent.

The analysis was descriptive and vertical for each professor interviewed in order to understand their specific characteristics. The 12 stories were then cross-referenced, as well as cross-category analysis, to delve deeper into the different perspectives, divergences, convergences, negative cases, and relevant key concepts. Teacher references are given with the letter D for teacher, followed by a consecutive number from 1 to 12.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Díaz (2012), Fernández and Farfán (2018), Imbernón (2011), Rodríguez et al. (2014), and organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization of Ibero-American States, and the National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions of Mexico, the activities carried out by university professors are related to teaching, research, and university outreach or linkage. Regarding teaching activities, it was found that the tasks that the professor performs during the teaching-learning process that he or she follows or uses to fulfill the activities required of him or her. Regarding research activities, those activities carried out within the field of research were identified as an activity that he or she develops within the university in which he or she works. Finally, regarding university outreach activities, it was established that the professor carries out activities that promote social programs or for the good of society. However, these functions are not always fulfilled by all university professors, and specifically by graduate professors.

In this sense, graduate professors have been placed in the same category as university professors, even though they do not share the same characteristics. A basic difference between these professors lies in the minimum educational level required to teach classes. Therefore, it is possible to find a professor with a postdoctoral degree teaching undergraduate classes. This indicates the existence of filters and requirements that graduate professors must meet to become part of a specific program, just as is the case with university professors and high school professors (García, 2015).

It is assumed that graduate professors possess research skills, unlike professors who only possess an undergraduate degree, because many programs at most universities do not require the preparation of a thesis as a means of obtaining a degree. Universities have had to make their programs more flexible through different degree modalities: GPA, internship, project, or dissertation, among others.

Tasks, responsibilities, functions and activities

Tasks have been established throughout the development and study of higher education, specifically at the university and graduate levels. However, they are not limited to those specified in the previous paragraphs, which must be continuously reported and evaluated. Other tasks are administrative, which, despite being addressed by authors such as Fernández and Farfán (2018), have been partially defined.

Therefore, and for this text, administrative activities are understood as those that involve the use and completion of forms that professors must submit, physically and/or digitally, to individuals or departments that request them at a set period. This may be immediate, upon prior notification, or scheduled.

Other activities that have been partially addressed in studies of university or graduate professors include coordination or management, as well as tutoring or thesis advising. The former is acquired when a professor serves as coordinator of an undergraduate or graduate program or of a specific department or area of the university. The second are those in which professors are responsible for guiding one or two students, as the case may be, throughout a postgraduate program during the preparation and development of their thesis. However, in this activity, there

are authors such as Díaz (2012) and Díaz and Hernández (2002) who place them within the tasks of teaching because a teaching-learning process is carried out in which the tutor teaches the tutee important elements about the preparation of theses, in reality, it is a process with greater complexity because, as indicated by the interviewed professors, it is about training and forging a new researcher.

Characterization of postgraduate professors

As a result of the data analysis, the professors' characterization revealed that the differences among them were not due to the university they attended (public or private) or the type of contract but rather to the type of work activities they performed in conjunction with the professional development they seek to achieve. Based on this, the elements that characterize the three types of professors identified in this study are described. From now on, professors' references refer to the *Sistema Nacional de Investigadores* (SNI) and the *Programa Nacional de Programas de Calidad* (PNPC), both of the *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* (CONACyT), a Mexican government agency that funds research in both human resource training and research development; the *Programa para el Desarrollo Profesional Docente* (PROMEP) and the *Programa para el Desarrollo Profesional Docente* (PRODEP), both of the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, as the main bodies for membership and evaluation of activities carried out in the areas described above. Incorporation and retention in these bodies imply recognition, status, and income independent of the salary received at the university.

Teachers—educators

They carry out tasks mostly focused on teaching, spending most of their working time in the classroom, which is why lesson planning is one of their primary tasks. They are usually hired as subject-based or hourly lecturers; however, some may be part-time, combining teaching activities with another higher education institution, other work activities related to their initial training outside of education, or other personal reasons and interests. These lecturers often come to the educational field by chance, on their initiative, or through an invitation from someone working at the university who believes they have the time and interest to dedicate a few hours to teaching a limited number of classes.

Their duties are mostly focused on teaching, so these types of lecturers are common at the undergraduate level, and although they are less common in graduate programs, they do exist. Therefore, from the moment the professor is assigned the subject(s) he or she will teach, he or she is required to prepare a course plan within a specific timeframe based on a plan previously approved by the university and following its pedagogical model. This model is explained in general terms in a preparatory course that the professor agrees to follow, and, if possible, the corresponding forms are provided. From then on, the professor will have academic freedom as long as he or she complies with the subject syllabus (previously prepared by a group of professors who are usually those who have been teaching the subject the longest or by the academy that brings together the teachers responsible for the subject during a given academic period) and adheres to the university's pedagogical model.

During the duration of the courses or seminars (monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, four-monthly, or semester), the professor teaches the class, in which they will put into practice planning, pedagogical, didactic, and assessment skills. If they do not already possess these skills, they can work on continuing education activities to develop the necessary skills. Meanwhile, these types of professors begin to develop their own style based on information they find self-taught or by recalling previous experiences with professors throughout their careers as students at different educational levels.

When the university offers an induction or preparatory course, the professor is invited to participate in it to gain a general understanding of the model and the activities they will undertake as a member of the university's teaching staff. The program coordinator sometimes acts as a guide for the professor because, as the professor becomes more familiar with the program, the coordinator provides specific recommendations regarding the program they are joining. In some cases, the professor has two different coordinators if the courses they teach remain in different programs.

Research-related tasks and university outreach or extension are practically nonexistent because the tasks are focused on teaching classes; if they are carried out, the professor likely does so because they represent a personal and professional interest, and they dedicate time and money to developing them.

[...] research is not the same as teaching research [...]. **D7** I don't do research as I should because I don't have all the infrastructure or the support. For example, I don't have a cubicle, I don't have a computer at the university,

I don't have the resources to move around, so with those limitations, even with this part. I mean, it's the interest of how you personally have to do these activities. **D1**.

Since I was a subject, I did research in my master's degree [...] At first, it wasn't a requirement, but recently, five years ago, it became a requirement. It wasn't for pleasure but an obligation. They handled you as a teaching researcher, categorizing or punishing you in that sense. There was a table, you taught classes. So I said, how are they going to start this research thing if those who don't do any evaluations like the SNI, like the PRODEP, how are they going to research if they're giving them five groups? It was illogical. **D6**.

Professors—researchers

These are those who, within or outside the university where they work, conduct research work as a complementary activity or one that is less of a priority than teaching. In some cases, it is carried out similarly to teaching. Typically, part-time professors are placed at this stage as part of their professional development because the development of research studies allows them to advance their hierarchy within the educational field and/or the university(s) where they work.

For this reason, they have some experience in the educational field, and specifically in higher education. They are more familiar with the model, activities, and dynamics of the university than professor-teachers but not as familiar as researchers-professors. They divide their time between teaching and research activities, although the latter is often their own initiative or because they are pursuing a postgraduate program. They seek to improve both teaching and research activities with the possibility of increasing their hierarchy within the university.

Depending on the university, they carry out a limited number of activities related to research and university outreach or extension, which they hope will provide some type of benefit within the university where they work. They are usually professors with prior experience in higher education at that or another university or higher education institution. Due to the number of hours they spend at the university and their years of teaching experience at the higher education level, they are likely to possess skills strengthened in the model of the university(s) where they work, such as lesson planning, teaching, pedagogy, and evaluation, depending on their interest in continuing development in the field of higher education. The continuing education activities they receive are suggested by the Coordinators, based on their current performance and their own needs and interests.

They will likely begin to receive certain requests from the university to participate in university outreach activities, and it will depend on the time and interest of the professor involved. The university does not explicitly require scientific production, but professors know that the more evidence they have in this area, the better their ranking and salary.

I try to do my best in the teaching-learning process because I go back to my personal experience when I was a student, both in the Master's, Doctorate, and Bachelor's degrees. **D2**.

To be able to enter the SNI, you have to make a super, super effort, almost against the tide of the institution, to be able to enter**. D11**.

You are condemned to this, let's say, to report from that time, even if you didn't have time because they gave you a thousand other things, so, well, you have to play with that because that's how things are. **D8**. After 5 years, I already requested a change of faculty; I wanted to do more research. [...] they don't leave me much time to do research, but I am doing more research, and now, because of the pandemic, we have two projects. **D10**.

Researchers-professors

Due to the type of contract, they are required to perform more work related to the development and dissemination of research work. They are also required to perform tasks related to the logistics of institutional events related to their area or discipline, university outreach or outreach activities, and other tasks requested by regional or national bodies. Their contract is full-time, and they join the university based on experience gained at other universities or higher education institutions or because they enjoy academic prestige that strengthens the university.

Although research activities are their main focus, they devote time to lesson planning, which requires them to have teaching, pedagogical, and assessment skills based on the university model, which they must know in depth..

I always design rubrics for each product. It's important from the beginning to develop the program as requested at the university and share it. **D9**.

Topics are discussed, and assignments should be submitted on the platform. [...] Then I assign team activities, and they can use WhatsApp or Zoom. **D12**.

Membership in the SNI has become a primary goal for professors, whether due to status, income, or as a university requirement, or, in exceptional cases, due to personal interest or preference. It is institutionally known that the more professors belong to the SNI and PROMEP, the greater the recognition the program gains from the university itself and society at large.

For example, I can submit a bachelor's thesis, a master's thesis, a doctoral thesis. I can submit a chapter from an indexed journal, a book chapter, and at the end of the year, I have to submit that report with evidence, which can be a transcript, a certificate, the thesis itself, the exam transcript, and if it's an indexed journal, I have to upload the journal chapter or the book chapter. But I do have to be accountable for what I'm doing, not only at CONACyT, not only at the university but also at PROMEP. **D5**.

I can't work for a PNPC graduate program at CONACyT without having to produce, and production is linked to research, so I participate in research projects. It's quite a challenge because I have a lot of management work, and then you have to do research at night and on weekends. **D12**.

I've been able to enter the National System of Researchers, where, for example, CONACyT doesn't care what you do; they care that you deliver. **D4**.

Regardless of the type of research activity that each type of teacher indicates, it must be insisted that research skills must be constantly worked on until they are developed, as Argota et al. (2020) maintain.

It's an ongoing activity, not a periodic activity or an activity that can be scheduled. It's an activity that has to be constant, and the way I do this type of activity is to assign one or two days. Those two days after class, I might work 2, 3, or 4 hours strictly for research. At that time, I don't focus on anything other than research, and that has allowed me to be able to get my work done. **D5**.

Well, it depends on the situation, it depends on what I'm working on, the time available [...] I have to invest my vacation time, and then I'm there on weekends or vacations working on research advances. **D9**.

We have to organize and, of course, prioritize teaching, but also research and other activities, like the ones we sometimes have to attend to, go out to. It's also about inserting, accommodating, and organizing schedules. **D4**.

Other tasks

In addition to the above, professors face a variety of administrative demands. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to make this brief note, emphasizing that professors spend part of their time submitting or sending documents, reports, and any other requested products online. These demands range from designing the class program to the final evaluation. For example, completing and submitting the class program or syllabus; checking in and out; capturing grades and signing the corresponding minutes; fulfilling the requirements specific to research assignments; monitoring and submitting internal and external faculty evaluation periods; and sending university extension or affiliation certificates.

Of course, it's very cumbersome to keep track of everything you do; gathering all the paperwork for the SNI can take a whole week. Oh, the processes are incredibly long! And they don't necessarily depend on you; it's all very random. But I think the key is to set timetables and goals or to adhere to the goals we have with the institution. **D9**.

Thesis Advisory activities include preparing and gathering evidence of research progress for both CONACyT and the university in a timely manner. Finally, regarding the Coordination activities, there is a vast amount of document review that not only the Coordinator prepares but also complies with deadlines. Some examples of this last activity are the reports on the tutees' activities and the updating of the CVU (CVU) if the tutee has a CONACyT scholarship.

Some of the administrative activities previously described have been highlighted by authors such as Botero and

Rentería (2019); however, these contributions do not go into depth because professors are sometimes unaware of some of the administrative tasks they perform or do not identify them as such. Professors act according to the requests made to them because they have so many activities that they lose track of time to analyze the situation or question themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

Teaching and learning in higher education, in general terms, depend on the changes this type of education has undergone and the concept under which the teacher at this level of education is conceived, which has also been conceptualized in various ways throughout history. However, teaching depends not only on the teacher who teaches but also on the collaborative work of the other two components that comprise it: the student, who is the learner, and the content being taught and learned, respectively.

Based on the results obtained from the 12 professors' reports, it was found that regardless of the public or private sector of the university where they currently work, the activities performed by university professors, and particularly those of graduate students, have been defined by national and international authors and organizations as teaching, research, and extension or university outreach activities. However, the depth of each of the aforementioned tasks, along with other activities reported by the professors in the reports obtained, demonstrates that the frequency and time devoted to each of the activities will define the professor in question: professor-teacher, professor-researcher, and research professor. This makes it clear that, given the lack of understanding of the variety of tasks and specific functions of graduate professors, much remains to be defined regarding the creation of a professional identity for this type of professor.

Attempts have been made to classify professors based on the degree they teach when, in reality, it depends on the activities they perform. The results showed that the most important activity is research because graduate professors tend to identify themselves as researchers rather than teachers.

It should not be forgotten that this study shows that the activities carried out by graduate professors are more than those usually described in other studies. In general, all graduate professors experience an oversaturation of activities and responsibilities that are incompatible with research, a task that ultimately turns out to be the most important and personally and professionally relevant. Thus, it is worth asking what is expected of graduate professors: Are they to be quality teachers? Are they to be part of the National System of Researchers? Are they to promote outreach activities? Are they to coordinate, administer, and manage graduate programs? Because all these activities differ and require the professor to perform various tasks to fulfill them properly.

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