

research is not always well understood or rewarded at PUIs, particularly if it does not involve undergraduate students. This internal lack of recognition can provide motivational challenges, especially post-tenure as the incentives and expectations change. Our efforts thus far have focused on connecting faculty at PUIs with each other to learn strategies for both maintaining motivation and finding rewarding scholarly pursuits. It has been enlightening to meet and learn from our colleagues at PUIs over the past few years on these issues.

Opportunities for Engagement

Thus far we have relied on existing structures to help build our professional network in an efficient manner. Rather than planning an entire conference, we have used Special Sessions at AMS Meetings (the JMM and sectional meetings) as a gathering for research talks. In a similar vein, last summer we hosted a series of virtual panels through the MAA Virtual Programming series. These panels were focused on four separate topics (undergraduate research, keeping research alive, professional engagement beyond research, and connections to graduate school and industry) and each featured five distinguished professionals in our network. Also through the MAA we maintain a MAA Connect⁴ community for *Analysis and DEs at Undergraduate Institutions*. This is an online message board that MAA members can join that we have used to share conference and funding announcements, and also to share and solicit teaching tips, and other relevant professional information.

Opportunities like these offered by professional societies have been crucial to our effort. Many mathematicians in our target audience are members of at least one of these societies, and so they receive announcements and discounts for registration. The AMS and MAA widely advertise their programs and provide other support such as technical assistance that saves us a great deal of time and effort. We've found that hosting a Special Session at JMM is particularly beneficial to speakers since it is common, in our experience, for undergraduate institutions to require one to speak at a conference in order to receive travel support.

One shortcoming we are working to overcome is that we have only been able to reach a small cohort of faculty at PUIs with our efforts thus far. The people who have participated in the Special Sessions and virtual panels are mostly people already in our orbit, whether that is by geography, by research area, or by type of institution. We are seeking ways to expand the group, and especially to include faculty from a broader range of types of institutions.

Future Steps

We hope to continue to see this work grow and evolve over the coming years. For our own community, we intend to continue having Special Sessions at the Joint Meetings,

and maybe see more sessions occur at sectional or other regional meetings. We would like to explore connections with graduate programs as a means to both help our undergraduate students who are interested in further study, and to encourage current graduate students who are considering a career at a PUI. We especially hope to engage more early career faculty to help combat the feelings of isolation and to demonstrate the wide range of possible scholarly development opportunities that are available. In closing, we have found many benefits to forming this community around a research area, and so we want to encourage other research groups to consider initiating or partaking in similar network-building efforts. If you're considering joining in these types of efforts, please reach out to the authors via email.



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Credits

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Important vs. Urgent: Balancing Teaching and Research

Allison Pacelli

It seems like we are bombarded daily with urgent matters that need our attention, but urgent is not the same as important. Everyone is busy, but it's so easy to be busy on the wrong things. Starting a career at an undergraduate institution that values both teaching and research may seem like a constant struggle between too many responsibilities vying for our attention. Distinguishing between what is important and what is merely urgent can play a crucial role in your success.

What you consider important will depend on both your and your institution's goals and priorities (hopefully these are not too disparate!). When I started at Williams College, fresh out of grad school and having won multiple teaching

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⁴<https://connect.maa.org/>

awards there, I thought teaching was the thing that I was naturally already good at, and research would be my bigger challenge. I soon found out how different it was to teach an undergraduate course at a research institution versus at a small liberal arts college with some of the best teachers in the country. I needed to think about teaching at a new level. It was an amazing opportunity to be in the company of a group of colleagues who share my loves of both teaching and research, but there are only so many hours in a day. Time management suddenly had new meaning, as I could easily devote 60+ hours a week to my students without touching any of my other responsibilities. If I wanted a balanced and healthy life, I had to decide how best to spend my time.

My new students expected more from me and my courses than I had been accustomed to previously. Explaining material well, writing good exams, answering student questions – these were all important yes, but that was really just the start. I was happily surprised to learn that my students didn't want to just learn how to calculate the determinant of a matrix or prove that a function is 1-1, they wanted to know why I cared so much about these things. Lectures shouldn't just be clear and informative but fun and enjoyable. There are those who take offense to the claim that we professors need to entertain our students—perhaps because the word entertainment conjures up images of stand-up comedy or theatrical performance. That doesn't work for everyone, and certainly never would have worked for me. But that doesn't mean class can't be fun and enjoyable. I am excited about math, and my students wanted to know why. Homework was something I really improved on from my past teaching experience. After all, students only spend about three hours a week in lecture, but hopefully more than twice as long engaging with a homework assignment. Homework is an incredible opportunity to have students process and expand upon concepts from class time, or even foreshadow future ideas.

The culture was completely different, of course, as well. Students at an undergraduate institution expect their professors to be much more available than at my previous school. I regularly get requests for individual appointments outside of office hours, emails asking for help with homework problems, appeals for more sample problems or practice exams, or just invitations for coffee from students wanting to learn more about me. Getting to know my students and having the luxury to devote time to elevating my teaching are two of the reasons I chose to teach at a small liberal arts college. But it's easy to be become bogged down by the urgency of all the requests. How was I supposed to finish that research paper with all the other urgent teaching tasks clamoring for attention?

I hadn't yet read Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* with his Urgent/Important Matrix but a mentor of mine made a brief comment one day on importance vs urgency that really resonated with me. I began to

consider my schedule from a different perspective in that same vein. Covey looks at four categories of activities with his classification: important and urgent; important but not urgent; urgent, but not important; and finally, neither important nor urgent. This perspective is far more helpful than a to-do list because spending time on research and writing homework solutions do not belong on the same list. To-do lists can give a false sense of productivity as you check off a series of completed but relatively unimportant tasks. That feeling of accomplishment will wear off as you look at those research questions still unanswered or the lecture notes that you didn't have a chance to take to the next level to make your course go beyond great to excellent.

For academic life, I prefer to use a slightly different division of activities into three categories: 1) important; 2) unimportant but necessary (often urgent); and 3) unimportant. Sorting items into categories can be a challenge, especially when urgency is disguised as importance. Category 1 items are where we want to be, they are the reason we chose this field and what we feel great doing – thinking about deeper questions in teaching, starting a research project, designing a new course. These types of activities typically require significant mental energy and large blocks of uninterrupted time; they are rarely urgent. Category 2 items are necessary and therefore important in the sense that we have to do them—paying bills, writing letters of recommendation, answering emails, holding office hours, attending committee meetings; but they are not at the core of what we do and therefore not in the “important” category. Luckily, these tasks often require less mental energy and can be done in smaller blocks of time. Category 3 items are those that we should minimize, or discard altogether when possible—doing things for students that they may not need, constant interruptions from colleagues stopping by our door to say hello, or distractions from social media.

So how should we categorize our obligations, and how can we prioritize Category 1?

Research is definitely important but often lacks the sense of urgency that our students bring to teaching. It's harder to justify devoting three hours to studying class groups of quadratic number fields when I have an inbox of emails asking me to write letters of recommendation or explain cosets. I found that collaborating with a colleague on a paper early on in my career greatly helped counteract that. Now there was someone waiting for me to finish my section of a paper, and not just students waiting for me to finish grading! Research projects with students can work just as well. Some people have accountability partners to help keep themselves on track with daily or weekly check-ins. Teaching activities can be harder to classify. It's easy to feel pressure from looming student evaluations to do everything the students want—but is that all truly important? Or even beneficial? I discovered early on that my students were much more accepting of my saying no when I fully explained why I was doing so. I rarely post practice exams

anymore (they're now in my category 3), but I frequently tell them why—it's not because I don't want to help them, it's because I find them deceptive in that students can be misled thinking that if they understand everything on the practice exam, they're ready for the real test. What about going over student exams after grading? Of course I want to help students understand what they did wrong, and sometimes, that requires an individual meeting. But now I post a Zoom video after every exam, writing out the solutions to every question or problem. It's more helpful than just posting the solutions since I'm explaining as I go. I tell all my students that I'm happy to discuss individual exams, but I want them to look over the comments I wrote on their exam and watch the video first before we schedule any appointments. The result is far fewer meetings.

Assigning your own deadlines may be enough motivation for any activity in the important-but-not-urgent realm of Category 1 if you can carve out and protect the time you need to achieve those deadlines. That's where scheduling and time blocking come in. Time blocking is devoting large blocks of time to the important items in Category 1. Schedule that block in your calendar as you would schedule a doctor's appointment or class meeting, and most importantly, protect that time, even when the other categories start threatening to take it away; for example, when a student asks if you have time for an urgent question after class. When you start with the large blocks of time for activities that require it, then you can fit the Category 2 items into smaller time slots in between. That hour between class and your department meeting isn't enough time for research, but it's perfect for responding to emails or writing out homework solutions. Think about when you schedule these blocks as well. Does your creativity flow best in the morning? Schedule larger blocks then. Is your brain fatigued after lunch? Maybe that's a better time for office hours. Urgent items in Category 2 will always show up at the last minute, so leave free time in your schedule to attend to those, even when you don't yet know what they are.

Now that you've scheduled your time, the bigger challenge is protecting it. I've never worked well in an office. Too many distractions and interruptions. Luckily my department chair early on told me I could work wherever I needed as long as I was available to my students. For my bigger time blocks, I often work at home or the local coffee shop. If you are expected to be at your office more, maybe you can talk to your chair about scheduling a few times a week to keep your door closed to limit distractions. Category 2 tasks are better for open-door time spent at the office, since interruptions aren't so detrimental to those activities by their nature. I may not be available all day for my students to drop by unannounced, but I give them my cell phone number to be able to text me to schedule an appointment or ask the kind of simple questions that can be answered via that medium. As a result, my students never feel neglected. Finally, resist that urge to immediately deal

with the urgent items that will undoubtedly arise during your Category 1 time—put your phone on silent, check emails and texts periodically or when you're done, rather than every time you hear the little ping. Be present, and enjoy the time you're granting to yourself.

I've focused primarily on professional activities above, but personal life is important too. As the flight attendants say, secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others. Self-care definitely falls into the important-but-not-urgent Category 1. Exercise, family time, relationships, personal time – the important things in life rarely present as urgent. Classifying activities between categories is highly dependent on the life you want to design for yourself, and may change over time. Reviewing these categories after every semester can be a great opportunity for self-reflection. Starting a career at a new institution can feel like trying to make yourself fit into an existing society with pre-established laws and standards. While there are guidelines and some rules that have to be followed, there's no one right way to be effective. With a little planning and reflection, you can spend your time on the important and fulfilling things in life.



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