DESPITE BEING DEAN, I TEACH ALMOST A FULL LOAD.
This year, that means I am teaching civil procedure to a large section of first-year students, an upper-level class in higher education law to 45 second- and third-year students, and an intersession course in negotiation, and that I occasionally substitute teach in the insurance law class. I gather that is why the editors have asked me to contribute to this regular “Why I Teach” feature of Washington University Law Magazine.

By historic standards, this is not a lot for a dean to teach. Most of our alumni remember deans who taught large classes, week in and week out, while also somehow stewarding the law school. But by recent standards, as the size and complexity of law school administration has increased, it has become increasingly uncommon for a dean to teach more than one course each year—one course that lasts only 13 weeks, with just two or three hours of class meetings each week. Even that one-course load has caused at least one dean to write an article worrying about the costs to the law school of deflecting the dean’s energy and attention from higher and better uses. Indeed, there is an awful lot at a law school that only the dean can do—including paying due deference to major supporters and guests—and teaching well does not fall in this category.

So why do I keep teaching so much when it takes time and intellectual energy away from my other responsibilities? There are two main reasons, and also several reasons that do not apply. Let me start with the latter. I don’t teach so that I can flee other responsibilities that are less enjoyable. I like deaning. I have been doing it, at several schools, for 14 years now, and I enjoy the complexity, strategy, and stewardship that go into helping a school produce spectacular lawyers, scholarship, and service. For me, deaning is sometimes like being a litigator with a practice that specializes in temporary restraining orders: you never know walking into the office each day what you will have to deal with, but you know the work will call upon your whole nature and teach you something new.

Similarly, I don’t teach in order to get the ego boost of being the center of attention in a classroom, or because I relish putting students on the spot in front of their peers. In fact, I do get that ego boost (but that feeling fades a bit after a couple of decades of doing this), and I do still call on students at random and often. However, there are easier ways for a dean to salve an ego or feel powerful than by standing up regularly in front of incredibly bright and well-prepared students who will cheerfully poke holes in every word you say if you are not on top of your game.

So why do I teach? Because I like my students, and because I think it makes me a better dean.

The greatest risk for a teacher who becomes an administrator, in my view, is that he or she will gradually forget what matters most in a school. Without daily exposure to student learning—and to how hard good teaching is—a dean can gradually come to take the ingredients of a great education for granted. There are so many ways to compromise good teaching in an academic institution. Some of those compromises have to occur because of the importance of other institutional goals, including vital goals of great research and public service, and the perhaps less vital goal of institutional fame. But a dean who daily is exposed to the quality of the student body, and to the real challenge of living up to student expectations, is, in my view, somewhat less susceptible to those compromises. It is surely also the case that a dean who teaches is much more aware of what is going on in the school, and more likely to have a professional relationship with students who can help improve the school. I am grateful every day that, for many of our students, I am “Professor Syverud,” rather than the impersonal “Administration.”

But in the end, I teach so much because it is such a privilege to teach great students like we have at this school. They are bright, and rigorous, and civil, and demanding, and they give me great hope for the future every day, even in challenging times. It may be selfish, but I can’t bear not sharing with my colleagues in the many benefits of teaching.