

The Big Lie About the 'Life of the Mind'



Brian Taylor

[Enlarge Image](#)

By Thomas H. Benton

The myth of the academic meritocracy powerfully affects students from families that believe in education, that may or may not have attained a few undergraduate degrees, but do not have a lot of experience with how access to the professions is controlled. Their daughter goes to graduate school, earns a doctorate in comparative literature from an Ivy League university, everyone is proud of her, and then they are shocked when she struggles for years to earn more than the minimum wage. (Meanwhile, her brother—who was never very good at school—makes a decent living fixing HVAC systems with a six-month certificate from a for-profit school near the Interstate.)

Unable even to consider that something might be wrong with higher education, mom and dad begin to think there is something wrong with their daughter, and she begins to internalize that feeling.

Everyone has told her that "there are always places for good people in academe." She begins to obsess about the possibility of some kind of fatal personal shortcoming. She goes through multiple mock interviews, and takes business classes, learning to present herself for nonacademic positions. But again and again, she is passed over in favor of undergraduates who are no different from people she has taught for years. Maybe, she wonders, there's something about me that makes me unfit for any kind of job.

This goes on for years: sleepless nights, anxiety, escalating and increasingly paralyzing self-doubt, and a host of stress-induced ailments. She has even removed the Ph.D. from her résumé, with some pain, but she lives in dread that interviewers will ask what she has been doing for the last 12 years. (All her old friends are well established by now, some with families, some with what seem to be high-powered careers. She lives in a tiny apartment and struggles to pay off her student loans.) What's left now but entry-level clerical work with her immediate supervisor just three years out of high school?

She was the best student her adviser had ever seen (or so he said); it seemed like a dream when she was admitted to a distinguished doctoral program; she worked so hard for so long; she won almost every prize;

she published several essays; she became fully identified with the academic life; even distancing herself from her less educated family. For all of those reasons, she continues as an adjunct who qualifies for food stamps, increasingly isolating herself to avoid feelings of being judged. Her students have no idea that she is a prisoner of the graduate-school poverty trap. The consolations of teaching are fewer than she ever imagined.

See more at: <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/598-the-conferencegoer-what-some-faculty-really-think-about-nonacademic-careers#sthash.1kSPjsNc.IZDCmWmG.dpuf>

Quotations from Faculty

“It’s my JOB to create more people like me.”

-Senior faculty member

“I’m very supportive of students in my lab who decide they want to leave academia. But they’re smart. They’ll figure out how to get there (alternative career) on their own.”

-Senior faculty member

“If a rotation student comes in saying they want to be a science writer, they’re not staying [in my research group].”

-Senior faculty member

“They shouldn’t get distracted until after quals. And after quals, they need to be in the lab doing research. I don’t want my students out of the lab teaching or other distracting activities.”

-Senior faculty member

“I made it and nobody helped me. Plus, I was the only woman in my graduate program. The best students will always succeed.”

-Senior faculty member

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Self Reflection

- What am I good at?
- What am I passionate about?
- What standard of living do I want?