May 6, 2012

The Ph.D. Now Comes With Food Stamps

By Stacey Patton

"I am not a welfare queen," says Melissa Bruninga-Matteau.

That's how she feels compelled to start a conversation about how she, a white woman with a Ph.D. in medieval history and an adjunct professor, came to rely on food stamps and Medicaid. Ms. Bruninga-Matteau, a 43-year-old single mother who teaches two humanities courses at Yavapai College, in Prescott, Ariz., says the stereotype of the people receiving such aid does not reflect reality. Recipients include growing numbers of people like her, the highly educated, whose advanced degrees have not insulated them from financial hardship.

"I find it horrifying that someone who stands in front of college classes and teaches is on welfare," she says.

Watch: Tony Yang, a history lecturer, describes the toll of having no steady source of income.

http://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-School-to/131795/
Elliott Stegall, 51, who teaches English courses, picks up food assistance at the WIC office in DeFuniak Springs, Fla. "The first time we went to the office to apply, I felt like I had arrived from Eastern Europe to Ellis Island," he says. "We all had that same ragged, poor look in our eyes."

Profiles

4 Academics on Food Stamps

People with advanced degrees, from Texas to Chicago to Vermont, talk about what it's like to have to live on federal aid.

Academics Receiving Government Aid

Ms. Bruninga-Matteau grew up in an upper-middle class family in Montana that valued hard work and saw educational achievement as the pathway to a successful career and a prosperous life. She entered graduate school at the University of California at Irvine in 2002, idealistic about landing a tenure-track job in her field. She never imagined that she'd end up trying to eke out a living, teaching college for poverty wages, with no benefits or job security.
Ms. Bruninga-Matteau always wanted to teach. She started working as an adjunct in graduate school. This semester she is working 20 hours each week, prepping, teaching, advising, and grading papers for two courses at Yavapai, a community college with campuses in Chino Valley, Clarkdale, Prescott, Prescott Valley, and Sedona. Her take-home pay is $900 a month, of which $750 goes to rent. Each week, she spends $40 on gas to get her to the campus; she lives 43 miles away, where housing is cheaper.

Ms. Bruninga-Matteau does not blame Yavapai College for her situation but rather the "systematic defunding of higher education." In Arizona last year, Gov. Jan Brewer, a Republican, signed a budget that cut the state's allocation to Yavapai's operating budget from $4.3-million to $900,000, which represented a 7.6 percent reduction in the college's operating budget. The cut led to an 18,000-hour reduction in the use of part-time faculty like Ms. Bruninga-Matteau.

"The media gives us this image that people who are on public assistance are dropouts, on drugs or alcohol, and are irresponsible," she says. "I'm not irresponsible. I'm highly educated. I have a whole lot of skills besides knowing about medieval history, and I've had other jobs. I've never made a lot of money, but I've been able to make enough to live on. Until now."

**An Overlooked Subgroup**

A record number of people are depending on federally financed food assistance. Food-stamp use increased from an average monthly caseload of 17 million in 2000 to 44 million people in 2011, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Web site. Last year, one in six people—almost 50 million Americans, or 15 percent of the population—received food stamps.

Ms. Bruninga-Matteau is part of an often overlooked, and growing, subgroup of Ph.D. recipients, adjunct professors, and other Americans with advanced degrees who have had to apply for food stamps or some other form of government aid since late 2007.

Some are struggling to pay back student loans and cover basic living expenses as they submit scores of applications for a limited pool of full-time academic positions. Others are trying to raise families or pay for their children's college expenses on the low and fluctuating
pay they receive as professors off the tenure track, a group that now makes up 70 percent of faculties. Many bounce on and off unemployment or welfare during semester breaks. And some adjuncts have found themselves trying to make ends meet by waiting tables or bagging groceries alongside their students.

Of the 22 million Americans with master's degrees or higher in 2010, about 360,000 were receiving some kind of public assistance, according to the latest Current Population Survey released by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 2011. In 2010, a total of 44 million people nationally received food stamps or some other form of public aid, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

People who don't finish college are more likely to receive food stamps than are those who go to graduate school. The rolls of people on public assistance are dominated by people with less education. Nevertheless, the percentage of graduate-degree holders who receive food stamps or some other aid more than doubled between 2007 and 2010.

During that three-year period, the number of people with master's degrees who received food stamps and other aid climbed from 101,682 to 293,029, and the number of people with Ph.D.'s who received assistance rose from 9,776 to 33,655, according to tabulations of microdata done by Austin Nichols, a senior researcher with the Urban Institute. He drew on figures from the 2008 and 2011 Current Population Surveys done by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor.

Leaders of organizations that represent adjunct faculty members think that the number of people counted by the government does not represent the full picture of academics on welfare because many do not report their reliance on federal aid.

Even as the number of highly educated aid recipients grows, shame has helped to keep the problem hidden.

"People don't want their faces and names associated with this experience," says Karen L. Kelsky, a former tenured professor who now runs The Professor Is In, an academic-career consulting business. She also operates a fund that helps graduate students and Ph.D.’s who are struggling financially, most of whom are women with children.
"It's gone beyond the joke of the impoverished grad student to becoming something really dire and urgent," says Ms. Kelsky. "When I was a tenured professor I had no idea that the Ph.D. was a path to food stamps."

It's difficult to talk about being on aid, says Matthew Williams, cofounder and vice president of the New Faculty Majority, an advocacy group for nontenure-track faculty.

"We regularly hear about adjuncts on food stamps," says Mr. Williams, who received food stamps and Medicaid himself when he taught at the University of Akron from 2007 to 2009, earning less than $21,000 a year. "This is not hyperbole and it isn't theoretical."

Some adjuncts make less money than custodians and campus support staff who may not have college degrees. An adjunct's salary can range from $600 to $10,000 per course, according to the Adjunct Project, a crowdsourced database about adjuncts' salaries and working conditions. The national average earnings of adjunct instructors are just under $2,500 per course, according to the American Association of University Professors.

The Road to Assistance

Elliott Stegall, a white, 51-year-old married father of two, teaches two courses each semester in the English department at Northwest Florida State College, in Niceville, Fla. He and his wife, Amanda, live in a modest home about 40 miles away in DeFuniak Springs, a conservative bulwark in northwest Florida.

"This is where the poor folk live," says Mr. Stegall. "It's small-town America. The people are nice, but there's no industry. The only jobs are on the coastline."

Mr. Stegall is a graduate student at Florida State University, where he is finishing his dissertation in film studies. At night, after his 3-year-old and 3-month-old children have been put to bed, he grades a stack of composition papers or plugs away at his dissertation. (He's writing about how Hollywood films portray Vietnam soldiers as psychotic men who return home destroyed by the war.) His wife is starting a two-year, online master's degree program in criminology offered by Florida State. They receive food stamps, Medicaid, and aid from the Women, Infants, and Children program (known as WIC).
Mr. Stegall has taught at three colleges for more than 14 years. He says he has taught more than two dozen courses in communications, performing arts, and the humanities and he has watched academic positions in these fields nearly disappear with budget cuts. When he and Ms. Stegall stepped inside the local WIC office in Tallahassee, Fla., where they used to live, with their children in tow, he had to fight shame, a sense of failure, and the notion that he was not supposed to be there. After all, he grew up in a family that valued hard work and knowledge. His father was a pastor and a humanities professor, and his mother was psychology professor.

"The first time we went to the office to apply, I felt like I had arrived from Eastern Europe to Ellis Island," he says. "The place was filled with people from every culture and ethnicity. We all had that same ragged, poor look in our eyes."

He took a number, sat in the crowded lobby, and waited to be called up to a plexiglass window by a brusque woman who screamed his name. The Stegalls and the other parents took turns entertaining one another's children. As he looked around, he thought about his situation as a true academic would.

"I tend to look at my experience as a humanist, as someone who is fascinated by human culture," he says. "Maybe it was a way of hiding from the reality in which I found myself. I never thought I'd be among the poor."

Mr. Stegall has supplemented his teaching income by working odd jobs. He painted houses until the housing crisis eliminated clients. He and his wife worked as servers for a catering company until the economic downturn hurt business. And they cleaned condos along Destin beach. They took the children along because day care was too expensive.

"I'm grateful for government assistance. Without it, my family and I would certainly be homeless and destitute," he says. "But living on the dole is excruciatingly embarrassing and a constant reminder that I must have done something terribly wrong along the way to deserve this fate."

As he sat in the WIC office with his family, Mr. Stegall blamed
himself. He made a choice, he says, to earn a graduate degree even as he saw the economy collapsing, the humanities under assault, and the academic job market worsening.

"As a man, I felt like I was a failure. I had devoted myself to the world of cerebral activity. I had learned a practical skill that was elitist," he says. "Perhaps I should have been learning a skill that the economy supports."

'Dirty Little Secret'

When asked if they believe that full-time faculty, administrators, and scholarly associations know that adjuncts are receiving government assistance, scores of graduate students and adjuncts who get public benefits gave mixed responses. In an informal questionnaire The Chronicle distributed through AFT Higher Education, the New Faculty Majority, and other groups that represent adjuncts, the aid recipients said that some of those people know, some don't know, some don't want to know, and some seem not to care.

At Yavapai, where Ms. Bruninga-Matteau teaches, a spokesperson wrote in an e-mail that the college "does not look into the financial backgrounds of its full- or part-time employees."

"If any employee were being helped or supported by a government program, the administration at Yavapai College would not be privy to that information," the spokesperson said. "In comparison to other community colleges in Arizona, Yavapai College's adjunct faculty are the third highest-paid in the state."

Numerous phone calls to Northwest Florida State College, where Mr. Stegall teaches, were not returned.

"It's the dirty little secret of higher education," says Mr. Williams of the New Faculty Majority. "Many administrators are not aware of the whole extent of the problem. But all it takes is for somebody to run the numbers to see that their faculty is eligible for welfare assistance."

Public colleges have a special obligation to ensure that the conditions under which contingent faculty work are not exploitative, he says. "When public institutions fill those seats in the classroom and tell students that they will be better off because of their education, it is absolutely disingenuous for institutions to
promulgate a compensation structure of faculty to be on food stamps and other forms of government assistance."

John Curtis, director of research and public policy for the American Association of University Professors, says he regularly encounters tenured faculty members who are unaware of the extent of the problem of contingent academic employment. At the same time, many tenured faculty members are outspoken advocates of improving working conditions for their colleagues in contingent appointments, he adds. The AAUP has been working with faculty groups, scholarly associations, and disciplinary societies to raise awareness, Mr. Curtis says, so there is "no legitimate claim to a lack of information."

Some leaders of scholarly associations say they are surprised to hear of graduate-degree holders being on public assistance.

James Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association, said in an e-mail that he consulted with his staff, and "nobody has ever heard of this among our members or other historians."

"No e-mails, no postings or tweets," he wrote. "That doesn't mean it's not out there. It just means that historians on public assistance have not crossed AHA communications."

Michael Bérubé, president of the Modern Language Association, says that he and his wife, Janet, qualified for WIC while they were in graduate school in the late 1980s.

"It was great. It paid for Nick's baby formula and food, and was just the kind of social-welfare program liberals should defend," he says. "It was a temporary leg up until we were paid living wages. Janet's mother also gave us her Social Security checks, so here's another cheer for the idea of social welfare."

Mr. Bérubé says, though, that he is disturbed that adjuncts continue to live for extended periods on these low wages, even after graduate school. As for why scholarly organizations don't think about Ph.D.'s being on food stamps, he says the answer is obvious.

"Everyone thinks a Ph.D. pretty much guarantees you a living wage and, from what I can tell, most commentators think that college professors make $100,000 and more," he says. "But I've been
hearing all year from nontenure-track faculty making under $20,000, and I don't know anyone who believes you can raise a family on that. Even living as a single person on that salary is tough, if you want to eat something other than ramen noodles every once in a while."

Many people hold on to hopes that they'll be the one to get a lucky break, even as their economic situation deteriorates.

Marc Bousquet, an associate professor of English at Santa Clara University and the founding editor of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, says that ego, identity status, and prestige may explain why so many people refuse to abandon their aspirations of becoming full-time professors.

"A big part of what we do in graduate education is foster this sense of vocation and teaching for love and passion for what you do," says Mr. Bousquet, who is also a contributor to *The Chronicle's* Brainstorm blog. "We socialize people into accepting the coin of reputation as status capital. Some people are so deeply socialized into the regime of payment by way of status that they are essentially trapped in it for life."

**The Role of Race**

Ms. Kelsky, who helps graduate students and adjuncts who are homeless or on aid, says the false portrayal of aid recipients as "welfare queens" is an illusion that was created for political purposes.

"Racializing food stamps denies that wide swaths of the population, reaching into the middle classes, are dealing with food insecurity," she says.

Thirty-nine percent of all welfare recipients are white, 37 percent are black, 17 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent are Asian, according to data from Aid to Families With Dependent Children. The majority of the dozens of graduate-degree holders on aid who responded to *The Chronicle* questionnaire are also white.

But race and cultural stereotypes play a significant part in how many of the academics interviewed by *The Chronicle* are struggling with the reality of being on welfare.

Lynn, a 43-year-old adjunct professor at two community colleges in
Houston, who is on food stamps and Medicaid and doesn't want to give her surname, says, "People don't expect that white people need assistance," she says. "It's a prevalent attitude. Applying for food stamps is even worse if you're white and need help."

Kisha Hawkins-Sledge, who is 35 and a black single mother of 3-year-old twin boys, earned her master's degree in English last August. She began teaching part-time at Prairie State College, Moraine Valley Community College, and Richard J. Daley College of the City Colleges of Chicago while in graduate school, and says she made enough money to live on until she had children. She lives in Lansing, Ill.

"My household went from one to three. My income was not enough, and so I had to apply for assistance," she says. She now receives food stamps, WIC, Medicaid, and child-care assistance.

Like Ms. Bruninga-Matteau and Mr. Stegall, Ms. Hawkins-Sledge says she had preconceived notions about people on government assistance before she herself began receiving aid. "I went to school. I went to grad school," she says. "I thought that welfare was for people who didn't go to school and couldn't get a good job."

Ms. Hawkins-Sledge says she grew up watching her mother work hard and put herself through college and graduate school. "My mom defied the stereotype and here I am in graduate school trying to do the same," she says. And she, too, has worked hard not to become the cultural stereotype of the black welfare queen.

"My name is Kisha. You hear that name and you think black girl, big hoop earrings, on welfare, three or four babies' daddies," she says. "I had to work against my color, my flesh, and my name alone. I went to school to get all these degrees to prove to the rest of the world that I'm not lazy and I'm not on welfare. But there I was and I asked myself, 'What's the point? I'm here anyway.'"

For Ms. Hawkins-Sledge, there is good news. She will begin a full-time, tenure-track job as an English professor at Prairie State in August.

Correction (5/7/2012, 10:24 a.m.): This article originally misspelled the surname of a former tenured professor who now runs The Professor Is In, an academic-career consulting business.
She is Karen L. Kelsky, not Kelsey. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.
Don’t get me wrong...I’m happy these folks are pursuing their dreams, but I would assume that someone with the requisite intelligence to pursue a PhD in Medieval History would have the common sense to know that it doesn’t pay squat.

I’m also a bit disappointed that there wasn’t a single “thank you” offered to the taxpayers for buying their groceries. Apparently, courtesy is not taught in the post-doctorate world.

Nevertheless, they are welcome.

... that’s not what this article was about.... it wasn’t about a thank you. and they probably are grateful, but why would a journalist put that in there. that’s not what this article was about (you seem to think that it’s about a good pat on the back for you, rather than the hardships that these people are going through). not about you, bro, not about you.

at any rate, there are always going to be people that study ‘soft sciences’ as you would call them. it’s not any less worthwhile, just hard to predict when higher education is going to be defunded, and the job you were aiming for would be cut. it doesn’t help to vilify them for going after the ‘wrong’ field.

They’re not sciences, period.

jdkgchem Latin "scientia," the origin of our word science, translates as knowledge, skill, expertise, or, indeed, as science. I think then, to be precise, any form of study that results in knowledge, skill, or expertise is, in fact, a science. Punctus.

You’re right. It’s not about me, it's about all of us.

American culture has a deep-rooted concept of reciprocal generosity. When we see someone struggling, we want to give them a hand. We know that, but for circumstance, it could be us in that situation. It’s one of the best characteristics of our way of life.

However, we also expect those receiving the assistance to put forth effort to help themselves. At the very least, we expect some level of humility and gratitude.

What is frustrating is when those receiving aid don’t make an effort to lift themselves out of their situation (i.e. second job in the evening, on the weekends, or during summer/winter/spring break, etc...). The expectation of unilateral generosity rubs against the grain of the American character.

It rubs to the bone when those receiving the generosity aren’t even aware they should be grateful to those who provide it. From the photo in the article, the lady in question seemed to have sufficient resources for makeup and tattoos. Nor does she look particularly malnourished.
I am in absolute favor of helping the truly needy, but this does not appear to be such a case.

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**Timera Drake** 3 months ago in reply to olivef

LuapLeiht1 said, "What is frustrating is when those receiving aid don’t make an effort to lift themselves out of their situation (i.e. second job in the evening, on the weekends, or during summer/winter/spring break, etc...)."

I am an adjunct in Washington state (where the pay is actually pretty darn good compared to some areas of the country), and adjuncts already HAVE second (and sometimes third) jobs teaching at multiple institutions. Some of us teach FIVE or SIX daily classes (plus the grading and the prepping) in a ten-week quarter at two or three institutions, just to make a living wage. On all of the campuses I teach, the adjunct faculty comprise nearly 70% (sometimes more) of the total faculty on campus—this is not to “accommodate fluctuations in enrollment” as many colleges and universities like to say. It is outright abuse of an exploited class that needs to end if we want to maintain the quality of education at American colleges and universities.

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**ihelhan** 3 months ago in reply to olivef

I teach six classes a day in high school, have these unsuccessful PhDs looked into that? Maybe it’s too low-status compared to a college professor.

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**LuapLeiht1** 3 months ago in reply to olivef

Timera, what is it you teach?

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**Sandy Barringer** 3 months ago in reply to olivef

olivef, Yes, when the economy is rolling, getting a degree does pay for the skills that are "soft", like Medieval whatever. But, when the economy goes south, everything gets back to the skills that are hard and pay. It’s unfortunate for some that they chose "soft" skills as a profession.

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**mack1986** 3 months ago in reply to LuapLeiht1

lol, no one is "truly needy" to you...admit it.
It's nice to know you can see so clearly into my soul...

After hurricane Katrina, I helped approximately 20 families get into new apartments. Some of these folks were simply shellshocked. With others, you could have given them $1 million in cash and they'd be back in the welfare line in a couple years.

The number one predictor of which person wound up in which group was the first question they asked me after we got them set up with shelter. Those with a future wanted to know the fastest way to get a job. Those for whom there is no hope wanted to know where they could get their FEMA check.

Through my local church (I'm an extremely infrequent member), I got to see the difference up-front. Charities seem to have a better BS detector and can steer resources towards where it will have the most good and away from those who will merely waste their time. The government has no such concerns...

Sorry, what? Business? You'd better mean Inuit Basket-Weaving, which teaches a marketable skill. Or economics, which teaches a popular form of mysticism. Business is just a diploma mill for people who think that you become an entrepreneur by going to college.

A "thank you"? The "taxpayers" don't buy their groceries. They buy their groceries with their own money. Yes, it's money that comes from the government - but these adjunct workers pay taxes just like the rest of us, and they get the public assistance they need and deserve. I don't know why people think they are "owed" an apology by poor people on public assistance. It's not your money anymore; once you give it to the government, it becomes government money, and once they get it in assistance it is theirs. Does your employer buy your groceries? Do you thank them for paying your rent?

Does it make me a bad human being if I feel zero pity for highly educated people who do not understand the basics of supply and demand in their chosen job market?

Yuri, I don't think it makes you a bad person, but you should lighten up. I'm very conservative in my politics and began my career in academia looking down on stories such as these. Then reality hit me -- my father's house was underwater in the mortgage meltdown, my job was at risk in state budget cuts, and my unemployed immigrant wife (also a PhD) was at risk of losing her permanent-resident visa if I didn't fulfill the obligations of the affidavit of support I signed when I sponsored her immigration. I was also supporting two in-laws who didn't speak English in the Los Angeles area and who were struggling to get visas, in addition to my child.
I am proud I didn’t go on food stamps. But what did I do? At the age of 37, with a PhD, I had to sign up for the Army Reserves, because I knew that according to federal USERRA law, Cal State couldn’t lay me off in the event that the budget crisis worsened and the faculty union voted for layoffs instead of furloughs. The recruiters told me I’d never get deployed, just as my father told me all the money I’d put into his house would never get lost, and just as the PhD program assured me and my wife that we’d get jobs, and just as Cal State had recruited me to LA saying there’d never be furloughs or layoffs.

The recruiter picked me up at my crowded apartment in a Los Angeles ghetto in July 2009, at 3 AM and dropped me off at MEPS, where I couldn’t leave and had no food and waited until 3 PM until I could see my contract. My eyes were blurry and I was starving. I just wanted to go home. I signed the Army Reserves contract and said fine, drive me back home. Within six months I was on active duty and had a closed head injury in addition to physical injuries and stress complications. It’s now three years later and the Army medical board still hasn’t discharged me.

The good news is, by the time I was released from active duty with a bag full of pills and a head pounding with nightmares, my wife had found a job — 3,000 miles away. I have a roommate in Los Angeles (another professor who has to struggle with student debt), and we’re living the life of two bachelors in itinerant housing. Once he moves out, I’m going to move into a trailer park down the street from my campus. I get to see my wife and family when I can get away from my full-time job in LA, and when I’m not called up for duty. We could have my wife quit her job and move to LA, but then we’d have to get by on one income (mine) and .... we’d be in food stamps territory. Life’s a lot harder than you might think.

The bad news is, none of this is fiction, as bizarre as it seems. As Republican as I am, I find I can no longer pretend to be above the kind of stresses depicted in this article and described by Berube and Bosquet. I don’t like the fact that this author conveniently focuses ire on a Republican governor (Jan Brewer) rather than going after Democrat governors in places like California and New York, where state cuts are especially hard on people with PhDs because of high rents.

But as for your “zero” pity, that sounds like a problem you need to work on.

I’m telling you all this why? Because you can’t go around telling people that they "signed up for it" and "knew what they were getting into" or should have known, or whatever. Unless you live on a trust fund, you could be in the same bind one day.

(Edited by author 3 months ago)

Well, ROL I will state Yuri’s question again: Should I "feel zero pity for highly educated people who do not understand the basics of supply and demand in their chosen job market?” It was 2009, you signed up for a the reserves and believed a recruiter’s statement there was never a chance you would be called up? Seriously? You have a Ph.D.? A degree which is designed to make you able to do research, to ask questions about the world in which you live, and you determined that in 2009 that after 8 years of call-ups and many very public fights about active and inactive reserves getting called-up you who didn’t want to go, you were suprised by your call up? Really? Sorry, but the pity goes to zero now.

Regarding the article itself: These people majored in Medevil history and film studies. Why, exactly am I to be surprised they can’t support a family on these degrees? Perhaps more importantly, why are these people surprised they can’t support a family? Geez, major in physics or don’t complain. Don’t get an on-line degree in a weak field and then complain about it. More to the point, I wish the CHE would stop with sad tail version of these stories. Along with the OWS crowd wow am I tails; I am lost about why I should care. Guess I am evil and heartless.

(Edited by author 3 months ago)
The fact that you think graduate students "major" in subjects tells us that you know very little about higher education.

You also seem to have missed that Ms. Bruninga-Matteau has classes to teach. There's obviously a need for her labor as a professor of medieval history. She's just not being properly compensated for her labor. Her being an expert on medieval history has nothing to do with her employment status.

70% of all US faculty members (that is, professors and instructors) are part-time. Trust me, 70% of US faculty members are not medieval historians or professors of film studies. This problem cuts across most disciplines. Math, physics, biology, and all that too.

The bottom line is that either universities cannot hire PhDs as full-time faculty at a fair wage with benefits due to financial constraints or, in the case of my private university, they want to hire adjunct faculty members at $2000 a course because that frees up money for other things, like hiring our 23rd vice-president at a six-figure salary or paying for our president's $1,000,000 home on the ocean.

My university is flush with cash. That has been true all through the recession. The administrators just don't want to pay faculty members what they should. As the cash rolls into their bank accounts, their morals go out the window.

You need to get past your prejudices against certain fields of study (what you think are "majors") and start caring that universities and colleges are putting far more money towards administrators who make $100-250K/year and perks (like fancy gyms) than they are towards instruction. This is a crisis in management. An ethical crisis.

It's no accident that 25 years ago there began a steady climb in the number of administrators making six-figures as well as a steady climb in the number of adjuncts making four or five figures. (An adjunct teaching a full load at my school cannot possibly make any more than $16,000 a year before taxes. That's for a 60-hour-a-week job that requires a PhD.) At private schools, it's about money and greed and self interest. At public schools, there's some of that, but there's also the issue of a lack of funding--not just for history but for entire universities--from state governments. Can you care about any of that?

All students should care too. The majority of the students at my university are taught by adjuncts. Students pay $45,000 a year in tuition, but only about $70 of that money goes towards paying for their instruction in a course taught by an adjunct. Some students have 3 or 4 adjunct instructors a semester.

Why are they paying so much money in tuition? Because the university needs to pay that 23rd vice-president his six-figure salary and make sure that the president's $1M home has a boat launch. That's why.

It's not all about PhDs making peanuts as adjuncts and having to turn to public assistance. It's also about students being ripped off. Those two issues are very much related.

But, none of these trends could never touch you, anonymous number 2.2 million?

Follow the markets and all will be well.

Give me a break.

You’re such a hero.

Even in small disciplines like medieval and film studies, administrative overhead grossly outweighs equitable contingent employment (still a particularly ineffectual solution) and the recommended tenure lines to meet program needs, instructional design, and national/regional standards. Decisions were made to make it harder to create and sustain jobs that pay livable wages and meet student demand.

BTW: popular culture, film studies, and cultural studies have seen some of the most impressive enrollment numbers across the past decade; often the courses meet writing across the disciplines needs, general distribution elective requirements, and assist in raising visual and digital literacy.

Lastly, no one, for God's sake, goes into any Liberal Arts field without a clear

http://chronicle.com/article/From-Graduate-School-to/131795/
understanding of the risks. We understand the risks; we also believe in the mission. But, like the military, we don't blame troops for joining the Marines when their commanders completely botch a mission. Higher Education is the same. Want better results, train or recruit better leaders. And stop blaming the workers for the gross negligence and sociopathic self-interest of the owner class.

431 people liked this. Like

michaelbryson 3 months ago in reply to 22097984

The irony of an illiterate post which takes to task those benighted people who were foolish enough to pursue humanities degrees is priceless. Truly entertaining in a "Medevil" kind of way.

Evil and heartless? Perhaps, But who cares? It is the raging ignorance that is the real source of value here. Please do go on...

235 people liked this. Like

michaelbryson 3 months ago in reply to 22097984

Oh and this pearl of great price:

"major in physics or don't complain"

You might find any number of allies in the comments section for the Huffington Post article (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/... that linked to the Chronicle piece we are discussing here. The comments are the typical morass of degree hatred and humanities hatred, including one woman who lists "sociology, anthropology, political science, journalism, Literature, art history, comparative languages, 'media studies,' history, philosophy, psychology, [and] theatre" as the specifically useless degrees.

Imagine that, a society in which there is no one who understands the language of any other country--will have to outsource all those UN interpreters (and if your company does business in China? Tough! None of your STEM graduates have learned Mandarin, much less Cantonese). Imagine a society in which no one knows history. Oh wait, Orwell already did that. He called the book 1984. Imagine a society in which there are no trained journalists (increasingly the future we are already facing), in which no one has learned to read critically and write clearly and persuasively (rather like many offices now, though there are still a few who can cover for the incompetence of the whole), in which no one knows anything about human psychology (so much for Marketing departments in our major corporations), in which no one knows anything of art or politics or human cultures at the macro, much less the micro level. Oh wait...like too much of the American population today.

But by all means, if you go to college, study something useful.

What use, after all, is Art, except to decorate the hallways of power? What use is History, except to be manipulated by the powerful into always-shifting narratives which justify the ever-changing needs of now...and now...and now? And Literature? The ultimate waste of time, except as a source of the cheap fantasies that will help keep the labor force from thinking too much (when will Edward finally have sex with Bella? OMG!).

Pay little or nothing to people who have actually learned how to synthesize ideas about human behavior, motivation, history, and aspiration. Teach them to regard themselves as essentially useless, lacking "skills" (demonstrated ability to perform discrete tasks that are of direct benefit to one or more members of the economic class above them--"Yes, we know you can write. But can you write in this very specific format, and do you have x+ years of experience in so doing? No? Sorry. Next!"). and therefore unemployable. Eventually, fewer and fewer people will go into the kinds of majors that develop broad-based thinking and analytical abilities, in favor of going into areas that develop specific skills, the ability to perform specific and replicable tasks whose place in a larger set of activities has been synthesized, theorized, or thought through by one's betters. Having been trained (for this is no longer education, even at the highest levels) in tasks, even exceedingly complex...
tasks, that enable them to "earn" a living by virtue of their temporary usefulness to those whose capital investments entitle them to create the world in their own image, such men and women can then be cultivated as fertile fields for the kinds of seeds sewn in the meme-development factories at the basis of our "news" and entertainment/mollification media. Facebook, UFC fights, and Rom-Coms will be more than sufficient to keep the workers occupied.

Who needs to know who Wat Tyler was, or what Jacques-Louis David was--for better/worse--agitating for in his painting La Mort de Marat, or who the hell Marat was anyway? Better to learn how to write derivative code in C++ or Java (Hey, the next Angry Birds isn't going to write itself, you know!), or how to "write" gateway web pages in SEO-approved style in order to attract more eyes and more clicks to a commercial website, or how to extract the maximum return on a minimum investment, while slowly hollowing out the very structure in which such economic activity is still possible. Losers learn history. Winners make history.

At least, this seems to be the pattern of thought behind the rather simple-minded anti-humanities line. Because the wonderful irony of it all is that it requires the very kinds of familiarity with history and ideas being derided and systematically pulled away from and made "undesirable" for the middle and lower classes in order for the financial and political elites to maintain and further consolidate their holds on power, money, and knowledge. You can be sure that knowledge of history, of human behavior, motivation and aspiration, will not disappear amongst our ruling elites. Such "useless" humanities-based educations are precisely the kind Machiavelli would recommend to a Prince.

But such knowledge is to be reserved for the Princes, the ruling classes, the Lords. We serfs simply need to know how to show up on time, understand and follow simple written instructions, and perhaps perform simple arithmetic. But above all, we need to know our place.

> Geez, major in physics or don’t complain.

There are maybe about 35,000 jobs for physics PhDs in the entire country at any given time and the vast majority of them are taken according to the BLS. Yes, they include both industry and academe. Same with chemistry, biology, and computer science jobs. Engineering is better but not by a whole lot. How now brown cow?

Oh and here’s a fun fact for you. As someone who went to college and worked in IT for years, with the IT field boasting some 1.3 million jobs, I still found myself laid off and was about five to six months short of having to file for assistance until a year of grad school in comp sci and a lot of luck landed me a programming job.

Turns out that being a in a highly demanded field doesn’t mean that demand will be the same everywhere (IT jobs in my city plunged in the wake of the recession) that demand will not necessarily be for you (only very senior people were being hired), and even small freelance projects will quickly dry up in a bad economy.

Unless you happen to live in the right cities, with the right degree, the right experience on your resume, know who to talk to to get your resume in front of a manager since anywhere between 250 and 1,300 people are applying for the same spot, and a company needs your exact skills right there and then, finding a job will be difficult for you. And yes, your pay will be based on what employers are willing to pay, not necessarily on what you’ll be "worth" because without a thriving [blank] industry, there’s not enough demand to drive compensation upwards.

If you think you did everything right, that you’ll always be in demand everywhere you go with your skills, and that’ll you’ll always be paid as much as you’re worth, I urge you to acquaint yourself with the facts of life and work mentioned above. Next it may be you who’s laid off and scratching for freelance projects to pay rent for a year and a half. Nothing personal, just how the market works sometimes.
You also seem to have missed that Ms. Bruninga-Matteau has classes to teach. There’s obviously a need for her labor as a professor of medieval history. She’s just not being properly compensated for her labor. Her being an expert on medieval history has nothing to do with her employment status.

She’s teaching two classes at a community college - and it’s not obvious that they’re even medieval history.

There’s non-zero use for her labor, but not so much a “need”.

And I disagree that she’s not being “properly compensated” for it, unless you know more than we do; turns out that medieval history is not exactly worth a lot in economic terms. “Proper” compensation being whatever she can freely get someone to give her, not “enough to pay for her education when it turns out nobody wants to pay for that”.

(I’m a history buff. I do medieval re-creation for fun. I took a lot of high-level history classes. I like history - but I was never mad enough to believe that a graduate degree in medieval history would remotely pay for itself, in two lifetimes.)

Two courses is a half-load. She should be paid at that rate, which is at least $20,000 a year. We don’t pay community college professors based on whether we think math or vocational majors are more valuable than history. You have no idea who’s valuable in a college or that colleges are not simply mirrors of the business world. If they were, you’d never have taken a medieval history course or anything other than a vocational course.

The school needs her and it should pay her for her time and expertise in her subject, regardless of that fact that you confuse college with trade school. Her rate of pay has nothing to do with your prejudices against the professional study of history or your thinking of it as some cute supplement to your status as a history buff.

You obviously did not get a liberals arts and sciences education, and I don’t have all day to explain what that is to you. Let’s just say that history buffs and history professors are about as similar as kids playing doctor are to a surgeon.

Your strange hobby has nothing to do with the study of medieval history. Dressing up in some costume and drinking out of large goblets has nothing to do with the study of medieval history. (The history and legacy of 20th-century pageantry, yes, but not medieval history.)

We live in a country where everyone seems to cook and worship highly-paid chefs. But you, you play medieval dress-up and think this not only makes you an expert on hiring conditions in higher education but also that the professional study of medieval history is worthless.

Try dressing up like someone who knows what they’re talking about next time.
2. "None of your STEM graduates have learned Mandarin, much less Cantonese." That statement is as ignorant as the STEM people who are assuming the humanities degrees are pointless (a very common sentiment that I actively fight against when my students start acting that way). I just graduated a student who is fluent in Japanese and German with a biochemistry degree. A few years ago I graduated one fluent in Italian. I know you were trying to make a point, but you didn't. One of our physics graduates is also a professional musician in the local symphony.

3. I have a great number of students who are amateur artists, musicians, and writers. While I realize we can say that’s about as similar as kids playing doctor vs. being a doctor, I will make one statement: My STEM students who play music know more music theory than the AVERAGE music student knows anything in STEM (with a few exceptions being students double majoring in STEM and performance, of which we have 5 on campus). They aren’t teaching the stuff at a collegiate level, but they are showing a dedication to the arts, they are showing they value it; you will never hear them talking about how useless it is online. I take them to the art gallery on campus, concerts on campus, readings on campus... (I’m sure in 5 minutes I’ll be told that I’m not a real academic because nobody in STEM does this, and then I’ll be ridiculed that my chem students only know Japanese and not Mandarin. What losers my students must be!)

MChag12 3 months ago in reply to 22097984

You are evil and heartless, and also ignorant. It is such a huge surprise to you that people accepted and believed in the daily stories of education and the American dream? In a recruiter who may have said almost anything—yes they are calling them up there and there but not here? Your lack of analysis and compassion are so obvious that one only wonders what will happen when you lose your job, or overspend your trust fund, or stop taking loans from daddy and mommy. And SIGIVAD, I am so glad you are having fun with your hobby in Medieval games. Too bad you couldn’t take a little of that wasted time and spend it in some actual analysis of the entire line you have bought, hook line and sinker. You would no doubt be happy with a nation of automatons making technology for those reaping the rewards. Good luck with that.

Biko Mandela Gray 3 months ago in reply to 22097984

I wonder what it would be like if we all could fulfill those dreams we had as children... It sounds Idealistic for someone like you 22097984, but I’d rather love what I’m doing than go into a field just for the money. It seems to me that our priorities in this country have been mixed up for a long time. We shouldn’t live to work or work to live; our lives and our work should be intertwined in a healthy way.

I say all of that to say I pity you and those who think like you for thinking that the primary reason one should get an education is to get a job.

Socratease2 3 months ago in reply to 22097984

No, not evil (but apparently you are "midevil") and heartless, but just like Yuri, dense and clueless. You have an additional problem of not being able to produce a coherent or relevant analogy...what are you talking about? Yes, there should only be physics majors and all other forms of knowledge should be banished. You have some thoughtful ideas. Have you checked the job market for all relevant grad programs, including physics? No, you haven’t, but of course you still have an opinion. And, yes, let’s all stop with the "sad tail" stories, I am sick of hearing about peacocks with drooping feathers, oh so depressing to contemplate.
Color me "evil and heartless," too, 2209784. I agree with every word you wrote. It is a matter of reasoned choices. There is no PhD historian who has more of a passion for history than I do, and 30 years ago I did think about pursuing it as a profession. But I took a realistic look at the job market. You can be damned good and not even really be in the race (especially if one is a conservative in academia). So I pursued a career in another strong interest of mine and kept history as an avocation. I now probably publish more historical articles in magazines than many academics publish, as well as go on speaking tours. I've never looked back and wished I had taken the other path. So I too feel no sympathy for those who made damned poor choices and now must live with them. It is not the place of the rest of us to subsidize them.

After reading this article, it sounds like most Americans. It's not just her that is having this problem. Do you know what I call this? I call it excuses. Why don't she cry me a river? When I graduated college, my mom told me to stop making excuses and complaining about not finding a job. I can't pay off my loans. I don't make enough money. I have kids. I can't support myself. I can't get a full time job. Put a sock in it. This is called life. You work hard and you will get a job. You sit and complain, you get a part time job and complain part time. Look at the bright side, at least your not working at McDonalds with a PHD.

And a bad speller, it's Medieval, not Medevil.

Yes, that's it! Perhaps you are heartless, but not evil. These fields that you consider useless are the very foundations of our culture and history. To replace them with purely hard sciences or vocational training misses the mark entirely. We are forgoing real education in favor of vocational training which will impoverish the country as a whole. The richest and most productive countries all have strong educational programs in the humanities. To dismiss those fields as useless or impractical is to fail to understand their impact on the culture as a whole, but what should we expect from a culture that values the Kardashians over the humanities? Humanities graduates start more companies, produce more innovation and change their fields at greater rates than those who are vocationally trained. Your position that the humanities are useless is not sound or supported by research, but it sure must feel good to kick someone else who is down.
I have a Master's degree in physics. Also a B.Ed. in Adult Education (university and college teaching). Also all the course work for a Master's degree in education (specialization in engineering education). My last job was as a part-time library clerk. No guarantees there.

Besides that, this is a structural problem in which the need to sell education at a profit has become the overarching goal of the institution, and the over-production and underemployment of graduates is then portrayed as the fault of the students in question. The reason I have all that education is that I was told it was the only way I would ever be able to find meaningful paid employment. I was in my 20's. What did I know? "They" said "get a degree", so I did. And then another and another (and most of another). Meanwhile they produced so many other people with the same degree(s) that it turned out that there just wasn't a need for all of us. Or rather, that they could raise the supply of qualified applicants so high that they could reduce the pay to basically minimum wage. Mighty convenient for The University that gets to be both the producer and the purchaser in the same circular supply-and-demand system.

Great, now 22097984 has let the cat out of the bag and ruined things for a generation of physicists. Five to ten years from now, as a result of this post, there will be a glut of physics PhD's, half of whom can't find jobs and will have to go on food stamps. But those who shrewdly read the trend and stayed in Medieval studies will be hot property, pursued by colleges that suddenly can't fill teaching slots in humanities because in 2012 everybody got smart enough not to study anything besides physics.

That's a very brave and touching post. Thank you for sharing your story, Robert. Hopefully the future will hold better times for us all.

Thank you for sharing your story. You are absolutely right that anyone (without a trust fund) could be in a similar situation. Yuri seems to think that everyone can predict the future with certainty. Take care and hang in there!

I agree - even the most secure among us could easily be in line for food stamps in an instant. Financial catastrophes, divorce, health problems, natural disasters... it's obvious that life is not secure for anyone. I hope we all keep that in mind when we are deciding whether or not to support government programs for those in need.
I most certainly don’t think that. I’m all for a strong social safety net for the injured, sick or differently abled, but getting a ph.d. in a field for which there is little demand is qualitatively different than having an accident or disease happen to you.

Yuri,

It is a disease and it's called insular stupidity. People in academia (especially the humanities) tend to associate mostly with other people in academia and are consequently infected by it.

When I completed an engineering undergraduate degree I promised myself that I would only go back to grad school if it paid more than other stimulating work I could find in my field. 5 years out of undergrad I am making more money and publishing more work than any of my professors. I understand that those who study less applicable topics tend not to have the option of paid grad school but that should be a direct and obvious signal that the work one contributes is not going to be highly valued by society.