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AN ACADEMIC IN AMERICA

## The Annual Labor-Shortage Hoax

**All too often, students learn the hard way that education, like the stock market, is built on speculation**

By THOMAS H. BENTON

When someone tells you there is going to be a labor shortage in the field in which they teach, run, don't walk, in the other direction.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* there is a moment when you realize that the Joad family is not going to arrive in the Promised Land. Like thousands of refugees from the Dust Bowl, they have been lured to California by the possibility of work. And the work exists; peaches have to be picked. But the big owners won't make enough money unless there are more workers than the work requires. So millions of handbills were dispersed:

"And the migrants streamed in on the highways and their hunger was in their eyes, and their need was in their eyes. ... When there was work for a man, 10 men fought for it — fought with a low wage. If that fella'll work for 30 cents, I'll work for 25.

"If he'll take 25, I'll do it for 20.

"No, me, I'm hungry. I'll work for 15. I'll work for food."

Ten years ago Cary Nelson, now president of the American Association of University Professors, published a book called *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (University of Minnesota Press), which focused on the struggle of Yale's graduate students to form a union against an administration determined to define them as mere "students," even if they did most of the undergraduate teaching. For the mobs of unemployed graduates of doctoral programs, the academic labor system conjures nothing so much as Steinbeck's sketch of ruthless capitalism in the Great Depression.

Not long ago, I was competing with hundreds of applicants for every available academic position, anywhere, including low-paying, part-time ones in obscure locations. At that time I would have worked for almost nothing, just to get experience so I could get a full-time position.

Always, for the untenured, the real job is somewhere over the next horizon, which is why you accept unfavorable terms in the present.

Nearly everyone who was in graduate school in the 1990s remembers — perhaps secondhand — the conclusions of the infamous report by William G. Bowen and Julie

Ann Sosa, "Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Demand and Supply, 1987 to 2012" (see <http://chronicle.com/data/articles.dir/articles-36.dir/issue-03.dir/03a00102.htm>). The report claimed there would be ample positions opening up near the end of the decade.

As *The Chronicle* reported at the time, "the most dramatic changes in the academic job market, the study found, will begin to occur in 1997, when it is projected that roughly four candidates will be available for every five openings in the arts and sciences. In the humanities and social sciences, where shortages are expected to be most pronounced, only seven candidates will be available for every 10 positions open, according to the study."

And so the graduate schools opened their doors wide and in swarmed an army of students, willing to do all the distasteful work for little or no money but with the promise of a real job after a few years as a teaching assistant. It was still called an "apprenticeship" in those days, before the term became loaded with so much bitterness and irony that no one dares utter it anymore. With all of those potential apprentices around — still believing that more education always meant more opportunities — it turned out there was no need to replace retiring faculty members: The labor shortage was solved.

In 1999, after I finished my doctorate with no academic position in sight — and nearly extinguished hope for one — I started interviewing for jobs outside academe without much success. I found that, despite the upbeat rhetoric of the career counselors, my academic background did not suggest "transferable skills" to potential employers so much as "probably not qualified to operate a cash register."

"What kind of an idiot spends 10 years training in a field for which there is no demand? Or writing a book that no one will read? Why would we want to hire a person with no common sense?"

In the late 90s, while I was still on the academic job market, I started looking to earn a quick technical degree in computer programming because it promised easy placement in a field with unlimited growth. That message was affirmed everywhere: Study computers, and you will be safe. I had not yet learned my lesson about the unspoken alliance between labor-shortage predictions and the opportunists of postsecondary education.

Two years later, the bottom dropped out of the high-tech job market. At that point I just might have jumped off a bridge. Fortunately, I had decided to hang on in academe instead of going to the InfoTech Institute out on the interstate. Out of almost pure luck — for there were thousands of qualified people — I found the tenure-track position that I still hold.

Most of the people I knew in graduate school have disappeared, even from Google.

What happened to them, I wonder? Do their advisers even know? According to a recent study by the Council of Graduate Schools, a doctorate in the humanities can easily take 10 years. Even after all that time, you may only have about a 50-50 chance of finding a tenure-track position in many fields such as English (see <http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i47/47a00101.htm>). Poor souls; they were simply not good enough for academe, unlike us. And so the myth of merit gets perpetuated by the winners.

Now I am faced with advising undergraduates. Every year a new crop of undecided students — echoing the concerns of their tuition-paying parents — ask me what they should do with their lives. And every year a new study, widely reported — and circulated by interested parties within academe — announces the looming labor shortage in elementary education, nursing, computer programming, library science, occupational therapy, athletic training, international relations, hotel management, social work, environmental law, or whatever.

For example, this summer a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers' Health Research Institute claims that the United States might have a shortage of possibly a million nurses by 2020 (see <http://chronicle.com/free/v53/i47/47a02503.htm>). But that doesn't tell the average student anything about the need for nurses in the state where he or she lives. It doesn't say anything about how the health-care industry might restructure itself to function with fewer nurses before this hypothetical student has even finished his or her degree.

The ability of business to adapt to existing conditions usually moves in advance of traditional education; there is no way to predict reliably where the demand for labor will be in four years, much less a decade. Nevertheless, driven by student expectations that they have helped to generate, preprofessional programs and graduate schools expand beyond the capacity of any projected labor shortage to absorb all of the graduates.

Meanwhile, no one is reporting that the labor shortage of a few years ago has since become a glut of applicants, nearly all of them the victims of what has become — in retrospect — the annual labor-shortage hoax.

Like me, those students are learning the hard way that, all too often, education, like the stock market, is built on speculation: I invest in training, and I receive a lifelong dividend in the form of an appealing career. But a hot stock tip that everyone knows about is bound to lose money.

Still, a year or so after they graduate, I hear from students who don't understand what happened to all the promised opportunities. They feel cheated, resentful, lied to, conspired against, and they — and their parents — start to mistrust higher education as another corporate racket. And, in some cases, they are right to think that way when institutions present themselves as providers of "marketable skills" rather than an education.

Am I wrong to think the annual labor-shortage claims do the work of business in creating a surplus army of the unemployed who can drive down wages in fields in which they might otherwise be rising? It seems that during a labor shortage rising wages result in downsizing, offshoring, and other forms of restructuring. As the newly trained workers arrive in droves a few years later, most of the high-wage workers can be dismissed, and the newcomers can be made part-timers with no benefits until the cycle begins again.

Nowadays, when students tell me they want to major in something because of a looming labor shortage, I say to them, "Sorry, there are no good jobs out there going begging, and there never will be. It is hard to find good work in any field." And then I send them right to career services.

Students shouldn't just talk with their academic adviser because, in the end, most of us don't know anything beyond the precincts of our field, and we are naturally biased in

favor of it. Despite everything I know, I want you to go to graduate school. I can't help it; I have drunk the Kool-Aid. For all that's happened, I still believe in the value of the humanities and that some people should be teachers and scholars. And for that reason I can't be trusted completely.

So go talk with the people in the career-services office before deciding your life on the basis of my flattery, an article in *Time* magazine, or the advice of your Aunt Sally who listens to NPR. And don't just take career services' word for it: They have biases, too.

The job market is beyond your control, so focus on what you can control: Do research on the field that interests you before, during, and after your degree program. No matter what you've heard, you will not get a job on the basis of nothing but your degree and your inflated GPA. Get relevant experience through internships, preferably paid ones, but use your time in college to get a real education instead of mere job skills. Believe it or not, successful business people don't like to be surrounded by philistines and ignoramuses.

Develop your writing and speaking abilities, mind your manners and appearance, do your work on time and without excuses (never say "but I tried really hard"), earn the respect of your professors, and, once you have become an educated, responsible adult with some skills and a network of other adults willing to vouch for you — you might find full-time, entry-level work — making copies, fetching coffee — in a city 500 miles away.

That's hard to swallow when every college seems to boast about unlimited prospects with minimal effort, but it is the truth for most undergraduates.

Forget the predictions; the only thing you can be sure about is yourself. The final lesson of your education is to stop acting like a child, allowing others to make your life decisions for you, and then acting surprised when life proves unfair.

It's a lesson that I learned far too late.

*Thomas H. Benton is the pen name of William Pannacker, an associate professor of English at Hope College in Holland, Mich. He writes about academic culture and welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at [careers@chronicle.com](mailto:careers@chronicle.com). For an archive of his previous columns, see [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/an\\_academic\\_in\\_america](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/an_academic_in_america)*

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