

How to Cope Without a Full-Time Job Offer

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I didn't always want to be a professor, but when I learned what a professor did (or what I thought they did), I decided it was exactly the profession from which to do the things I wanted to do. My early career dreams primarily revolved around three things: I wanted to be an actress, an activist and a writer.

Reality got the best of me, and I decided none of those things were viable career paths. Or at least not financially lucrative career paths, which was a necessity for someone who grew up working-class with a single mom. By the end of college (which I attended by the grace of loans and persistence), I was enamored with the professors who taught me theories to make sense of my positionality as a woman, a poor person, a queer femme, a white person, etc. I also witnessed professors publishing books as well as doing activist work on their days away from the campus. And they got to perform, in a way, in front of the students they taught. I felt like it was a legitimate dream career, and I was nothing short of elated when I was accepted tuition-free into a master's and then a Ph.D. program.

I started grad school with so much optimism. I truly believed that academe was a place from which one could change the world and that I would be rewarded if I worked hard, published and got excellent teaching evaluations. The years of \$12,000 teaching assistant salaries would be worth it because I would be met on the other side with a stable tenure-track professorship. I would get to teach classes I loved and inspire young minds to think critically and make the world a better place. I would write things that would influence people. I would use my "free time" to attend protests and organize in my community.

Each year that optimism faded, and by the time I hit the job market for the second year, I was becoming downright disillusioned. My course load was a 3-3, and one year it was a 4-4. My free time was nonexistent, partly because I had to pick up a second job teaching yoga in order to pay for rent and student loans. According to Academia.edu, the articles I continued to publish currently have a collective total of eight mentions in other academic papers (so much for influence). And although I still loved teaching, that love turned tired by late in a day of back-to-back classes.

As a lecturer on a year-to-year contract, however, I knew I was supposed to feel lucky. After all, I wasn't adjuncting. And although the contract wasn't supposed to be renewed more than once, they had offered it to me three times more. I should be grateful, I realized. Despite doing the same work for less money than my tenure-track and tenured colleagues, and despite having no security, I should be glad for my scraps.

By my fifth year on the market, that disillusionment turned to bitterness. I did receive one tenure-track offer over those years, but it was in a very small town, and the institution had nothing to offer my partner. And after years of false promises about my likelihood of getting a tenure-track line at the college where I was lecturing, this year they were also unable to offer me another year on the lectureship line.

Upon the brutal realization that I would be another of the many Ph.D.s who were denied secure academic employment, I knew I had two choices: wallow or grow.

I picked wallow. Well, for at least a solid two months, I definitely picked wallow. Any time anyone asked me how I was doing, I would be certain to include that I'd be a lot better if academe wasn't such a dream crusher. I wept on the car ride home when my students asked me what I'd be teaching next year.

But then, slowly and with some resistance, I started to see this experience as an opportunity for growth. I'm not trying to put rose-colored glasses on unemployment, but I am going to suggest that those of us with the cultural privilege of a doctoral degree can find innumerable ways to cope and even thrive without a secure academic job offer. Here's how I'm dealing -- in the form of my advice to myself and those of you in the same situation.

Know that this is temporary. One of the biggest sources of my sadness was my belief that no academic offer this

year meant I'd receive no academic offers for the rest of my life. Although it's true that leaving academe can hurt your chances of getting back into academe, it's also true that academic employment is a crapshoot. Maybe you'll leave for a year and no one will want to hire you because they think you're too rusty. Or maybe you'll leave for a year and get amazing experience doing something that makes you the most desirable candidate for all the jobs you want.

Learn to make a skills-based résumé. When I started applying for nonacademic jobs, I was devastated to realize that, although my CV was impressive, I had a terrible résumé. My work experience involved one job for the past 10 years: professor. Not the best selling point when you're competing against 25-year-olds who have already worked six different industry jobs.

Thankfully, I learned about skills-based résumés, which, just as they sound, emphasize your skills rather than your jobs. As it turns out, academics have a lot of skills, including the ability to juggle multiple projects (classes, committees and the like), manage staff (TAs), create powerful presentations (teaching), and so on. All of those things look highly appealing to employers.

Revel in all your mad skills and use them to create your own business. If you're like me, you may create a killer résumé only to realize there are hardly any jobs you are interested in. We went into academe for a reason, after all, and you might find that you are not excited about much else. I have two responses to this. The first comes from my working-class roots and is telling you to suck it up promptly because no one is entitled to do what they love, and there are a lot of people who have it a lot worse, so just deal with a job you're not excited about it. Most people hate their jobs. Welcome to living under capitalism.

So, there's that.

But a kinder, gentler part of me wants everyone (poor and uneducated folks included) to do what they love and thinks that we may as well start with ourselves. One way to do what you love is to make a business doing what you love. And it turns out, academics are natural entrepreneurs. If you're into it, consider self-educating yourself on starting a business in consulting, workshop leading, coaching or whatever else you might be passionate about. As a critical scholar who is inclined to unpack discourse surrounding self-employment, I've taken to listening to entrepreneurial podcasts hosted only by women and people of color, because they are at least willing to mention identity (and occasionally even power) in their discussions.

Find your version of stress relief: working out, yoga, meditation, tarot, good TV, whatever. For me it's yoga, which I thankfully get for free because I also teach classes part-time. Find what works for you and make room for it in your life.

Have a release ceremony and/or a celebratory dinner with your people. My partner suggested I start writing down every angry or negative thought I was having about my employer and the academy in general. Every time I had a thought, I'd write it on a sheet of paper, fold it and seal it in a Mason jar. After the last week of school, we're going to have a release ceremony and then share a meal with our friends. There is power in ritual, and I highly recommend some kind of ceremony for closure.

Don't mourn, organize! Last but not least, if you're angry about the injustice of higher ed employment, translate that anger into social-justice work. Find ways to help organizing campaigns for adjunct faculty members. Write op-eds to bring awareness to the pay gap and its impact not only on faculty members but also students. Talk to your tenured friends and encourage them to use their power for good. And then, if you do ever find yourself in a tenured position, don't forget about what it was like to struggle. Make a difference in the system, even if you're outside it for now or perhaps forever.