

Faculty, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Academics

 [insidehighered.com/advice/2016/09/23/faculty-member-no-longer-advises-her-students-go-academe](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/09/23/faculty-member-no-longer-advises-her-students-go-academe)

Among the many tasks associated with my position as a professor, one is to talk to my students about their future plans. What kind of job would they like to find? What career have they decided to pursue?

Not so long ago, I was heartened by knowing that a few of my students liked the idea of becoming a professor, of doing the same job that I do. Something about their college experience had gotten them hooked on the idea of pursuing a future in the ivory tower. What could be more flattering than students coming to me for advice about how they could do what I do for a living?

But more recently, things have changed. Students still come to me seeking advice about pursuing a Ph.D. But I have found myself, without much conscious reflection, pointing out the pitfalls of a career in academe. So many more applicants than positions available, the track toward tenure ever more precarious Eventually, I began telling my students that I thought they needed to reconsider their plans, or at least to be very deliberate in making them.

How did it come to that?

In the last couple of years, I have been [writing](#) and [speaking](#) about neoliberalism. To characterize it as an earthquake is inexact, both literally and figuratively; it is an imprecise metaphor. But I have no doubt about the tsunami it has unleashed on academe -- not to mention society as a whole. How soon will it drown us all in its insistence on small government and free markets, competitiveness, deregulation and privatization? Its celebration of ever-lower taxes, consumerism, individual empowerment and self-interest has had dire effects on education in general and on higher education in particular.

Tuition skyrockets, students bear staggering debt burdens, cost cutting must always be prioritized -- even over learning. Institutions lean ever more heavily on poorly paid contingent faculty members (don't even ask about fringe benefits), pit faculty against administrators and create a culture of accountability that takes time and energy away from the important and difficult work of teaching. Students focus on earning a credential and pray that all the debt they are taking on is worth it. (No wonder many of them only seem to care whether this information will be on the exam and if a course fulfills a particular requirement.)

Like most academics, there are aspects of my job that I enjoy, others that I tolerate grudgingly and, increasingly, some that I deplore. That said, I realize that I am luckier than many people, given that I love aspects of my job -- that they still get me so excited after more than 20 years that I can barely contain myself. Seriously. There are times when the process of teaching feels like the farthest thing from work. As I sometimes tell my students, I get paid to read books and talk to people about them. How bad could that possibly be?

And I say this despite all the demands on our department, which already teaches more students than others in our college, to serve still more students and despite the uncertainties that I continue to feel about teaching online. Despite any number of other changes wrought by neoliberalism, I still have a dream job.

If my job only involved working with students, then I would extol its virtues to anyone. Even if it just included scholarship and service on top of teaching, I would still consider it a great option for anyone's future.

I have gone places and had experiences that I could never have dreamed of as a child, all because of my job. I have made lifelong friends and had opportunities to meet scholars whose work I teach. I have co-authored a book and written articles that have brought me recognition. I have made a living reading books and talking to people about them.

But I also have to wonder whether I will actually be able to make a living at this work for the rest of my life. When I entered this profession in the 1990s, I had no idea that possibility would ever even enter my mind, let alone become something I had to push out of my thoughts.

I remember hearing sometime during my first decade as an academic that things were changing -- that for every three retirements from tenured faculty positions the result was a single tenure-track job. One position became a contingent job. The other was eliminated entirely.

Then I started to hear that public colleges and universities, which had once been state funded, were now merely state supported -- and would soon be merely state located. Indeed, the loss of state funding is key to the impact of neoliberal ideology on higher education. But it was only when my partner, herself a sociologist, turned me on to neoliberalism that I really started to understand the big picture.

Life as a faculty member is not what it was when I began my first full-time job. As the dean of my college said just a few weeks ago, we used to have fun. We used to deal with everyday, mundane concerns. We used to complain about grading and entertain each other with amusing stories about hapless students. We would cheer when we passed something by vote in a faculty meeting because it was so uncommon.

Now we debate the meaning of DFW rates (drop-fail-withdrawal -- funny how no one talks about grade inflation these days) and wonder not whether, but how much, the budget will be cut this time. We obsess over retention and graduation rates and wait on tenterhooks to find out if our summer courses have sufficient enrollment to be taught and allow us to support our families through those months. We feel pitted against our administration rather than valuable, and valued, partners with it.

For all of these reasons, I strongly urge any student who will listen to reconsider their plans to go on to earn a Ph.D. I tell them flat out that I think they should not do it. And that if they do, they need to be prepared for the high likelihood that they will not end up in a tenure-track faculty position.

How can I tell my students not to pursue the very career that I love? How can I urge them to reconsider the dream of getting paid to read books and talk to people about them, just like I do?

How can I not?