January 20, 2010

The Discount Professorship

By Rob Jenkins

Ever since I saw Jimmy Stewart in *The Rare Breed* as a kid, I've always wanted to be described in those same words. Now, if Melanie Benson is right about the current state of the professoriate, I may have finally achieved my goal: I'm a midcareer associate professor who makes a decent living, owns a home, and has never had any student-loan debt.

Benson, an assistant professor of Native American studies at Dartmouth College, published an essay in *The Chronicle* in November ("At What Cost?") lamenting the fact that her professional accomplishments have not led to commensurate financial success. Even with an Ivy League salary, she finds the cost of living in her part of the country oppressive. She doesn't think she'll ever be able to afford a home. The monthly payments on the debt she accumulated as a student are bleeding her dry.

I sympathize with Benson, partly because she reminds me of friends of mine who borrowed heavily to finance careers in fields that are not particularly high-paying. But I'd like to point out—and I don't mean this unkindly—that her predicament is largely of her own creation, the result of choices she made.

I'm not saying they were bad choices or that she was wrong to make them. That's not for me to judge. I'm just stating the obvious: They were choices, and she made them. And choices have consequences, both positive and negative. On the plus side, Benson has an enviable position at one of the world's great colleges, a result of having attended all the right institutions and done extraordinarily well. On the down side, the cost of all that prestige has been a crippling student-loan debt that will likely weigh on her for years.

To those who read Benson's essay and wondered if a career in academe was really worth the cost, I would suggest that there is another way to go about it. I'm not saying it's a better way, just different. And I can vouch for it because it's the route to the
I began my career on a partial academic and athletic scholarship—"partial" meaning that it covered less than half of my expenses—at a small but prestigious liberal-arts college. My parents couldn't really afford to help me out much, but that first year I was able to make up the difference with some cash I had saved. It seemed like a great situation: I was at a good college, receiving a "quality education," playing a sport I loved.

During my second semester, though, reality began to intrude on my idyllic fantasy. After a season of competing against college-level athletes, I realized I didn't have much future in that arena (pardon the bad pun). It also became clear that, in order to return for the next three or four years, I was going to have to borrow money. A lot of money.

It didn't seem worth it.

So I transferred to a nearby midsize state university, where I could afford the tuition and living expenses through a combination of financial aid and part-time jobs. Neither the institution nor the English department at the university was highly regarded (the campus itself was actually a notorious "party school"), but I studied hard, got to know my professors, and learned everything I could from them. When it came time to apply for graduate school, I had high grades, solid GRE scores, and stellar recommendations.

On the advice of my major adviser, I applied to five graduate programs: three top-tier programs and two fallback ones. I was accepted at all five. But none of the top-tier departments offered me any financial assistance, while both of the fallback ones did. Clearly, I had another decision to make.

I say that now but, looking back, I don't think I ever seriously considered borrowing tens of thousands of dollars to get a graduate degree in English, even from a top-tier university. It just didn't seem to make much sense. If I'd been going to law school (which I briefly considered), I might have done that. At least as a lawyer, I could reasonably expect to make enough money to pay off them loans without having to live on oatmeal and ramen noodles. But as an English teacher? No way. I would barely be able to afford a used copy of *101 Ways to Make Ramen Taste Like Something Else*.

So off I went to Fallback U. It awarded me a fellowship and, later, an graduate assistantship that paid all my tuition and provided a
small stipend to boot.

Once there, I learned a couple of interesting things. One was that my undergraduate "party school" had actually prepared me pretty well for graduate study. I was at least as well prepared as any of my classmates, including a few who came from top-tier undergraduate institutions. I also learned that Fallback U. had a pretty good graduate program in its own right. I enjoyed the professors, the environment, and my fellow students. Best of all, although I was certainly poor at that time, I wasn't overly burdened by debt. I had made the right choice.

As my studies continued, however, another choice began to loom. I was close to finishing the Ph.D. course work when my wife and I discovered she was pregnant. I could stay in school another three or four years, finish the Ph.D., and borrow money to live on, or I could get a job. I elected to get a job.

Of course the only teaching job I could get in my field without a Ph.D. wasn't exactly at Dartmouth. It was at a community college. And even back then, in the mid-1980s, I was fortunate to get it. (I was also offered a job writing reports for a government agency that actually paid better than the teaching gig. I passed.)

That was 23 years ago. As I look back, I can honestly find little to regret, even though my choices, like Benson's, have led to some negative consequences—or at least to what some people might regard as negative.

For one thing, I've been "stuck" in community colleges my entire career. That has meant heavy teaching loads, comparatively low pay (compared to Dartmouth, at least), and virtually no professional prestige within the higher-education community. In fact, I bet some of you reading this are saying to yourselves, "Well, he's not a real professor." That's why many academics would rather sell their souls than teach at a community college, and quite a few probably have.

My decision to leave graduate school without finishing the Ph.D. isn't something I would necessarily recommend to anyone else—although, as I've written before, if what you want to do is teach at a community college, you don't really need a doctorate. Still, I've been limited somewhat by that decision, in that I'll probably never be able to hold a permanent high-level administrative post (even though I served as interim academic dean for a year) or teach at a four-year college. Fortunately, I don't really care to do either of
those things.

Also on the bright side is the fact that I get to do what I love every day: interact with students, teach writing, and engage in stimulating conversations with my colleagues. Those are the things I envisioned myself doing when I set out to become a college professor nearly 30 years ago. Moreover, my job offers great benefits and a decent salary that, if not up to Ivy League standards, at least allows me to own a nice home in a pleasant suburb with good schools, parks, and libraries—a circumstance that is also due, in large part, to the region of the country where I’ve chosen to live (hint: not the Northeast or the West Coast).

So there is a less-expensive path to the professoriate, yet, given the state of the job market in the humanities, I wouldn't encourage students to follow even the cheaper route at this time. The reality is that many of you reading this are unable to find any kind of full-time teaching job in academe. Others, just as capable and at least as well educated as I, teach part time at two or three different campuses, trying to cobble together a meager living. Believe me, I know how blessed I am. I have a son in college now, and I advised him not to pursue a faculty career in higher education, despite the satisfaction that it has brought me.

But if you know those truths and you still want to pursue a faculty career in academe, all I'm saying is, you don't have to mortgage your future to do so. You can if you want, and it may work out for you, as it has (to some extent) for Melanie Benson. But if the cost of a professorship seems too high, just remember: You can probably get it at a discount.

Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English and director of the Writers Institute at Georgia Perimeter College. He writes occasionally for our community-college column. If you would like to write for our regular column on faculty and administrative careers at two-year colleges, or have a topic to propose, we would like to hear from you. Send your ideas to careers@chronicle.com.

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