October 1, 2013

**On Graduate School and 'Love'**

**Why do so many students decide to seek Ph.D.'s, even knowing what they know about the academic labor system?**



*Image: Brian Taylor*

By William Pannapacker

Graduate school is often described as a labor of love. But "love" is a troublesome word. It often is applied to undercompensated work done mostly by women. It's also typically applied to "soft" academic fields that are "feminized" (i.e., institutionally disempowered), such as the humanities, but not to male-dominated "hard" fields, such as physics or engineering.

No one asks a corporate lawyer whether he protects the interests of his clients for "love."

The word hovers in the background of salary negotiations in academe: "Since you are doing this for 'love,' we don't need to pay you more than we currently do. Maybe we don't need to pay you at all. You should do this work for its own sake. Maybe you should pay us?"

We hear the word all the time in discussions of graduate school: "Only go if you love your subject," which is about the same as saying, "Only do it if you are willing to sacrifice most of your rational economic interests." You are, arguably, volunteering to subsidize through your labor all of the work that is not defined as "lovable."

The love rhetoric that's so pervasive in academe—and certain other labor sectors—supports the transfer of resources from one group to another, typically from women to men, from minority to majority. There's no doubt about it: "Love" is ideological, and it should not be left unquestioned when it is used in relation to work.

Most prospective graduate students in many of the so-called soft fields already know that, although maybe not viscerally through experience (that will come later). But they understand that their destiny—if they are lucky—is to join, as Pierre Bourdieu put it, the "dominated fraction of the dominant class." The small population of faculty members in the humanities, for example, are an elite, but they have very little control over their lives in terms of where they live, what they earn, and even, to a great extent, what they can teach and do research on. That experience is magnified exponentially for the majority of academic humanists who are contingent workers in the college classroom and elsewhere.

If undergraduates who aspire to the professoriate already know the odds are against them, then why do so many, despite warnings, continue to apply to graduate school in the humanities? I tried to answer that question, somewhat polemically, in a column a few years ago, ["Just Don't Go."](http://chronicle.com/article/Graduate-School-in-the/44846) Essentially, a lot of the motivation may be what career counselors call "legibility."

College is a familiar place, and academic careers seem, at first, to provide a clear direction that is reassuring in contrast with a life out of school. That's especially so in a nonacademic job market that, for generations, has seemed to veer between tough and impossible for many humanities B.A.'s, at least if they want to do something that relates directly to their training.

Having been in school for nearly all of their lives, some humanities B.A.'s see the academic world as a welcoming place of like minds. The feeling of "love" is closely akin to feelings of comfort and security: the warmth of one's alma mater.

"Legibility," as such, seems like a negative thing—a symptom of some kind of personal weakness, like the inability of a fledgling to leave the nest. But that's not the whole story. The vast majority of human beings have lived in small kinship groups, never venturing far from the village into which they were born. The dislocations and disruptions of the modern world are not an unambiguously good thing; one can just as easily praise continuity and stability.

Also, for many undergraduates, the academic life is not familiar. It represents a radical departure from everything they have known before, and they are demonstrating their tenacity in an unfamiliar context all the time: Getting a degree is heroic for them, and getting even more advanced degrees continues that self-affirming struggle. One can fall in "love" with a life of challenges as much as with one of familiar comforts.

Many things about one's "love" of academe are hard to describe and deeply personal, and yet I suspect that variations on them are shared by many readers.

For me, the fall seems to arouse the strongest feelings about college life (something I've [written about before](http://chronicle.com/article/Collegethe-Fall/33762)). It has bittersweet memories of the end of summer (mixed with the joys of something new) that go back to the beginning of school as a child. College continues that, but it may also be the time when you first started your adult life, when you left your parents and former self behind. Those kinds of emotional juxtapositions give the season its romantic poignancy. It's a feeling of falling in love with something or someone, and knowing, at some point, that it may come to an end.

Looking back, college offered the charm of the so-called bohemian lifestyle, possibly in a great city or an idyllic small town. You may be poor, but you are young and full of hope and expectations.And you are surrounded by beautiful things: picturesque shabbiness and grandeur, reading on benches in parks, browsing old book shops, prowling the stacks of libraries, reblazing abandoned scholarly trails, and maybe even making new discoveries. (You don't remember the quotidian details of dirty laundry and noisy neighbors.)

The picturesque libraries and buildings set the scene, but the real drama of college life involves a diverse cast of people. Maybe for the first time, one is encountering other serious students, who care about ideas and whose backgrounds challenge your preconceptions about everything.

I was a commuter student—so I missed many things about campus life—but there were still conversations, shared projects, and the feeling of being engaged in the world of ideas.

The mentoring by faculty members was a huge part of the experience. I was in awe of them. Amazingly, these accomplished people were there to help us find paths to greater things in ways that our parents—for many reasons—never could. I thought of my thesis director as the literary-studies version of Obi-Wan Kenobi, and he really was like that for me. He became the first of many mentors with whom I've had relationships that were among the most powerful and important of my life. I revere them still.

And—it's probably true for many young scholars—while they were falling in love with the academic life, they were falling in love with someone who was sharing it with them. Just now I can conjure powerful feelings of nostalgia by remembering the time I drank coffee with my partner in Boston's Public Garden. We had spent the morning doing research on our projects in the stacks of Widener Library; our next stop would be Brattle Book Shop, to see if it had anything interesting in the outdoor discount racks. We would go back to the apartment and read, write, and comment on each other's papers. In my memory, it's always early autumn.

The feeling of "love" for what I was doing back then was more than "false consciousness." Had I been indoctrinated into some kind of [academic cult?](http://chronicle.com/article/Is-Graduate-School-a-Cult-/44676) Maybe. But those experiences also were positive goods. I never wanted them to end. That's why I went to graduate school. And I am sure that's why so many others go, too, no matter what they know about the academic labor system.

In my case, it was the intensity of my attachment to the academic life that drove me to a sense of disillusionment as I approached what seemed like an unwelcoming job market in the nonacademic world. Increasingly, I became convinced that all of it would have to end, and I would be forced into an illegible context doing things that had no continuity with what I most loved about the life I had.

I stretched my graduate program several years longer than I needed to, even while I worried about my failure to begin building some alternate path in life. If I had not been fortunate enough to find a tenure-track position (the one I now hold), I might have continued working in visiting positions, hoping that, somehow, I'd be permitted to stay permanently. The positive attractions of the academic world are that powerful; they can override almost any other consideration.

So the rhetoric of "love" has an ambiguous meaning when it's applied to graduate school. It can be impossibly idealistic, and deeply rooted in powerful experiences that override economic self-­interest. It also can be deeply cynical, a means of devaluing the work of some for the benefit of others. The transformation of higher education into a system of contingent labor—a reflection of larger transformations of the workplace—depends on "love" in both senses. For some "love" is a calling; for others it's a tool.

*William Pannapacker is a professor of English at Hope College, in Holland, Mich. His Twitter handle is @Pannapacker. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily represent those of his employers.*

http://chronicle.com/article/On-Graduate-SchoolLove/141965/