

# Why So Many College Grads Are Bartenders

Imagine you are offered a job to work 60 to 70 hours a week as an English graduate assistant, teaching those who need to be taught and doing some research at a salary of about \$15,000 a year. You love to teach and you care about people, so you take the job.

You begin to notice things at this job. You are a challenging teacher, and you are reminded that if you care about people, you “will not stress them out so much.” At first you think there should be penalties for plagiarism, but then you rethink this because “people make mistakes.” And your tests ... you definitely need to rethink that, so your students need a review sheet with every question you’re going to ask on the test and no more. You care – a lot more students are skipping your class with that new review sheet given just before the test – but you care.

Increasing federal government student loans have raised tuition dramatically while greatly decreasing the need for academic standards.

After five years, you hear about a great job in your department doing the same thing you’ve been doing, and you apply for this promotion offering \$50,000 a year and a great title. You have student loan debt and the federal government had given you loans, so ...

You are rejected. As a consolation, you are given a certificate recognizing your five years of work (it has three funny letters: PhD; this means: ‘Please Hire Directly’).

You’re not alone. In fact, there are innumerable people with such similar certificates. All of them were graduate assistants too, but now, because of the new graduate

assistants, they can't find a full-time job either.

One day, somebody comes up to you with tears in their eyes. "I was your student, and you prepared me for the rest of my life." You squint, trying to remember the face out of so many.

"What do you?" you ask.

"I'm a bartender."

Welcome to the world of US college academics.

### **The Reason behind the Madness**

In fact, you are the victim of increasing government involvement in higher education. Increasing federal government student loans have not only raised American college and university tuition dramatically beyond the cost of living increases, but they have also greatly decreased the need for academic standards and, consequently, full-time academic employment. Colleges and universities have thus begun to structure their curriculum mainly to keep the student loan money rolling in, often ignoring rigor – hence the lesser need for full-time teachers.

As [Peter Wood](#), former provost at Boston University, once said,

*The regnant phrase was "Don't leave money sitting on the table." The metaphoric table in question was the one on which the government had laid out a sumptuous banquet of increases of financial aid. Our job was to figure out how to consume as much of it as possible in tuition increases.*

[Andrew Gillen](#), an economist with the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, has written,

*... as long as financial aid allows students to pay more in tuition, colleges will face irresistible pressure to raise tuition to capture the aid. The implication of this is that*

*there will never be 'enough' aid, because there is never a point at which spending or tuition will stop increasing.*

Average tuition at all American colleges and universities has increased [about 300%](#) in constant 2014-15 dollars for a far less meaningful degree. Student loan debt is at an all-time high of 1.2 trillion dollars, and the percentage of students having to take student loans in 2015 is similarly increased – [70%](#), much higher than in the 1970s. This is like a man who bought a Porsche in 1978 for \$37,000 but whose son can only, at best, buy a Ford Pinto for \$111,000 in constant 1978 dollars.

In 1970, five years after LBJ first signed legislation permitting federal government student loans and increasing federal subsidies for American college education (and the most recent year for which I have been able to find statistics), about [78%](#) of faculty were full-time. In 1975, on a steadily downward trajectory, about [71%](#) of faculty at American colleges and universities were employed full-time. Now, after massively increased federal student loan funding began in 1978 with Jimmy Carter's Middle Income Student Assistance Act, only 49% of American faculty are full-time – many of them in poorly paid, second-tier, "Instructor" positions.

As proof of diminishing academic standards, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa's book [Academically Adrift: Limited Learning On College Campuses](#) notes that, according to scores on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, in 2007,

*... freshmen who enter higher education at the 50th percentile would reach a level equivalent to the 57th percentile of an incoming freshman class by the end of their sophomore year. Three semesters of college education thus have a barely noticeable impact on students' skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing (35).*

This has all created what academics like Richard Vedder call the “higher education bubble.”

### **How This Works in English Departments**

The English department has been a major enabler of this trend. Because many colleges and universities are not consequently concerned with how much students learn in their courses, since profits are only directly related to high tuition fees, enrollment, and government subsidies rather than academic rigor, colleges have increasingly diminished their standards in freshman Rhetoric and Composition. This is to justify the increased use of teaching assistants, who are spending most of their time working on graduate degrees, or similarly overworked adjuncts, to teach them.

So there is little need to hire graduate degree holders as full-time employees once they receive their degrees. The Faustian bargain is that full-time faculty members generally support this system, or at least keep quiet about it, in exchange for keeping their own full-time jobs and sometimes reduced teaching loads. And so the number of full-time English faculty members becomes smaller and smaller.

The somewhat predictable result has been declining English major enrollments in the US. It is too discouraging for a student who wants to teach college-level English to see English graduate degree holders find their potential full-time higher education jobs occupied by what they once were: poorly paid teaching assistants who will merely become adjuncts. With such bleak employment options, students increasingly steer away from the English major. [In 1970](#), 7.6 percent of majors were English. [By 2015](#), the number stood at 2.4 percent.

### **The Solution**

The solution is to end all federal and state government involvement in higher education. Any tuition cost would then be due to the immense skills and abilities an alumni degree-

holder has (something likely to increase donations to universities in the long run), not from how much governments happen to be offering in student loan aid or subsidies that year.

Imagine the conversation: a student comes to you with tears in their eyes, saying, “I was your student, and you prepared me for the rest of my life. And no student debt.”

You find the student has a full-time job teaching English at a college in another part of the country, making \$50,000 a year with full autonomy.

You walk away smiling.

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*This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).*

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