Quit Lit: Academics Discover There's Real Science Outside Universities

By Hank Campbell — September 14, 2015

Two things have always puzzled me during my time pondering the academic side of science: (1) Why anyone with tenure would ever leave and; (2) Why anyone without tenure would ever stay after doing two post-doctoral runs.

The first is most baffling. No one in America thinks they are under-worked or overpaid but if you are doing cultural analyses of professional wrestling, as Dr. Oliver Lee sometimes gets to do in his academic job [1], you should stay. Those gigs are not easy to find in the private sector. But he is leaving anyway, he says, and his "quit lit" piece in The Atlantic says it's because of the political infighting and that his students don't care enough.

Does that sound like a recipe for real-world success? Not really. Because politics happens everywhere and in the real world, students are called customers. And, if you bore your customers they stop paying you, which will put you on the road to unemployment.

Academics, like everyone in every job, want a six-figure income (and they get it: The average salary for a professor [2] is $134,747, which includes those people in the humanities writing criticisms of criticisms of Proust, all the way up to Professor David Silvers of Columbia who clocks in at $4.33 million annually) and they want no criticism and they want to idolized by students. Well, good luck getting that.

The post-doctoral hamster wheel is more complex so they can't really write "quit lit" because it would just be "failure lit" - they don't have an academic job to quit yet. I do feel bad for post-docs because they got sold a well-funded public relations campaign, got their Ph.D., and then found that there is a lot of competition that wasn't mentioned when the government was insisting there was a "critical shortage" in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.

The biggest disappointment for young scholars is to learn how the grant system works - and what it means for their career. For example, despite what they chose to believe, they're not going to be independent. If you want the closest thing to true independence, go work at a pharmaceutical company. Yes, that's right. They assume 4,999 out of 5,000 drugs will never go to market whereas if you show up with a null result in front of a grant committee your career will basically be over.

The myth of government-funded independence has sold so well because the government is a lot bigger than any corporation - the number one employer in Silicon Valley, home of Apple and Google and Intel, is the Federal government. And, government controls 50 percent of basic science. Then that same government that is spending billions convinces young researchers that only government science is real science. The government is happy to let young people be indoctrinated into the idea so that they can then engage in the academic equivalent of dog fighting.
It wasn't always that way.

In the old days, **science was funded by patrons**. My next book is on mitochondria, and there would have been almost no funding for it without John D. Rockefeller. Yes, a religious fundamentalist robber baron made it possible to discover the secrets of the engine of life. You're funded by Big Oil, cellular biologists.

As it became clear that basic research would often lead to applied benefits, **science became increasingly funded by corporations**. Bell Labs, for example, had too much great research to detail here. CEOs were happy to fund basic research and still are. They don't know what it involves, so they just throw money into a black hole and assume something like microwave ovens will come out of it. The entire semiconductor industry was started by James Clerk Maxwell and he didn't have an NSF grant. Corporate CEOs get that.

Finally, in World War II, governments discovered that guiding scientists with financing led to things they wanted, **so science became funded by governments**. The atomic bomb was a huge success, Professor Ernest Lawrence of U.C. Berkeley ushered in the era of Big Science, and when people saw the millions being thrown at him, they wanted it also. The James Webb Space Telescope fiasco and PhDs working for $30,000 per year (or free, or sometimes they even have to pay) are all thanks to government.

But we are seeing a cultural reset because of the glut of young researchers. On Science 2.0, physicist Dr. Tommaso Dorigo put out a call to fund a trip [3] for a researcher in a branch of mathematics called **category theory** [4]. She couldn't get a job doing it in academia but she didn't want to change her passion. Whether or not she is being unreasonable in pursuing work no university wants to fund is a matter of opinion, but the audience believed otherwise. On September 12th, with 24 hours to go, the public had funded 250 percent of her goal.

It may be that patrons are the way to go once again, or young researchers can rebel against the university-manufactured notion that corporate research somehow does not count. Otherwise, it means a lot of people who refuse to give up their passion will end up being post-docs at age 50.

What about the trend in "quit lit"? It will be short-lived. Academics are cheering and encouraging it, perhaps because it eliminates competitors and those not up to the challenge. Those not up to the challenge are the ones who are whining that the real world of academic research is different than the idealized one they bought into. As John Warner writes at Inside Higher Ed [5], those quit-litters are writing a Why didn't anyone tell me unicorns don't exist? essay.

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