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## The problems of not showing enough love for academic work (opinion)

Submitted by Lara McKenzie on November 30, 2021 - 3:00am

As an academic, every job, award or grant application comes with an expectation of demonstrating passion for one's field or project. Often, this expectation is explicitly stated. In advertisements for jobs I have recently applied for, applicants were told they should have a "passion for excellence," be "passionate about solving society's challenges" or feel a "passion for teaching." To me, this talk brings to mind U.K. comedian David Mitchell's [rant about passion](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, in which he mocks the ardor of companies claiming to be deeply passionate about taxation or sofas.

Of course, many people would argue that academic work is different. Historically, such work has been framed as something we are lucky to be a part of: a [calling](#) <sup>[2]</sup> or [vocation](#) <sup>[3]</sup> that reflects our innermost selves. While such an attitude may have made sense when academe was often more the domain of the affluent, as it was [centuries and even decades ago](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, that is no longer entirely the case. Academics need to earn a living from their vocation. As such, the understanding that scholarly work is a passion, calling or vocation has been criticized as promoting exploitation. Increasingly, it is seen as helping promulgate unpaid work and poor working conditions, especially given the [growing problems](#) <sup>[5]</sup> of higher education systems [worldwide](#) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Globally, there is growing insecurity and competition in higher education. College and university employment statistics show a bleak picture—especially in the United States, where the number of [graduating Ph.D.s](#) <sup>[7]</sup> dwarfs that of advertised faculty positions each year. Pre-pandemic figures show that [73 percent](#) <sup>[8]</sup> of all academic positions in America are non-tenure-track, part-time or graduate student positions. Access to tenured positions is unequal, with [white men](#) <sup>[9]</sup> disproportionately serving in those roles.

Things have only gotten worse since the pandemic. Billion-dollar losses <sup>[10]</sup> across American higher education have led to hiring freezes <sup>[11]</sup>, causing widespread uncertainty <sup>[12]</sup> for Ph.D. graduates. Those new doctorates have little hope of being hired into non-precarious roles until things change. The situation is no better elsewhere. In Australia, for instance, about 13 percent <sup>[13]</sup> of university employees lost their jobs in 2020 alone.

Under such circumstances, it is understandable that scholars may not feel hopeful about their academic futures, especially those working in insecure roles. However, passion is often described as the driving force for continuing with academic work, even in difficult circumstances.

As a result, observers have increasingly begun to see the prevalence of passion—and the obscuring of other, less “positive” emotions—as a problem in higher education. For instance, Rosalind Gill writes about the hidden injuries <sup>[14]</sup> of modern academic work. She says that academics feel pressured to hide the fear and loss of failure or rejection. Gill and <sup>[15]</sup> others <sup>[16]</sup> argue that pleasure and passion worsen the effects of exploitation and employment insecurity. Academics, both junior and senior, feel compelled not to complain and to appear optimistic. They are “lucky” to be involved in such work.

How have such expressions of hope, optimism and passion come to be expected in academe? And what happens when people do not offer them? Are there dangers in refusing to do so?

My own research <sup>[17]</sup> finds that early-career and precariously employed academics are often severely punished for refusing to express unconditional love for their work. Conducting interviews with aspiring academics in Australia, I heard from scholars who had talked with senior academics and mentors about the challenging emotions they felt due to their precarious academic employment. Almost all of those conversations ended badly.

One woman had, on separate occasions, talked to two different mentors about the emotions that her current work evoked: the anger, hopelessness and feelings of inadequacy. She told me she did this consciously, rather than speaking in terms of hope and optimism. The mentors had both then told her that she did not seem committed to her academic work, with one

adding that she “seemed confused about what she wanted.” Following this, they had both stopped replying to her emails, ultimately cutting off the mentoring relationship. Her and others’ experiences demonstrate how junior academics are expected to present as happy and pleasing to senior colleagues.

Indeed, other academics told me near-identical stories about how they or their peers had lost opportunities or senior academics’ support because they were critical or less than enthusiastic about their work or career prospects. One man—the junior member of a judging committee for a small grant—told me how the head of that committee unilaterally rejected an applicant for “not being passionate enough” in their cover letter. The committee head went on to complain that today’s junior scholars lacked passion for their work: their job applications were too formulaic, too perfect—a reality likely due to the proliferation of career advice <sup>[18]</sup> in this highly competitive environment.

Other interviewees spoke of the importance of “remaining positive” in their search for academic work. One woman reported cutting off social contact with colleagues who were “too negative” about their own job prospects. She told me she needed to retain her sense of optimism in order to continue writing and applying for jobs; others’ negativity did not help.

My findings are consistent with other people’s research <sup>[19]</sup> on how the idea of academic passion ensnares scholars, precarious or otherwise. One of the ways those scholars can be trapped is through what has been called hope labor <sup>[15]</sup>. Hope labor is work that is unpaid or underpaid, performed with the aim of getting future employment opportunities, experience or exposure. Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan, who coined the term, see it as both an individual coping mechanism and a means of “capturing” people in insecure work. The ploy works especially well in highly competitive industries, like academe, where secure work is a rarity. The idea is similar to Lauren Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism <sup>[16]</sup>, through which she describes people’s futile and counterproductive desires for the increasingly impossible ideals of mobility, security and equality.

It is clear that people often feel unable to express anything but passionate love for their academic work—and not only because they are honestly

sustained by it, but because they feel obligated and know the consequences of not doing so. Therefore, I would argue that showing a lack of passion is actually a kind of resistance. It subverts expectations that one should sacrifice for one's work and be willing to take on opportunities at any cost. It highlights the difficult, career-long work that goes into expressing hopefulness, passion and optimism.

Unfortunately, many academics remain too scared to express such "negative" feelings openly, especially to senior colleagues. But it is important for all of us to talk with colleagues about these sentiments and how they reflect and inform our working conditions. In doing so, we can better understand how modern higher education needs to change.

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#### Links

- [1] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz2-49q6DOI&ab\\_channel=DavidMitchell%27sSoapbox](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bz2-49q6DOI&ab_channel=DavidMitchell%27sSoapbox)
- [2] <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2101/making-the-case-for-an-academic-calling-in-a-neoliberal-age-12972>
- [3] <https://academiccoach.info/blog/this-is-not-a-vocation>
- [4] <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=WfGLBQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- [5] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-year-that-pushed-higher-ed-to-the-edge>
- [6] <https://www.theage.com.au/national/fears-hard-hit-australian-universities-will-cannibalise-demand-for-international-students-20210427-p57mr7.html>
- [7] <https://nces.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf21308/report/u-s-doctorate-awards>
- [8] <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/10112018%20Data%20Snapshot%20Tenure.pdf>
- [9] <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=61>
- [10] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-fight-covids-financial-crush>
- [11] <https://www.browndailyherald.com/2021/03/11/graduate-students-face-bleak-job-market-among-nationwide-university-hiring-freezes/>
- [12] <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-professor-is-in-stranded-on-the-academic-job-market-this-year/>
- [13] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/03/more-than-17000-jobs-lost-at-australian-universities-during-covid-pandemic>
- [14] <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/fs-2016-0105/html>
- [15] <https://www.polecom.org/index.php/polecom/article/view/9/64>
- [16] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/25/affect-theory-and-the-new-age-of-anxiety>
- [17] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/share/GBNKH82SC64UF9RZYUFT?target=10.1111/1469->

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[18] <https://theprofessorisin.com/>

[19] <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/02/25/is-it-ethical-to-be-passionate-in-academia/>