

Degree of uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

With the spring semester winding down, the seniors in my classes at Boston College have entered a short-timer's state of in-betweenness, balancing youthful optimism with anxiety and fatalism brought on by a bad job market.

FULL TEXT

With the spring semester winding down, the seniors in my classes at Boston College have entered a short-timer's state of in-betweenness, balancing youthful optimism with anxiety and fatalism brought on by a bad job market. Some are hellbent on partying as hard as they can, but it's an increasingly forced and empty exercise in nostalgia. It's too late - about four years too late - for them to be playing at slacker irresponsibility, and they know it. Most seem ready, even impatient, to look beyond campus to the world of work.

Those with a job to report to after graduation feel lucky to have it but are already wondering if it's good enough.

Those without a job who aren't going straight on to grad school are preparing for uncertainty and for some cut-rate adventures in marginal adulthood - unless they're returning home to their parents, in which case they're feeling secret relief edged with shame and despair.

Listening to them talk about their calculations and prospects, what strikes me is the all-pervasive sense of flux.

Most are facing an indeterminacy that has long been normal at the entry level in the arts but not so much in other fields.

New-minted grads looking to get into the writing trades or film or music have traditionally girded themselves for years of spot work and scuffling on the cheap, accepting a lot of uncertainty while building up a portfolio in advance of the moment when serious opportunity knocks. But now, especially among the seniors in the humanities and social sciences I tend to see in my classes, almost everybody's plans look like that.

They're competing all-out for unpaid internships and other frankly exploitative temporary gigs.

For a lot of them, irregular freelancing for peanuts is plan A. Others will be blogging on the side or otherwise trying to work on their chops on their own time while paying their bills by doing jobs unrelated to their career ambitions. Those trying to go right into a career have resigned themselves to systematically forgoing money, benefits, and security in order to build up experience.

They make this backhanded waving gesture when they talk about classmates coming out of the School of Management's undergraduate programs.

Those kids, they say, will have "real jobs" in traditional business and finance, with regular salaries and benefits. It used to be that almost all graduates coming out of a good college were faced with a choice between accepting such a job - giving in to the ironclad sure thing, as my cohort saw it - and going for something less sure but perhaps more exciting, more creative.

Now, with fewer and fewer such straight entry-level jobs out there, more and more grads don't have any such choice to make. They're getting ready for a non-optional, open-ended bohemian phase.

This situation isn't just the result of a bad job market after an ugly economic downturn. Contingency is increasingly the norm throughout the labor market. We're getting used to companies balancing the books with jobs that don't come close to providing a living. Those who question that standard - unions, advocates of affordable health care - are increasingly seen as an enemies of opportunity. As long we're assured that we'll be free to sell our labor to the highest low bidder, we're apparently comfortable with stripping away everything else from entry-level work: money, benefits, security, plausible prospects for advancement, and the right to stand up for yourself in the workplace in any way other than moving on to the next contingent gig.

The middle of the road has shifted a long way since I left college 26 years ago. My students accept flux as normal. To them, steady wages and benefits are as quaint as a pension. They're not whining about it; they're just trying to figure out what to do next. They'll leave BC with a good degree, and many can count on family money to back them up in the short run. They can be relatively confident that they'll get through the uncertain years and eventually end up in a viable career. They'll probably be all right. I wish I could say the same for people with fewer resources facing the same changed assumptions about what constitutes a decent job.

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Illustration

Caption: elvis swift for the boston globe

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