



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on February 21, 2012

Academic Hypocrisy

Academics love to say that businesses are not paying enough to people who work for them. But where in business are there people who are paid absolutely nothing for strenuous work that involves risks to their health?

In academia, that situation is common. It is called college football. How often have you watched a big-time college football game without seeing someone limping off the field or being carried off the field?

College athletes are not to be paid because this is an “amateur” sport. But football coaches are not only paid, they are often paid higher salaries than the presidents of their own universities. Some make over a million dollars a year.



Academics also like to accuse businesses of consumer fraud. There is indeed fraud in business, as in every other aspect of human life — including academia.

When my academic career began, half a century ago, I read up on the academic market and discovered that there was a chronic over-supply of people trained to be historians. There were not nearly enough academic posts available for people who had spent years acquiring Ph.D.s in history, and the few openings that there were for new Ph.D.s paid the kind of salaries you could get for doing work requiring a lot less education.

My own pay as a beginning instructor in economics was not high but it was certainly higher than that for beginning historians.

Now, 50 years later, there is a long feature article in the February 17th issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the chronic over-supply of historians. Worse yet, leading university history departments are resisting demands that they keep track of what happens to their students after they get their Ph.D.s — and inform prospective Ph.D.s of what the market is like.

If any business operated this way, selling customers something that was very costly in time and money, and which the sellers knew in advance was almost certain to disappoint their expectations, academics would be bursting with indignation — and demanding full disclosure to the customers, if not criminal prosecutions.

But *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports “faculty resistance” to collecting and publishing information on what happens to a university’s history Ph.D.s after they leave the ivy-covered walls with high hopes and low prospects.

At a number of big-name universities — Northwestern, Brown and the University of North Carolina’s flagship campus at Chapel Hill — at least one-fourth of their 2010 history Ph.D.s are either unemployed or their fate is unknown.



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At Brown University, for example, 38 percent of their 2010 Ph.D.s are in that category, compared to only 25 percent who have tenure-track appointments.

For people not familiar with academia, a tenure-track appointment does not mean that the appointee has tenure, but only that the job is one where a tenure decision will have to be made at some point under the “up or out system.” At leading universities, far more are put out than move up.

There are also faculty appointments that are strictly for the time being — lecturers, adjunct professors or visiting professors. Half the 2010 Ph.D.s from Duke University and the University of Pennsylvania have these kinds of appointments, which essentially lead nowhere. They are sometimes called “gypsy faculty.”

Finally, there are Ph.D.s who are on postdoctoral fellowships, often at the expense of the taxpayers. They are paid to continue on campus, essentially as students, after getting their doctorates. More than one-fourth of the 2010 Ph.D.s from Rutgers, Johns Hopkins and Harvard are in this category.

At least these universities release such statistics. A history professor at Rutgers University who has studied such things says: “If you look at some of the numbers published on department Web sites, they range from dishonest to incompetent.”

But apparently many academics are too busy pursuing moral crusades in society at large to look into such things on their own ivy-covered campuses.

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