

2013

The Uncertain Future of the Postgraduate-degree Life – A Commentary

Cari L. Cuffney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/fphr>

Part of the [Public Health Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cuffney, Cari L. (2013) "The Uncertain Future of the Postgraduate-degree Life – A Commentary," *Florida Public Health Review*: Vol. 10, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/fphr/vol10/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Brooks College of Health at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Public Health Review by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© All Rights Reserved

Footer Logo

The Uncertain Future of the Postgraduate-degree Life – A Commentary

Cari L. Cuffney, BA

ABSTRACT

Public health is an area where we will always need professionally-prepared people, but despite desperate needs to replace persons in an aging public health workforce, some students are concerned that there might not be a quality job for them in the foreseeable future. Perhaps now more than ever public health professional programs and schools need to devote resources toward career counseling and job placement.

Florida Public Health Review, 2013; 10, 10-11.

What is now known as the Great Recession of 2008 provides the historical context for a generation of American college students who have begun their careers in the midst of national and global economic crisis. In the autumn of 2008, I watched as the economy sank, national morale plummeted, and jobs disappeared. In the spring of 2009, I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a summer job with insufficient funds to hire me full time and a pile of unanswered job applications. By September, I had settled for a job in a third-party medical billing firm, the first job offer I received. Overqualified, underpaid, and jaded by my work, I quickly grew sullen and apathetic. In need of new opportunities, I applied and was accepted to several graduate programs in public health, a subject I feel passionate about and a sector that everyone assured me was resistant to economic upheaval. As I prepare to graduate with a Master's of Science in Population Health Sciences, it is a repetition of my past experiences, only now with a graduate degree under my belt, that most terrifies me.

A disconnect between expectation and reality has left me dissatisfied by my experience with academia and anxious about my professional future. Rather than fulfilling the role of incubator and protective bubble that I expected during the two years of my Master's program, academia has instead served as a microcosm of the greater economy. State legislatures slash the budgets of public universities, federal grant money is limited, and competition for graduate assistant, project assistant, and teaching assistant positions is fierce. As in 2009, I submit scores of applications only to receive

the stock email reply each time, assuring me that there were an "overwhelming number of qualified applicants" and wishing me "the best of luck in my future endeavors." Such sentiments ring hollow without a job in hand. Even given every advantage – an undergraduate degree in the subject, a connection to the professor, and a strong recommendation for the position - it was not enough to gain success in the graduate student job market. Over 100 graduate students applied for that position. I did not even get an interview.

Given these experiences within the academic environment, I worry about my ability to compete for similar positions in the larger job market. Despite completing a research-oriented degree, my lack of research experience remains a hole in my resume, a hole I had hoped to fill through graduate-level training. Such was the aim outlined in my personal statement two years ago. I worry about how to sell the utility of my skills and of my degree to future employers. Population Health Science is not a familiar term to the general population. Even now I find myself making compare and contrast statements to public health to convey what I do and how I do it to friends, family, and acquaintances.

Perhaps most concerning, I worry that my emotional health and self-esteem have taken a beating in academia and that their weakened state will prove a hindrance to my job search and career advancement prospects. At a certain point, one becomes accustomed to rejection and begins to question one's capabilities. From discussions with career counselors and mentors, it seems that self-confidence may be the most

Florida Public Health Review, 10, 10-11.

<http://www.ut.edu/floridapublichealthreview/>

Page 10

important trait in the job search process. A lack of confidence leaves one ill-prepared for the grueling battle that is the present job market. Unfortunately, I now question myself constantly, including my decision to go to graduate school. I do not know if my expectations were too high, simply misinformed, or even a revealing statement of an unwarranted sense of entitlement as a member of the (disappearing) white, suburban middle class. What right do I really have to complain, when I'm already privileged to be so educated? Add guilt to the list of anxieties I carry with me into this next stage of life. These anxieties are not new, and I recall a professor at UNC telling me that he knew all of his students would be fine because we were the educated elite and would thrive in any market. I want to believe he was right, but worry that such advice may be based on outdated assumptions about the value of an education. Without a doubt I have learned a lot in the last two years, but it remains to be seen if it will translate to a financially and professionally stable and fulfilling job in public health.

Cari L. Cuffney (cuffney@wisc.edu) is completing a Master of Science degree in the Department of Population Health Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH). She has a BA degree in Anthropology and Political Science from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. This paper was part of an assignment in the SMPH's Public Health Summer Institute course, *Writing for Scholarly Publication*, July 1-11, 2013. Copyright 2013 by the *Florida Public Health Review*.