

MY TURN: THE LESSONS I DIDN'T LEARN IN COLLEGE

When I got my first job after graduating, I found that life's real tests start when final exams end. By Caitlin Petre (*Newsweek*, 13 Nov 2006)

Newsweek, "My Turn" / Nov. 13, 2006 issue

To think there was once a time when I thought nailing the interview was the hardest part of getting a job. I recently applied to be a cocktail waitress at an upscale bowling alley in Manhattan. After a brief interview, the manager congratulated me, saying I'd be a great fit. It was only a momentary victory. She produced a sheaf of papers, and my stomach turned flips. I knew what was coming—the dreaded W-4. I'd filled them out before, for various summer jobs, but I'd always been exempted from taxes because I was a full-time student. Now that I had graduated from college, this was the first W-4 I had to complete fully.

The manager watched as I hesitated. "Are you having trouble?" she asked as I squinted at the tiny print. "Oh, no, I'm fine." I stared at the form, trying to figure out how many allowances to claim—or what an allowance was, for that matter. I didn't want to admit that I was stumped, so finally I just took a guess.

Later I asked my friends to shed some light on the matter, but none of them knew any more than I did. Instead, they advised me to do what they did: make it up and hope for the best. So much for being a well-educated college graduate.

Having taken seminars on government, I could hold forth on the relationship between taxation and the federal deficit but was clueless about filling out a basic tax form. I'd graduated with a B.A. in philosophy in May, and had decided against going straight to graduate school. But while countless newspapers claimed that the job market for graduates was the best it had been in years, I had no idea how to take advantage of it. I couldn't imagine myself in an entry-level administrative position staring at a spreadsheet for eight hours a day—partly because it sounded dull, but also because in college I had never learned how to use spreadsheet programs. Cocktail waitressing seemed like a good way to make ends meet.

My friends and I are graduates of Wesleyan, Barnard, Stanford and Yale. We've earned 3.9 GPAs and won academic awards. Yet none of us knows what a Roth IRA is or can master a basic tax form. And heaven help us when April comes and we have to file tax returns.

My friends and I are incredibly lucky to have gotten the educations we have. But there's a discrepancy between what we learn in school and what we need to know for work, and

there must be some way for universities to bridge this gap. They might, for example, offer classes in personal finance as part of the economics department. How about a class on renting an apartment? Granted, it might be hard to lure students to such mundane offerings, but the students who don't go will wish they had.

College students are graduating with greater debt than ever before, yet we haven't learned how to manage our money. We can wing it for only so long before employers start wising up to our real-world incompetence. In fact, they already are: a study released last month showed that hundreds of employers have found their college-graduate hires to be "woefully unprepared" for the job market.

All this raises a disturbing question: when I spent a ton of time and money on my fancy degree, what exactly was I buying? The ability to think, some might say. OK, fine, that's important. Still, my résumé would look odd if it read, "Skills: proficient in French, word processing, thinking." The thinking I did in college seems to be of limited utility in the "real world." The fact that I wrote a 30-page critical analysis of the function of shame in society did nothing to ease the sting when I spilled beer on a customer at the bowling alley.

That's not the only time I've found my education incompatible with real life. I had trouble getting used to my new uniform, which consists of a supershort '50s-style bowling skirt, boots and fishnet stockings. As I changed into it for the first time, I had a vision of the feminist philosophers I had read in college hovering over me, shaking their heads disapprovingly.

But it wasn't long before I began to see that the short skirt played a role in boosting my tips—a definite plus now that I was trying to rent an apartment, feed myself and buy the occasional book or new toothbrush.

So which to live by: the philosophers or the skirt? I'm trying to fashion some combination, one that allows me to retain my principles without having to file for bankruptcy. After all, the last thing I want is to be confronted with more confusing government paperwork.

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