

Low Expectations

An insider's view of ed school

By JULIA HARVEY

I could tell from the start that my experience at a highly ranked education school would be vastly different from my undergraduate experience as a foreign-language major at an Ivy League university. I took four classes the first semester, all of which were taught by adjuncts, only one of whom seemed to have a firm grasp on how to conduct a graduate-level course.

My classmates complained that her class was too hard.

One of my other instructors spent class sessions badly summarizing the readings, instigating awkward and often one-sided class discussions, or trying to explain the homework assignments and projects she thought up. When she assigned one of her own articles for us to read, it became clear that despite having completed a doctorate at our university, she could not write a coherent academic article.

Desperate for a more challenging academic experience, I increased my course load for the second semester and handpicked my instructors. I actually enjoyed most of my classes that semester, but it was at this point that I began to deeply question the university's approach to preparing future teachers.

It baffled me, for example, that I could get a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) after having completed only one rudimentary course in linguistics and one in English grammar. Almost all of my classmates struggled greatly in these two courses, leading me to wonder whether perhaps the admission requirements might also need refining. A class in adolescent development was useful, but the program offered no course in child development, despite the fact that my certification would be for grades K–12. It seemed that they were skimming over the important topics while bogging me down with courses in “theory and practice,” which did little to make me feel prepared to begin teaching on my own.

The focus of the third and fourth semesters was student teaching. My first placement was in high-school foreign language, for which I was also receiving certification. I was fortunate to work with a relatively strong supervising teacher; the infuriating aspect of this first placement was how I was evaluated. A supervisor from the university observed me during three lessons over



PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO / HIDE5Y

It seemed that they were skimming over the important topics while bogging me down with courses in “theory and practice.”

the course of the semester. After each observation, she completed a write-up and made a few minimally helpful suggestions. During the final observation, she leaned over to my supervising teacher and casually asked, “So, what grade would you give her?” No criteria for evaluation, no request for a report on what I needed to work on. Fortunately, I did receive some valuable feedback from my supervising teacher that semester; I cannot say the same about my English as a Second Language student-teaching placement the following semester.

The final task I was asked to complete for the program was an “individualized project,” which sounded to me like a dumbed-down version of a thesis or capstone project. I have to confess that I took the easy way out. I knew I wasn't going to get the kind of academic support I would need to complete an actual thesis, so I settled for designing a unit based on what I was already working on with my ESL students. After meeting with the professor a few times and receiving some vague suggestions, I handed in a project that earned me the last of a full transcript of easy As, with a friendly note on the cover and not a single comment or suggestion for how the unit could have been improved.

After observing and teaching in a variety of classroom settings over the course of my graduate studies, I have concluded that good teaching depends on three things: mastery of the subject, a keen understanding of how children learn, and an ability to maintain a disciplined yet positive learning environment. It is hard for me to express how disheartening it is to have spent two years and more than \$80,000 in student loans on a program that did justice to none of those objectives.

The author earned a masters degree in education at a private university in the Northeast. Julia Harvey is a pseudonym.