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[More options](#) | [Back issues](#)

Home

News

- [Today's news](#)
- [Current issue](#)
- [Special issues & data](#)
- [The Faculty](#)
- [Research & Books](#)
- [Government & Politics](#)
- [Money & Management](#)
- [Information Technology](#)
- [Students](#)
- [Athletics](#)
- [International](#)
- [Community Colleges](#)
- [Short Subjects](#)
- [Gazette](#)
- [Corrections](#)

Opinion & Forums

Careers

Presidents Forum

Technology Forum

Sponsored Information & Solutions

Campus Viewpoints

Travel

Services

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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Faculty

From the issue dated January 12, 2001

Psychology Ph.D.'s Pass on Academe**Star graduates turn down faculty jobs, finding better pay and less stress in industry**

By SCOTT SMALLWOOD

Bonnie Brown had just received her Ph.D. in psychology from Stanford University when she took a colleague's advice and typed the word "psychologist" into a search form at HotJobs.com.

The Internet worked its magic, and after a few seconds, dozens of want ads streamed onto the screen revealing a wealth of jobs people would pay her for, ranging from researcher at a major technology company to experimental psychologist for the U.S. Navy -- all far beyond the traditional academic career she once considered.

ALSO SEE:

Colloquy Live: Join a [live online discussion](#) with Richard McCarty, executive director for science at the American Psychological Association, on the career choices being made by new Ph.D.'s in psychology, on Thursday, January 11, at 2 p.m., U.S. Eastern time.

It was 1999, the Internet boom was in full stride, and dot-coms were seeking research psychologists for all sorts of jobs. Ms. Brown was in Northern California, the heart of the new economy. In college, she had joked that while she and her fellow graduate students were toiling away in the library, the economy next door was exploding.

After a few more Web searches and some old-fashioned dinner-party networking, Ms. Brown joined the Vividence Corporation, a Web-site consulting firm that helps companies make their sites more efficient, in San Mateo, Calif. Her pay is more than double the \$40,000 many starting assistant professors earn, and the company offered her something she'd never get at a university -- stock options.

Across the country, an increasing number of top Ph.D.'s in psychology are abandoning academe for commercial careers that offer better pay and less stress.

Ms. Brown, for example, believes her job -- despite recent turmoil in the Internet economy -- provides a sense of security that academic posts lack. "Academia is much more risky," she says. "It's much less clear what to do if you're not that big star that makes it."

Ms. Brown apparently makes a convincing case: Almost immediately upon arriving, she helped recruit two more Ph.D. students from the Stanford psychology department to the Vividence research team.

For years, most psychologists have wound up in nonacademic positions, but that's because many follow the clinical path to health-care-related jobs. The difference now is that students in traditional research fields, such as cognitive and social psychology, are being wooed by a widening array of career options to what some still consider "the dark side."

They become market researchers or management consultants. They help design computer software or fighter-jet cockpits. They work as researchers for pharmaceutical conglomerates or testing companies. These high-paying jobs are the carrots drawing students away from the academy.

There's a stick as well. The academic life, at least in psychology, has gotten more demanding. Grants are tighter, publishing is harder, and bureaucratic layers seem thicker. Students look at their mentors and see a life they might not want.

"It's partly a result of changes in the economy, but also there was a time when, if you went nonacademic, there was a sense that you failed. It was like, 'what a loser you are,'" says Robert J. Sternberg, a professor of psychology at Yale University. "There are some people who still feel that way, but not everyone. There's a sense that people should find a job that's right for them, rather than satisfy some preconceived notion of what's prestigious."

The shift has Philip Zimbardo, the new president-elect of the American Psychological Association and a professor at Stanford University, concerned. Stanford's highly respected psychology department has no clinical program, focusing instead on research. Historically, it has turned out top researchers who form the bedrock of psychology departments at other universities.

In recent years, though, Mr. Zimbardo has watched as more and more of his students leave the academy. Stanford hasn't tracked exact numbers, but he suggests that perhaps a third of the department's Ph.D. students are now taking industry-related jobs. That's in line with the national rate, according to surveys by the American Psychological Association. Its 1997 survey of students who received doctorates found that 32 percent of those in research subfields had taken business or government jobs. That number has hovered around 30 percent in recent surveys, but since 1986, the percentage of those students who took consulting jobs has risen from 4 percent to more than 8 percent.

In the past, Mr. Zimbardo says, a student might test the waters of the tight academic job market and then settle for an industry job; now he's seeing students choose early in their graduate careers to pursue commercial jobs. That is especially true of some top-level students who might in years past have considered a job with a second-tier psychology department before deciding to leave academe entirely.

"Probably the superstars are still going to be superstars," he says. "Maybe it's the people who were going to go to Oregon or Duke who are now thinking: 'If I can't have the best job, maybe I should go to Oracle, get the Christmas bonus, and have the summer picnic.'"

When John Boyd arrived at Stanford, he had his sights set on an academic career. Over time, he decided that wasn't what he wanted. First, he worried about the lack of jobs, then he worried about moving to what seemed like a remote outpost to get one of those rare jobs. He threw in the uncertainty of tenure, and the scales were tipped.

About 18 months ago, Mr. Boyd became a scientific consultant at Alertness Solutions in Cupertino, Calif. The job allowed him to remain in the Bay Area and continue to do research. Instead of the time-perspective experiments he was conducting with Mr. Zimbardo at Stanford, he is studying sleep and circadian rhythms to help truck drivers and airplane

pilots stay alert.

"For me," Mr. Boyd says, "the main issue was choice -- choice of where I live, and more control over my time." In return for stepping off the academic track, he says, he was offered more money to work less.

When students like Mr. Boyd jump ship, not only does academe lose a potential faculty member, but programs cannot rely on those Ph.D.'s to burnish their institutional reputation through scholarship and teaching. Mr. Boyd, for example, is now of little use to the Stanford department. "It's unlikely he's going to publish, go to conventions, or teach," Mr. Zimbardo says of his former student. "A lot of the value that went into teaching him will be wasted. He will be lost in terms of that luster for the department."

Students and professors alike have become all too aware of that fact, and that threatens to undermine the student-teacher relationship as students keep their intentions under wraps. Professors can't bask in any reflected glory when their apprentice joins a team of researchers at, say, Microsoft.

"Many of our graduate students know from the start that they don't want to go into the academy," says Richard C. McCarty, the executive director for science at the American Psychological Association. "But they keep it quiet because they know their advisers aren't open to that."

Stepping off the academic track isn't a move students take lightly. Their concern is that there's no turning back once they've snubbed the academy.

"That's the most common question I get when people are thinking about this," says Stephen M. Kosslyn, a professor of psychology at Harvard University. "I tell them that, as long as you publish and present at meetings, it's not as if you've burned any bridges behind you. Then it's not foreclosed."

The key to returning to a faculty job is possessing the coin of the academic realm -- work published in peer-reviewed journals.

"If a person finds a nonacademic job that allows for peer-reviewed publication, then I could imagine them moving back to the academy. I'm just not sure how long the door would remain open," agrees Mr. McCarty. After a while, he notes, many psychologists in industry move away from being researchers and become managers.

At the same time, Mr. McCarty and others believe that psychology departments will be strengthened if they loosen up, encourage students to consider nonacademic employment, and forge stronger bonds with their industrial counterparts.

Fred W. Hornbeck, professor and chairman of the psychology department at San Diego State University, says having more psychologists in management positions in industry would probably lead to more philanthropic support of psychology departments and stimulate interest in corporate collaborations.

Anne Beall spurned the academic path that both her father and grandfather had followed, instead going straight into market research after graduating from Yale with a Ph.D. in 1993. Seven years later, she's the director of research for the Boston Consulting Group's Chicago office, and she's been back to New Haven to offer a seminar on nontraditional career options.

Now, years removed from the academy, she finds her former classmates hold her and others who labor in industry jobs in low esteem. "Why aren't we coming together more?" Ms. Beall asks. "We are solving very similar types of problems."

While professors and industry psychologists may be paying lip service to the concept of collaboration, many students take nonacademic jobs to escape the ivory tower. They have lost interest in doing research that goes into journals destined to sit on dusty shelves in the library. Even if the impact of their work -- making a Web site more intuitive, keeping a trucker awake, or creating fairer standardized tests -- seems somewhat pedestrian, they enjoy seeing results out in the real world, rather than inside the academy's halls.

As a graduate student at Yale, James Kaufman studied creativity, loved teaching, and planned for an academic career. Last spring, with graduation looming, Mr. Sternberg, his adviser, forwarded him an e-mail announcement of a job opening at Educational Testing Service.

Somewhat skeptically, he read it over, and then "I realized that this looks like me. They want to do research on all the things that I want to do research on." It required him to reconsider his image of testing companies a bit. His parents, both psychologists who designed intelligence tests, worked with some that were heavy on business and light on research.

"Then I came for an interview here, and I realized that the researchers here were just as good as the ones at Yale, and the research they were doing was just as cutting edge," Mr. Kaufman says. "And they get paid more."

He spurned offers from colleges, which would have meant working for less money and doing research that didn't interest him. Instead of becoming an assistant professor and earning in the mid-\$30,000's, he's making about \$20,000 more. Now he's an associate research scientist for E.T.S.'s Center of New Constructs, in Princeton, N.J., studying ways to measure thinking styles, leadership, and motivation. He hopes his research will help make tests fairer, and he appreciates that more practical bent.

Not only does the research on the business side seem more practical, it often involves regular people. As a business consultant, Ms. Beall has gotten into cars to understand how decisions are made in fast-food drive-through lanes and tagged along while people shopped for engagement rings; she has spoken with farmers on tractors and high-powered executives. It all seems much more like the real world than experiments designed around 19-year-old psychology undergraduates, she says.

Ms. Brown, of the Web-site consulting firm Vividence, spent years in graduate school on a topic far from Silicon Valley -- the factors that underlie genocide and atrocities. She plans to return to that research, but probably not in a university setting. "Now I see that as something to do after you guarantee your financial security," she says.

Mr. Zimbardo of Stanford wonders whether the changing economic landscape will affect universities' ability to attract top minds in the coming years.

"If the temptation of these attractive jobs continues to compete with academic jobs, we may not find the high-quality people to replace us," he says.

Mr. Kosslyn of Harvard, however, isn't worried about any

shortage of graduate students. "I think there's more people in the pipeline," he says. "And I think the system is self-correcting. If there was momentarily a blip, it would be quickly filled."

Second-tier institutions have also seen more of their psychology graduates choose the industry path. At Indiana University at Bloomington, for instance, recent graduate students have taken jobs at Microsoft and AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, Professor Alice F. Healy says she has seen a growing number of students find industry jobs.

But it doesn't seem to have depleted the pool of applicants. A recent search at Indiana for a social psychologist turned up more than 100 applicants who were at least as good as those attracted in past years, says Joseph E. Steinmetz, chairman of the psychology department at the Bloomington campus. Ms. Healy, who says she believes the very best students are still choosing academe, described the pool of applicants for two recent hires at Colorado as "outstanding."

But for the students who do decide that academe isn't for them, what, if anything, should psychology departments be doing to prepare them for this more complex career landscape? Many faculty members rose through the ranks 20 years ago, facing a very different marketplace. Can they prepare students for a future they don't know much about?

"A lot of graduate students don't appreciate the opportunities outside the academy, and many departments are ill-equipped to provide that information because they've rarely been outside the academy," says the A.P.A.'s Mr. McCarty. "We need to instill in graduate students there are many things that they can do."

At Harvard, Mr. Kosslyn occasionally offers a noncredit course on academic survival skills, covering how to compose letters of recommendation, how to review an article, and how to write a grant proposal. He says he could envision a similar course that walked people through some of their various career options.

But for all the talk of a tight job market and the hardships of academe, more than a third still follow that path. Mr. Kosslyn had one recent student go to Microsoft and another form his own software company, but others have pursued academic careers at Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Minnesota.

Mr. Kosslyn encourages his students to see both the good and bad about an academic job. First, he makes sure they understand the stress and bureaucracy of the university life.

Then, he tells them, there's a flip side: "One of them is that you get to be around bright, young, interested students. That's good. It's good to have people who are intelligently alive. And the other is that you get paid for doing your hobby. You have a measure of freedom you're not going to have in those other jobs."

Mr. Sternberg of Yale gives students similar advice: "Prestige-wise, being a professor isn't like being a doctor or anything. Academics is for people who really love it. Otherwise it's a really bad job."

<http://chronicle.com>
Section: The Faculty

Page: A10



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