

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## Arrived at the Mountain, Only Saw Waste

GEMMICKA PIPER

*Dear Higher Education,*

I am a child from a double parent household. My mother dropped out of school in the sixth grade, while my father quit school during his second attempt at what should have been his junior year. On my father's side, he was the only one of five siblings not to graduate from high school. On my mother's side, she was just another of the eight siblings who never made it through the K-12 pipeline. Neither she nor her side of the family really cared about education. My mother's family actively pushed their children to join the labor market early. Cooks, janitors, care workers—basically all designated for the lowest paying pink-collar or service work. On my dad's side—there were many military veterans, deaconesses, substitute teachers, and other low-tier white- and blue-collar workers. As the only high school dropout, my dad became the black sheep of the Piper family. Maybe it is because of this reason that when it came to education it was always my father who would sit me and my siblings down and tell us, "Don't be like me or y'all's Mama. Go to school and graduate." My mother, usually sitting on the bed next to him, would placidly sip her beer. She wouldn't disagree but her eyes remained indifferent.

My dad, in the 38 years I have known him, has never held a documented job. My mother raised seven kids solely on a CNA worker's income. She was constantly pulling doubles and triples back-to-back, so most times I would see her maybe twice in a week. Her eyes would be all bloodshot; she would be so mean, quick to cuss you out, and just as fast to hit. She'd tell stories of the people she worked with at the nursing home. Sometimes a few of her colleagues would come by and drink, discussing the owners of the nursing home where they worked. They frequently griped about how abrupt changes in care policies or staffing were negatively impacting their ability to do their jobs, or how the owners were cooking the clocks to deduct their pay checks for taking what they deemed too many breaks. I fondly remember my mother's coworkers as older friends who occasionally sent me birthday cards with five- or ten-dollar bills, Easter baskets, and cute little outfits.

Later, as a sixth or seventh grader, I would have to be up and at the school bus stop by 6:25am. I would get up around 5:20am. My grandmother would already be up and showering by 4:00am, preparing to catch either the metro bus or a shared carpool to her janitorial job at Rockhurst University. Just like my mother, my grandmother was miserable each day she returned home from work. She would be full of stories about the disrespect and nastiness she encountered daily from private school kids as well as various, mainly white, faculty members. Just like my mother, she also had an explosive temper, which she cast on her children, and later me and my siblings when we were placed in her custody. Both my grandmother and mother kept working the same jobs they hated for decades because they needed the money, while time, resources, and limited education meant they couldn't find better options. They deeply believed that even if they got different jobs, it would still be more of the same disrespect. There was never a conversation or attempt to either go back to school or get a GED. Instead, they focused on being steady laborers. While mom picked up extra shifts, my grandmother occasionally would double as waitstaff at college events. Even with all the time they put in and pay raises received along the way, neither my mother's nor my grandmother's base salary broke the \$40,000 threshold on a single income strand.

While my mother may never have said anything directly about staying in school, I observed both her and my grandmother's economic situations and realized they were living examples of how not finishing education would lead to being economically trapped. As such, I grew up already knowing the wasteland—though I did not yet have the word for it. It looked like women leaving before dawn for work that wore them down physically and spiritually, still never paid enough to make them financially free. This became the first lesson I internalized about education's necessity and possibility.

Dear Higher Education, unlike other Black women, I never fell for your illusions of meritocracy. From the start, I pursued you purely as a means to an economic end. I craved not the pleasures of intellectual stimulation and mental engagement, but the raw access to upward class mobility. You were the mountain I had to climb to escape the rampant, desolate poverty surrounding my parents and my maternal grandmother.

### **Journey Up the Mountain**

I did not ascend the mountain for personal cultivation or enlightenment. I came seeking an exit strategy. No one in my family had any craft-based or technical skills that could be taught. Honestly, I didn't really care that much about school. I didn't have a chance to dive deep into my personal likes or dislikes; my focus was purely on survival. I only got serious about education as a high school student. I learned my second lesson, the necessity for education, as I was starting to apply for part-time jobs. I was trying to secure a job either in my neighborhood or on a major bus line. I had a fantasy of working in the comfort of a public library, but at the time the neighborhood libraries unilaterally turned my applications down. The Westport and Plaza districts, overtly catering to upper-class white clientele, quickly dismissed the 50-plus applications I put in at about 70 different stores. I didn't mind being turned down from the retail clothing and food-service stores but Barnes and Noble, Waldenbooks—that was a particular pain.

Eventually, I got my first job at 17; it wasn't at all one that I wanted. I was forced by my grandmother and her guardian aide to beg for a position at the local KFC. I was hired as a dishwasher but was also trained as a cashier. It was miserable. They would put me on random short shifts, call me in for work, and then cut my hours first if they staffed too many people in the shift. Then they moved me to the closing shift. I was a lone, short and skinny Black girl catching a late-night bus from work. They did not care at all about me still being in high school.

For context, this was the same summer when a fourteen-year-old girl was kidnapped, held hostage, and then gang-raped by 10 men a few streets over from my grandmother's house. At the same time, the Prospect Corridor Killer was active and dumping female victims along Prospect Avenue—the same strip I needed to travel down to make it back home. No adult around me made sure I had bus fare or really cared about how I was getting to or from work. Often, I didn't even have bus money or a ride. Instead, I would run the twenty blocks from the KFC location back to my grandmother's house at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m., terrified and not wanting to be a target. I wasn't allowed to quit KFC; my grandmother was waiting for my shifts to stabilize so that I could start handing over my money. My average paycheck was about 30 dollars; when she saw this she blamed me for the unstable income. My money was an extension of her money. Even though I earned little she still dictated how it could be spent. I wasn't allowed to save it.

I wanted longer-term job security and economic mobility. Life kept lifing, and I was eventually removed from my grandmother's care and then placed into a group home where I was finally allowed the decision to quit working at KFC. But I was still pushed to get a service-type job as I was rapidly approaching 18 and about to age out of state care. No one pushed me to go to college, despite my maintaining a solid 3.5 GPA, despite early acceptances from out-of-state colleges, despite my grandmother's active monitoring and interference with my mail and her denial of supplying income information for the FAFSA, and even despite my securing a full ride to the local community college. I was pushed by both the Division of Family Services and the owners of the girls' home I was relocated to to be self-sufficient, not a drag on the system. For them, this meant I needed to

immediately secure a job and start saving up the first and last month's rent and then transition to living on my own.

My decision to pursue higher education was steeped in a profound understanding of both the bitterness and reality of not pursuing it. My life has been a constant state of survival. Whether or not higher education was for me or not, I was going to do it and I was going to be successful, because I had no time for any other choice. Everyone around me was already trying to push me out of higher education; therefore, it became even more critical for me to go to college.

The summer I was to transition out of care, I was under immense pressure. Suddenly, I was being made to coordinate my relocation from one city to another, with no guidance or practical support. I had one person, a church friend of the mother of one of the group home owners, who agreed to transport me to college but then acted like we had never settled on the date and location when the time came to actually show up. Luckily, I had developed a relationship with the admissions team at the college and one of their coordinators volunteered to drive 168 miles to pick me and my stuff up.

I knew before entering college that I had to hold the line; there was no family support coming, no backup plans, and no alternatives. Eyes wide open, mind clear, teeth gritted, I gathered every bit of that famous Taurus willpower I had and decided I was going to be successful in college and go as far as I needed.

This is to say, my entrance into higher education was always explicitly about fleeing poverty. To a lesser degree it was also about showing folks that I could graduate and be successful. I was the first person in multiple generations on my mother's and dad's sides of the family to pursue higher education. I had to learn to navigate the social pitfalls of university life, as well as the embedded expectations and assumptions coded within higher-education culture. I had to learn to do this while still grieving the disruption that was the Division of Family Services and the subsequent dysfunction and chaos of my grandmother and maternal family.

Higher education was supposed to be the doorway out of generational poverty. I wanted to forget what it was like to sit with bone-gnawing hunger for most of the day. To forget what it was like to live without heat in winter. I wanted to forget what it was like to have to choose between paying a utility bill or putting food in the fridge. I wanted to forget what it was like to never hang out with friends because I couldn't find two pennies to rub together, let alone a dollar twenty-five to hop on a bus. Higher education was an implicit promise of upward mobility, a lush landscape waiting at the summit.

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Higher education was supposed to be the doorway that, once I passed through, would help me escape generational poverty. It was an implicit promise of upward mobility, a lush landscape waiting at the summit.

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I was focused on finishing my degree, not necessarily on what I would study. In retrospect, this sounds strange, but it really didn't matter to me what I majored in. I knew I was never going to be super wealthy. All I needed was to make enough to be comfortable and live on one salary. What I wanted was to escape the rage-and alcohol-fueled trauma brought home by women who had to navigate racial suppression and indignity within their workspaces. I didn't want to be on call as someone's cook. Even more so, I didn't want to spend my life providing care for others. I wanted to be able to live a life of intellectual labor.

I expected to be able to comfortably step into middle-class life with all the resources I had been denied: a house, annual vacations, and enough monthly savings to cover any small, unexpected expenses without overdrawing my bank account.

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## Surviving in the Edges of the Academic Wasteland

From the ages of 18-28, I measured my life not in phases but in degrees. In 2009, I crossed the stage to whistles and cheers, officially completing a B.A. in English while unknown university administrators butchered the pronunciation of my name. I went straight from undergrad into graduate school. From 2009-2013, I earned an M.A. in English, along the way to my Ph.D. I made it through the program, successfully defending in December 2015, while also managing to wrap up a random secondary master's in library and information science in May 2016. After ten years and multiple degrees, I thought I would finally be able to cash in on higher education's hard-won promise. However, as I transitioned from student to young professional, I realized that this was not exactly going to be the case.

I realized that the peak I had climbed was surprisingly barren. I initially received plenty of job interviews. I received no fewer than 20 phone interviews, with one campus visit. I slam-dunked the interview after missing my original flight and having less than five hours of sleep. I answered question after question, even for the parts of the position I had no idea about and made sure to stay upbeat and polite. Everyone seemed warm and welcoming, but before I had even left campus, I had already been pulled aside and warned by one of the archivists that I would most likely not be selected despite interviewing very well and having innovative ideas for building community relationships. The archivist further explained that this department has a pattern in which they liked to bring in candidates with doctoral degrees for campus visits but would never select them for the position offer.

I never even received a follow-up phone call; instead, it was me checking in to see if they had decided as the position start date came and went. In those first six months after graduating, I lived on my credit cards, running up debt. Eventually, I landed my first post-graduate job. The offer was for \$47k pre-tax. I made a third move across state lines, from Iowa to Missouri, and then from Missouri to Ohio. No relocation fees, just debt and then even more debt, as the housing scarcity in the new city forced me into an untenable living situation. I have previously written about my general experience with this job from a financial-impact standpoint. This academic position was economically devastating. I not only moved across state lines from Missouri to Ohio in a short time frame but also had to hire moving crews and storage pods.

If the financial burden of moving wasn't enough, once I relocated, a new challenge emerged. I am not sure if this is already a fully fleshed-out concept in academia, but higher education runs on the "Single Tax." The single tax refers to the simultaneous economic, organizational, and cultural overburden placed on unmarried and childfree individuals. Unless your job pays extremely well, having no dependents and making above-poverty wages means you are financially taxed at the full allotment in your tax bracket. If you work in corporate spaces or in academia, because you don't have children there are presumptions on your flexibility and availability. Colleagues assume you can be asked or pressured to sign up for late outreach and programming events. In a family unit, it's the same presumption that because you may not have immediate family commitments, you are always available to cover babysitting duty, pick up supplies, chip in extra, or run errands for other friends and family who have prior work and family responsibilities.

On paper, \$47k as a single, childless, head of household with no dependents, and at the time no chronic health issues, sounds livable. I wasn't warned before the single tax kicked in, stripping away the few resources I had managed to gather. I was unprepared for the sticker shock of receiving the first W-2 statement from my academic position after fighting for it for so long. Combined, federal, state, and Social Security taxes on top of

city tax ate up a little over 10k from my annual bottom line. This is what the academic wasteland looks like in practice: salaries that sound respectable on paper but collapse under rent, taxes, utilities, debt, and the endless cost of staying afloat. I was educated and did all the right stuff. I worked my tail off to find a job in academia, only to realize the financial stability I sought was a mirage. I was economically back in the same poverty I fought to escape.

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## Cultivating Dust: Economic Devastation

I landed another position, across another state line, this time with relocation fees and slightly higher pay of \$52k. Initially, in Indiana I found some equilibrium. My apartment was half the price of the rent I paid in Ohio. I lived in an old building near the downtown area, and every day, in rain or snow, I would walk six blocks to work. My apartment had high ceilings, a PTAC-style heater hanging in a carved-out hole with not much blocking the crazy cold wind and located directly behind a small food court outlet. Its location meant my apartment would be intermittently infested with mice. The bathroom had older plain-wood cabinetry and a small shower stall. I put up with all of this for six long years. I paid down my debts, rarely went out, buried myself in work so that each year I earned my small merit pay raise. Even still, I was only closing in on around \$55k after the four-year mark.

The following year, I put in my dossier a year early and, more importantly, crossed the threshold of \$62k. I almost believed that I was finding fertile ground when COVID hit. I pulled myself up, taught courses on overload, continued to make a mark in my field, mentored, and offered support. I pushed myself and eventually saved \$11k after paying off all my prior debt and most of my graduate student loans. I thought I could finally move on from this apartment directly into my first home.

I was smart. I signed up for a community housing program to streamline the process. I made sure I understood the purchasing power within my budget. Initially, I started to search for local homes at the lower end of my purchasing power. Many of these were older homes with various code compliance and structural issues. I changed tactics and started searching for homes at the upper end of my purchasing power. After finally finding one, I experienced many issues on the sellers' side with finalizing the home. Unexpectedly, I ended up having to purchase large appliances (e.g., refrigerator, rangehood, microwave, washer and dryer, dishwasher), which wiped out the initial \$11k nest egg I had managed to painstakingly accumulate.

One major bill before I even moved in, and my economic freedom was snatched again, leaving me staring at another stretch of desolate ground. I had budgeted and consulted with professionals, but I wasn't prepared for the post-COVID hike in basic cost-of-living expenses, utilities, and services. My monthly budget was seriously falling short in this new reality. But I had no choice anymore; I had to make it work. Asking about pay raises or potential half measures between my current rank and the next rank up—which, given the sustained quality of work I had been putting out, I was fast-tracking towards a rank up anyway—led to gentle and softly wrapped no's.

My only choice was to take on more external work. I went back to teaching overload, this time teaching courses in two separate departments while facing increasingly heavy service expectations in my role as a tenured librarian. I then landed external writing-consulting work while moving between my job as an adjunct and a librarian. I applied for many remote part-time gigs, trying to rebuild my savings as the cost of living continued to rise. No matter how much extra work I take on, the problem of lower base pay

means that I am not making headway. Currently, every spare penny is put back into paying off utilities or toward paying down revolving credit debt.

Two more years of receiving barely cost-of-living merit pay, and now post-tenure, I was pulling just over \$65k. Tenure may signal a major career accomplishment, but my wallet was still empty. Last year, our Dean of Business Administration successfully lobbied the campus, and I received the serendipitous pay realignment within the 25th percentile of our system-wide campus institutions, which brought my base salary to a whopping \$68k. Now, four years post-tenure, I'm still making under \$70k. I am submitting my dossier again, this time for full. Driven again by the need for the pay bump that promotion will bring.

My dreams of stability and economic freedom have kept me struggling toward upward mobility and away from financial ruin. The more I struggled, the less I gained, and the more I began to understand my mother and grandmother's post-work tempers. I thought higher education would end my long intimacy with economic precarity. Instead, I found myself in a new wasteland—different in language and dress, but built on the same logic of scarcity, overwork, and deferred life.

Higher Education, if you were a person, I would have nothing but curses for you. You designed a trap out of prestige and intellectual labor. I existed in stasis, waiting to live as I paid down all debts. When I thought I had finally finished, the door sprang shut, leaving me in this field of desolation. Your labor force runs on a never-ending will to keep fighting to live, even as you find new ways to work them to death. I arrived at the Mountain, but looking around at my hard-earned life, I only saw waste.

Higher Education, it was never the romanticized idea of education I desperately chased, but rather the promises of what was waiting on the other side. Promises you never kept.

*Sincerely,  
Gemmicka Piper*

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### About the author

**Dr. Gemmicka Piper** is currently IU Indianapolis's Education and Humanities Librarian. Aside from being a decent academic librarian, Dr. Piper is affiliate faculty in the Africana Studies Program and the School of Education. She provides research and writing support to Urban Education Studies doctoral students. A former McNair Scholar and first-generation college student—and then, as someone who struggled with navigating the hidden curriculum of both graduate school and early-career professionalization—Dr. Piper has done a lot of personal reflection and mentoring based on her hard-earned life lessons.