

# A Shot in the Arm

*Why would a tenure-track professor find himself selling his plasma to make rent: about debt in the academic world.*



Illustration by: [Kjell Reigstad](#)

***Josh Roiland | Longreads | February 2017 | 14 minutes (3,710 words)***

“Who’s sticking today?” the man asked.

He wore tan work boots and rough jeans. He told a friend in the waiting room he had a couple hours off work and thought he’d stop in for some extra cash. The receptionist told him the names of that day’s phlebotomists. He paused. Slic

16-gauge needle into someone's arm is tricky, and the man reconsidered. Instead of signing in, he announced to the room that he'd come back tomorrow and try his luck.

I'd driven 107 miles from my home in Bangor, Maine to the BPL Plasma Center in Lewiston to collect \$50 for having my arm punctured and a liter of my plasma sucked out. The actual donation takes about 35 minutes, but the drive and attendant wait makes for an eight-hour day. I clocked in for that trip five times this summer.

I'm a professor at the University of Maine. My salary is \$52,000, and I am far away from tenure. But like everyone else in that room, I was desperate for money.

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After signing in for the first time, I took a seat in the back bank of connected chairs. The man next to me rocked back and forth.

"Fucking bullshit," he muttered, over and over.

To my right sat a man in pajama pants and a tank top. Two loosies sat in his chair. He raced Asphalt-8 on his smartphone. The clientele was mostly white. There were more men than women, many sporting tattoos in places that raised questions about their foresight and long-term planning. The adjective "grimy" continually popped into my head, perhaps confirmation bias from a [Google Review](#) that said the waiting room "smelled like body odor and was full of people that I wouldn't want to walk into in a dark alley."

BPL has a "no children" policy and several mothers with infants in carriers asked to leave during my visits. That first day one family balked. Three generations came in together, the oldest perhaps in her late 40s. That woman's daughter told that she, or at least her infant, could not stay in the waiting area, per center policy. The grandmother became incensed.

She yelled at the receptionist: "She a hater. I could see it when I walked in. I could smell it like, 'Welcome to BPL.' It's permeating off from you."

All three then got up and left the building.

The BPL Plasma Center is understaffed, and it's hard to tell who is more disgruntled, the technicians or the clients. The donors are often rude, impudent, coarse, and belligerent. The staff are exhausted, distracted, catty, and irritated. One time I made the trip, I heard gossip about the latest employees to quit. One off the job while I sat in the waiting room, leaving a nimbus of f-bombs in its wake. The burnout rate is high, but the number of clients stays constant. Fewer staff serving the same number of clients leads to longer wait times, more impatience, and increased conflicts. Much like donating when you're dehydrated, it's a vicious good cycle.

With a population just under 40,000, Lewiston is the second largest city in Maine. It is home to Bates College, one of three elite private schools in the state. The city is perhaps best known as the place where Muhammad Ali knocked out Sonny Liston to retain his heavyweight crown in 1965. Skeptics say Liston took a phantom punch, and in the **iconic photograph** Ali stands over his dazed opponent, right arm cinched into a flex, yelling at the defeated brawler, "Get up and fight, sucker." This phrase embodied, for better or worse, by the state's current **Dickensian Governor** Paul LePage and Lewiston native, the combative Paul LePage. Lewiston, today, is a poor community, known throughout the state as "**Dirty Lew.**" A former mill town, Lewiston has suffered the same familiar fate as countless other post-industrial communities. The city has tried to bolster its economy via medical, finance, and tech ventures, but the city's fifth largest employer remains Walmart. Into this crucible, BPL essentially offers free money twice a week to those who have the time and inclination to sit and wait to get stuck.

Each time I went to BPL there were at least 25 people in the waiting room; all were returning clients on a first name basis with both each other and the staff. There are squirrel-eyed tweakers, junked-out space cadets, dads in Patriots gear, and hunched old ladies who took communal smoke breaks every 10 minutes. It would have been depressing, except it wasn't. There was a spirit of camaraderie and a complete lack of shame every time I entered the building. If someone heard their name called for either the required physical or the physical prick, the clients helped track them down. Because the wait is tedious and long, no one wants to lose their place in line; so, everyone helps each other out. One poor guy was sitting in a bathroom stall when his name was called and called again. I was in the restroom washing my hands as he frantically yelled, "Just a minute!"

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Time is currency at BPL. First timers march through an especially excruciating series of hurry-up-and-waits. First, you're handed a thick packet of literature everyone pretends to read; then, an explanatory video. After each station, the donor heads back to the waiting room. Eventually your name is called, and maneuver past all the other people waiting for their names to be called, and into a claustrophobic room for Physical Number One. There's a 50-question medical survey that you have to pass to be eligible. The techs have these in memorized, and they simultaneously fill in the correct answer as they recite question, because everybody lies. Am I currently taking any medication? No course not. Do I have asthma? Nope. Next: blood pressure, temperature, weight and a finger prick. Then your arms are inspected for track marks. Later on first visit I sat through Physical Number Two, where a tech looked between toes to make sure, once again, that I was not an injection drug user, and recited me to look in her eyes as I answered another battery of questions about medical history.

Here are my vitals: I have more than \$200,000 in student loans and \$46,000 credit card debt—all accumulated during my B.A., M.A., and Ph.D., and the for a tenure-track job. My annual salary translates to a little more than \$3,000 monthly take-home pay. I pay \$800 a month in rent, \$1,100 in credit card (paying only the monthly minimums), \$350 in student loans, and have \$280 a month car payment. I also pay the usual insurances, utilities, groceries, gas, don't have cable. Or a kitchen table. Or blinds on any of my windows. I've cancelled all magazine and newspaper subscriptions—an actual dilemma for journalism professor. For my first year in Bangor I didn't even have a bed. I slept on a Target air mattress until it lost its breath; then I moved to the couch (which I had purchased on credit), until my back finally demanded I buy a chair (credit, again).

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Midway through every month—when all my bills had cleared and I was left wondering how I'd make the hundred dollars in my checking account last two weeks—I'd ask myself: How did I end up in this mess? And each time I drove my car south on I-95, asking the same question. But incredulity was the wri-

note. A colleague who studies poverty bluntly put it to me: “What did you expect?” she asked me. And she was right.

I decided to get a Ph.D. in American Studies from Saint Louis University, even though I was not offered funding. A gigantic loan got me through year one. Of the 20 or so in my cohort (roughly half of whom were fully-funded), I earned lone “high pass” on our first year exams, which netted me a research assistantship and tuition remission for my second year. But after year two my course work was done, and so was my funding. I adjuncted for the remainder of my Ph.D. and supplemented this meager income with student loans and credit cards. My wife at the time was also in graduate school. Like most academic couples, we made work by living cheaply, working as much as we could (often to the detriment of academic progress), taking out huge sums of student loans, and, of course, credit cards. What started for me as one card with a \$1,000 credit limit during my first year of college bloomed into a dozen cards by the time I reached Maine; my credit limit nearly matched my annual salary.

We eventually married and moved to a new city where she began her Ph.D. and added debt, but not nearly as much as me attending several international conferences to present my work in hopes of boosting my profile for the incoming job market. I self-financed these trips to Lisbon and London and Paris. My department offered a couple hundred bucks a year for graduate travel, but my trips ran into the thousands. Still, in time, it worked. Eight years after starting my Ph.D. and one year after defending my dissertation, I got a visiting position at the University of Notre Dame. It was my third year on the job market.

Notre Dame has an endowment of approximately \$10 billion, making it one of the 10 richest schools in the country. According to data from U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics, the average annual salary for an assistant professor at Notre Dame is \$126,000. That figure, however, is considerably lower in the Humanities, and in my department tenure-track assistants start around \$75,000. Because I was visiting, I was offered \$40,000 per year, which I was able to negotiate up to \$44,000. Nonetheless, the resources available at that gilded Catholic institution were mind-boggling. After my first week, I was given clearance to buy my entire class of 16 students iPad 3s at a cost of nearly \$10,000.

For two years I dedicated myself to the university, hoping this dream job would have converted to tenure-track. I published award-winning articles in both scholarly and popular publications. I earned grants and fellowships. And I taught to such acclaim that the students in my department petitioned university President John Jenkins to keep me. In the end, none of it mattered.

Worse, my devotion to the job hollowed out my marriage.

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The actual plasma donation is somewhat of a letdown after the sideshow performance. Eventually my name would be called, and as I was ushered into a roomful of recliners, a tech would ask, with a twist of uptalk, “Which arm?” I toggled between left and right on alternating visits—I was scared what two shots into the same arm in the same week would do to my arm. I was terrified of bruising or of looking like I had track marks.

Once in the backroom, I would curl into a crescent chair and tense as a technician tightened a blood pressure tourniquet around my arm. I was swabbed with alcohol, then I watched as the phlebotomist unwound a string of tubes that he then coiled, and plugged around and into a centrifuge machine. He applied several scissor-like blue clamps to the tubes to block blood flow after the insertion. My toes clenched every time the needle went in—one particularly anxious day I wore a pair of cheap flip flops by clenching my feet too hard—even though the shot hurt less than the finger prick. He’d then remove the clamps, turn the machine on, and the tourniquet would tighten. I rhythmically squeezed my fist and my legs would run into the centrifuge where it would spin and the plasma would separate from the red blood cells, then drain into a liter tube, before the arm band would release and my blood returned to my arm.

The staff at BPL are not exactly paragons of equanimity and poise. Twice I was stuck by a scatterbrained man named Wilbur who alternated between Three Stooges and Snidely Whiplash impressions as he prepped my arm. Another tech loudly recalled an “Amy Shuler (sic) joke” about wanting to be Jewish so she could “complain more,” which led to his own riff of anti-Semitic jokes that ended with him singing “dreidel, dreidel, dreidel” as he plunged a needle into the crook of my right arm. As the blood began to flow he told a coworker, “See, I must’ve won.”

politically correct school because we were taught that song!"

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As I dedicated myself to Notre Dame, my partner worked through exams, to do dissertation fieldwork. Midway through my second year I learned that visiting position would not become permanent. The separation left me reeling. Fortunately, I was in a position to accept a tenure-track job at the University of Maine. With my partner still doing research, I moved to Bangor by myself in the summer of 2014. In time, our marriage dissolved, and I plunged into a dangerous depression. I faced the sudden reality of all the ways that I had mortgaged my future for some elusive—and illusory—present. In slow, painful time I worried that there are all sorts of debt, and some of it cannot be relieved by a shot in the arm.

When I was an undergraduate contemplating going to graduate school, my professor encouraged me by saying, "If there's anything worth going big-time debt for, it's education." I never questioned her. Moreover, I never questioned myself; I just figured I'd be a professor someday and it would all work out—own lack of foresight and long-term planning. But I'm not alone. According to the **2016 American Household Credit Card Debt study**, U.S. consumers have \$1.28 trillion in credit card debt and \$1.28 trillion in student loan debt. These gigantic figures translate to per-household averages of \$16,000 in credit debt and a median of \$49,000 student loans. **Within academia, this type of debt is not uncommon**: nearly 50 percent of Humanities Ph.D.s graduate with zero debt, 35 percent more than \$30,000—the highest percent in that range across all fields, according to a comprehensive report from the **National Science Foundation's 2014 "Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities."** (Seventeen percent have median salaries of \$70,000). Meanwhile, the median basic salary of Humanities doctorate recipients with "definite commitments" in academe was \$55,000—the lowest rate across all fields.

I am aware of my extraordinary fortune, both professionally and class-wise: a tenure-track job, which is more security than a lot of Ph.D.s. There were more than 54,000 doctoral degrees granted in 2014, an increase of more than 80 percent from 1960. The surfeit of Ph.D.s and the constant reduction of tenure-track jobs leaves many in more dire straits than myself. **According to the National Science Foundation's 2014 "Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities,"** the median basic salary of Humanities doctorate recipients with "definite commitments" in academe was \$55,000—the lowest rate across all fields.

more than 40 percent of 2014 Ph.Ds were not able to secure a tenure-track. Instead, many have to adjunct to get by, and even then, they don't get by. A teaching load does not earn a living wage or garner health insurance, or job security, or the time to work on their scholarship—the only thing that will eventually land them a tenure-track gig.

I'm privileged, yes. As a friend recently reminded me: "Josh, you're not poor." She's right. Anyone making \$52,000 a year is not poor. But I am struggling. Reality for the last two years has been spending the last two weeks of every month in a fever, wondering how I'm going to make my remaining \$100 last two more days. One month I sold all my DVDs. Another time I hocked some records for a few dollars. One particularly depressing morning, I rifled through my recycling to collect a handful of returnables, which I bagged up and brought to the grocery store with my coin jar for a coincident stop at CoinStar. That collective haul netted me \$5.85—enough to do a load of laundry. I've gone grocery shopping with empty bags and six days until payday. I've had popcorn for breakfast on more than one occasion. I've had panic attacks logging into my checking account and seeing it overdrawn. My point is this: tenure-track jobs are not necessarily the financial panacea that we in academia sometimes make them out to be—especially if you have been adjuncting for years before they get a position with more security.

The stress of my financial situation has affected both my mental and physical health. The last two times I gave plasma, I failed the blood pressure test. The first time I was told to just hunch over on my elbows and try again. It worked. The second time, however, the tech made me sit down for 10 minutes. My pressure was 150 over 115. I told her I was a runner, training for two marathons in October. She told me I should get checked out by a doctor before I have a heart attack. Her remark that, surprisingly, did little to calm me down.

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Driving to Lewiston to give plasma is, no doubt, a dramatic gesture. As my English studies colleague chastised me: What alternatives did I explore before relying on this? Some histrionic plan like driving for two hours to give plasma? Did I try to find a part-time job? Surely I could have found something in the summer to earn some side cash? I could have copy-edited. I could have become a test-scorer for Pearson. I could have hauled sugar beets during October harvest. (All are just excuses.)

other academic friends have taken up to boost their income.)

And it's true: I could live more modestly. On the first of the month I go to C and buy a burrito. I may grab drinks with friends a couple times a month. I once in a while I'll buy a book or a record. That's about it. But, yes, I could do some of those indulgences, and if I did I might be able to save \$200 a month. A rate that would eliminate my debt in roughly 100 years. And it would also eliminate any and all vestige of human happiness.

Moreover, I didn't have to go to graduate school or get married or present work at conferences in order to network for job references, and then hopscotch around the Midwest chasing degrees and jobs.

In short, I didn't have to live this life.

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Given my financial constraints, how was it even possible for me to commute back and forth to Lewiston? Don't I use all my payout on gas? Yes and no. One thing I learned when you have no money is how to game the system. For example, I learned that even when credit cards only have a dollar or two of remaining credit available, you can pump a full tank of gas on them. Yes, I know this is irresponsible, especially if I'm getting slammed with overage fees and penalties, but when you're with limited money you narrow your vision to now and worry about those issues next time when the bill comes. So I will pump \$35 worth of gas on two dollars of credit and drive to Lewiston and back twice (428 miles) and make \$100.

I know you never get something for nothing, but when you've got nothing, take something, anything—even at the expense of more nothing down the road.

On my third trip to Lewiston, I walked in on the clients captivated by the C dressage competition. I signed in, took a seat, and joined them. There we were, dozens of us anxious for cash, watching fancy horses mounted by fancy riders dancing around an arena. The room was silent. We were rapt. The irony, at least unspoken, among us; each distracted from the reality of why we were there.

I went two more times.

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Donors receive \$50 for each of their first five donations. After that, your payment is determined by how much you donate, which is determined by body mass. In my case, the \$50 paydays would decrease to \$25 for my first donation of the week, \$30 for my second. I could receive a \$15 bonus for donating five times in a single calendar month, and an additional \$40 for going twice a week for all four weeks in a month.

After five trips to Lewiston the abrupt reality of subsequent diminished returns hit me. I finally slouched toward a more sustainable solution: I met with a bankruptcy lawyer.

With clear eyes it's evident, now, that bankruptcy was the only solution—you can't get out from \$46,000 in credit card debt by hocking your plasma for beer money. But when you're drowning in debt, it's hard to open your eyes, much less see clearly.

I will end up filing for Chapter 13 debt relief, which, for a \$2,000 fee, allows me to make a monthly payment towards a percentage of my overall debt for the next three years. That payment will be about a third as much as the \$1,200/month I paid before. The idea of an extra \$800 of available cash per month—not to mention an end to the weekly panic attacks, to say nothing of no more days spent trundling to and from Lewiston—was obviously attractive.

But, there was an even better option.

Initially, the legal aid suggested I file for Chapter 7 bankruptcy protection. The fee was the same: \$2,000. But after that fee was paid in full, all of my unsecured debt would be wiped away in 60 days—no monthly payments, no more debt. The downside is that my credit report would be slightly worse than with Chapter 13, but the immediate financial relief made it a no-brainer.

"You're a perfect candidate," she said, ticking off all the reasons: single, no children, no property, negligible assets, still young. It sounded too good to be true—but of course it was. After a few more questions, she determined that I wasineligible.

I make too much money.

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