Opinion: At elite universities, a message to avoid a career in K-12 teaching

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Last summer, before my freshman year at Columbia University, I earned $4 an hour working 10-hour days — and it was the best experience of my life. Teaching middle-school students full time with Breakthrough Collaborative was exhausting, yet also rewarding and meaningful. It inspired me to consider a career in K-12 teaching.

But now, after a year in an Ivy League school, I’m worried about whether to keep walking down that road.

The crisis in academia is well established: College students, especially those at top schools, have few incentives to go into K-12 teaching, a profession that direly needs our nation’s best and brightest. Much has been said about how teachers earn too little and need more respect. But what’s being done to change the situation?

Working at a campus calling center this year, I spoke on the phone with hundreds of Columbia alumni, many of whom work in finance, health care, law or media. My elite, expensive school tells me in subtle ways that the “best” students pursue those sorts of fields. No matter how noble it may be to educate tomorrow’s leaders, or how accomplished an individual teacher may be, that person will never earn the social prestige or compensation that professionals do in many other fields.

Alumni who had gone into teaching asked whether I really want to teach or had considered the likely disrespect, insufficient pay, long hours and lack of autonomy that go with the job.

In short, I’m being scared out of teaching by teachers. And it seems reasonable to ask: Who wants to pursue a career in which they won’t be appropriately respected or compensated?

A friend of mine briefly considered becoming a teacher after two fantastic summers with Breakthrough, which works with high-potential, low-income students in urban areas. But as she weighed her options, she focused on her decision to attend — and pay for — an established St. Louis school, Washington University, instead of a cheaper state college. “What would be the point of attending Wash U. instead of Ohio State if I became a teacher?” she asked me. Now she is in law school with a corporate internship for the summer. She envisions working in education policy one day — after she establishes a prestigious, well-paid career.

Elite educations create opportunities but sometimes close them as well. For students conditioned to be ambitious, a teaching career simply isn’t. As William Deresiewicz wrote in a 2008 essay titled “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education,” some are left wondering whether becoming a teacher would “be a waste of my expensive education? Wouldn’t I be squandering the opportunities my parents worked so hard to provide? What will my friends think? How will I
face my classmates at our 20th reunion, when they’re all rich lawyers or important people in New York?” Becoming a schoolteacher can feel like a failure to pursue something more impressive.

I’ve studied consulting companies and law firms on Glassdoor.com, which bills itself as offering an “inside look” at jobs and firms. I’m not sure what else is “suitable” for an Ivy League history major, and it would be easy to be sucked in: These careers are starting to look more appealing than teaching.

What about Teach for America? It’s popular among Ivy League grads, particularly at Columbia (drawing even more of our undergraduates than Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan Chase, according to 2011 data from our career education center).

But 80 percent of its teachers leave after three years, a 2010 analysis found, and many see Teach for America as a temporary stint — whether in social engagement or as a résumé-booster. In some ways, Teach for America is as prestigious and selective as Goldman Sachs — another way to prove oneself, another hoop to jump through. It sounds great to friends and looks good on graduate school or job applications. But ultimately, that means it’s a stepping stone to more prestigious and profitable sectors.

Part of the problem is systemic, and part of it is cultural. It isn’t just about money: Teachers fall too low within our professional hierarchy. They ought to command more respect. In China, where my parents grew up, teachers are addressed as laoshi, or “old master,” a reverent term of dignity and authority. Is it surprising that Asian and Scandinavian countries, where teachers are well-compensated and treated with dignity, show higher levels of student achievement than the United States?

I don’t have all the answers — or a definite sense of my career. But I do know that the change needs to start with us — the laypeople and academics — and the respect we show teachers. It’s also time to banish tired cliches like “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” With simple steps, we can start a discussion on elitism and cultural prejudices and we can examine how to make teaching a more desirable profession.