

## Making the Most of Life After Tenure

Many established scholars see their careers flounder because they fail to stay up-to-date and do not work hard to find productive new uses of their time, warns Michael S. Weisbach.

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In recent years, it has become harder than ever to acquire a tenured position at a major university, since colleges and universities have been replacing tenure-track positions with non-tenure-track ones, and the number of applicants for the positions that do exist increases every year. Consequently, the bar just keeps rising, and in some fields, it has become virtually impossible to find a tenured position. Young faculty members view a tenured job as the holy grail and often work relentlessly to get one. Yet when academics finally do get a tenured job, it too often turns out not to be as enjoyable as they expected, and many end up unhappy.

One of the ironies of academe is that we professors spend a lot of time helping our students plan their careers but often don't put much effort into planning our own. Academics should have a career strategy designed to maximize their value to the colleges and universities for which they work. Most of the time, such a career path will also turn out to be personally rewarding.

Some professors are lucky and have trusted friends who can help them make sensible decisions about how they should allocate their most precious resource: their time. But many don't, and they instead spend their entire careers teaching the same classes and writing similar papers to the ones they wrote as a doctoral student. Once a faculty member achieves tenure, the incentives to be creative and hardworking can be small. Many established scholars see their careers flounder because they fail to stay up-to-date after receiving tenure and do not work hard to find productive new uses of their time.

Underlying this problem are two common mistakes: faculty members do not spend enough time thinking about potential future options they will have in their careers. And even if they do have some ideas about directions for their careers, they do not make sufficient human capital investments to pursue them.

In most major universities, research is the predominant focus of most junior faculty, especially those who end up being awarded tenure. Many faculty members continue to spend most of their time after receiving tenure on their research; they must continually invest in their human capital to stay up-to-date with the newest methods, what has been learned from the literature and what the hot, interesting questions are. But a number of other options can lead to rewarding, productive careers, as well. Such options include textbook writing, academic administration, consulting with the private or government sectors, and becoming a public intellectual. They all can be enjoyable ways to build a career.

Academics are not chosen randomly from the population. They self-select, almost always because they have a love of learning and a fascination with the field they choose to study. They invariably have been excellent students their entire lives and most likely could have had more lucrative opportunities rather than a Ph.D. Academics start off their careers with a desire to spend their lives moving the frontier of knowledge they have chosen to study and to teach others about. They are smart, hardworking people who are happiest when contributing to the organizations for which they work.

Yet it always surprised me how many tenured faculty members become bitter about their position. Being a tenured professor is the dream job of most people who enter graduate school, and those who have achieved it devoted countless hours working toward this goal. How can so many people who get their dream job end up so unhappy with it? Why couldn't they have done something to make them happier at work?

There are a number of underlying sources of this bitterness. Getting tenure, which is a wonderful achievement, also limits one's mobility. Other universities, which usually have a full complement of their own tenured faculty, can be reluctant to make tenure offers to outsiders. Most faculty members who earn tenure at a university end up staying at that institution for the rest of their careers. If the faculty member likes their colleagues and the location works well for the individual and his or her family, that can be a wonderful way to spend their life. But sometimes they don't get along with their colleagues or care for the town. Personality conflicts can worsen over time, and grudges can last many years—especially when two faculty members remain reluctant colleagues for a long time.

Compounding the issue is that relatively young scholars, who are often untenured or recently tenured, tend to conduct the most important research. They can have more up-to-date skill sets, be more on top of recent developments in the field and have stronger incentives to produce impactful scholarship. Older faculty members who do not stay up-to-date in their research or add value in other dimensions can receive bad teaching assignments and fewer resources (summer money, access to research assistants and so on). Having nurtured the younger faculty throughout their careers, the older faculty can end up becoming resentful.

## Taking Control of Your Life

The sad fact is that this situation is entirely preventable. Anyone who is smart enough to get a Ph.D. and earn tenure is capable of being a valuable member of the faculty for their entire career. Academics are almost always bright, hardworking scholars when they complete their degrees and when they earn tenure. And if you are one of those people, you will end up much happier over the long run if you find a niche, continue to do interesting work and contribute to your institution and society throughout your life.

That interesting work could be new research, but it doesn't have to be. Many other kinds of opportunities can become important parts of an academic's professional life, as well, and you should always be thinking of ways to branch out to do new things. Most of us entered academe because we

love to learn ourselves and also to help others learn. We are not happy unless we contribute to the world around us. The antidote to bitterness is often generosity.

Some faculty continue to focus on research throughout their careers—some even become more interested in it as they get older and understand their fields more fully. An important skill to have if one wants to be productive for a long time is the ability to always be forward-looking. To be influential, a research project should be one that people care about years after it is published rather than at the time it is written, so a scholar should try to envision the literature as it will be in the future rather than as it is today. You won't always be right, but by focusing your efforts on areas with potential for growth rather than the "hot topics of today," your work will be more likely to have a lasting impact.

That said, given that research output peaks in most academics' younger years, it is important to have a plan to keep your life interesting even if your research slows down. Some faculty move into administration as they age—an excellent way to contribute to a university. Others get more excited about teaching. Advising students can be particularly rewarding, especially when the advising leads a faculty member to form a lasting bond with a student. Some scholars write textbooks and teach extra courses, sometimes for additional compensation. Some become public intellectuals who contribute to the public discourse in their area of expertise. Consulting is yet another way that an academic can keep life interesting. Establishing yourself as an expert in a particular area that is in high demand by the private sector or the government can lead to a rewarding and profitable business.

If you focus your professional life on any of these—or other—options, you can avoid falling into a rut and not enjoying your professional life. But pursuing them requires an investment of your time and effort. For example, to remain capable of state-of-the-art research, you must work to keep up with the latest techniques and issues that other people care about. Similarly, earning income through extra teaching requires an up-front investment in developing a new and distinct course and marketing it. To become a successful administrator, you need to demonstrate interests in whatever positions come up. Taking a less visible position—such as serving as the assistant head of a small program in your department or as an adviser to a student group—is important as a way to gain experience and pave the way to eventually becoming a department head or dean. And consulting opportunities usually don't appear magically. An academic who wishes to establish a consulting business usually has to develop it over time by investing in specialized knowledge that practitioners are willing to pay for and by cultivating relationships with industry professionals that will allow them to exploit this knowledge.

As a scholar, you should learn early in your career that academic life can be characterized by the expression "You are the CEO of your own life." You will be happiest if you go about your career with a purpose, rather than just drifting toward whatever seems interesting at the time. You should spend time thinking about what your options are likely to be in the future, as well as what investments in human capital you'll need to make to pursue the options you find attractive. The investments that will make your life more interesting in the future are likely to be well worth their cost.

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