

Your 50-Year Career Plan

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Personal experiences on the job market

A few months into my new job at my new university, I grasped the meaning of "long term" in academe.

I was sitting in a room that served as a library for past dissertations in psychology, listening to a student defend his doctoral proposal, when a mental connection clicked. I scanned the walls of blue and black, gold-lettered, bound theses, and there it was: "Perlmutter 1952."

My father's dissertation had faded somewhat, but the typewritten, onionskin pages were still legible, and so was the name of at least one of the signatories, Roger Barker, the great University of Kansas social psychologist. Holding that original manuscript in my hand, with the knowledge that my father, although retired, was still doing research, still publishing, still involved after more than half a century of academic life, focused my thoughts on the importance of the long-term view in our profession.

As academics, from our earliest apprenticeships, we are under considerable pressure to focus on the short term. As doctoral students we hear the clock ticking: The best jobs go to those who begin presenting at conferences and getting published as early as possible.

We are hired on the understanding that we have either finished our dissertations or are about to. Then more fuses start to light: completing grant applications, preparing for class, grading papers, and of course publishing, publishing, publishing -- all aimed at that third-year review and then at tenure evaluation.

Even after tenure, especially at research institutions, the incentive for possessing a limited horizon of thought and action is strong: We focus on producing more (and, we hope, better) publications to secure promotion to full professor, on continued grant applications, on the increasing weight of writing letters of recommendation and evaluations for students and colleagues, and on the many administrative deadlines we must meet.

But if we are granted health, luck, and sanity, the full arc of an academic career is 50 years, not 15 weeks.

As the eminent critic Cyril Connolly argued in his *Enemies of Promise*, the creative professional could avoid early burnout and survive the "marathon of middle age" only if he understood that a career must be paced like the proverbial long-distance race, not a sprint followed by exhaustion.

We have to weigh what it makes sense for us to focus on in the here and now, and what is best deferred. Charles W. Haxthausen, director of the graduate program in the history of art at Williams College, has been mulling the choices he's made. "Because of the demands of the

administrative job I have had for the past 14 years, I did not fulfill two book contracts," he told me. "But as I retire from administration and go into half-time teaching with more time for research, I am now glad that I have waited this long. I think both [books] will be better for having ripened in my head, and enhanced by the papers and articles I have written along the way."

Taking the half-century view of a career allows us to conceptualize our work as both a solitary venture and a group effort. As your career develops and you build alliances and partnerships with colleagues -- and then with graduate students who go on to build their own careers -- you begin to understand how any particular area of research must satisfy the interests of not just yourself but others.

In my own case, as I serve as a reviewer for an increasing number of journal articles within my own area of specialization -- reading articles that apply and misapply, agree and disagree with my own writings -- I have a much better sense of the limitations and opportunities of my research.

I recently reviewed a journal article that applied a theory of mine in a case study. The author did a terrific job of finding that my theory needed tweaking to fit into the particular circumstances of the case. It was a challenge to me and will enliven my future work.

Perhaps, then, taking the long view reveals that research advances when we push, prod, and pull each other.

To think in the long term recognizes that our world is changing, and will change yet more. The words of Bruce Springsteen apply as much to academics today as to the steelworkers of the 1970s: "These jobs are going, boys, and they ain't coming back to your hometown."

The tenured professor, while not quite an endangered species, is becoming more and more a premium position as many colleges and universities rely increasingly on visiting instructors and part-time adjuncts.

At the same time, the "unproductive" tenured professor is the bane of administrators, legislators, and fellow faculty members. Post-tenure reviews are common; some sort of redefinition of tenure toward a mounting bar of post-tenure productivity is likely.

In short, all signs point to promotion and tenure standards rising as academics are required to prove their future potential as much as they document their past achievements. What better way to stay afloat than to think in terms of a lifetime of contributing to the creation and dissemination of knowledge? The best way to be judged well by others is to keep judging ourselves -- over the long term.

Which brings me to the psychology of success.

I believe a majority of people who fail in their academic careers by being denied promotion or tenure, or who earn tenure and then fall into an embarrassing lethargy of underachievement, do

so for psychological reasons. It's not that they physically can't type, read, or gather data. It's that they lose focus, acuity, or their will to succeed. It's the mental game -- as in golf -- that can make or break you. And one facet of that is the danger of too much short-term thinking.

If you are focused only on immediate highs -- getting a journal article accepted for publication or receiving superlative student evaluations that semester-- then like an addict you will eventually experience letdown.

There is inner peace in understanding that one semester is not a referendum on whether you are a good teacher and that one rejection letter is not the final word on your scholarship. As a senior colleague once told me, "I have been rejected by journals many times, but after a while, as I built up my CV, I realized that a rejection was not the end of anything at all." Individual humiliations and failures seem diminished, even trivial, when we lay them out in relation to a life's work.

The 50-year career plan works only if you accept it as a metaphor and not as an actual prognosticative blueprint. In fact, many scholars do not have one long career but many different ones -- a stint as a researcher, another as an administrator, or a string of periods perusing different subjects.

My father, for example, started out studying small groups as an engineer and a social psychologist. Now an emeritus professor of international business management at the University of Pennsylvania, he is writing a book on the future of human civilization. During the half century of his academic adventures he has explored many bodies of knowledge, served in many capacities, and tells me that he "still enjoy[s] confronting the white computer screen page as much as I looked forward to filling the blank paper in the typewriter in 1952."

Likewise, Ralph Izard, a chaired professor of mass communication at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, who is now in his fifth decade of scholarship, commented, "The variety of shifting foci of my work and research gives me something fresh every day. As a result, I'm more productive and happier."

The point is not to expect that for the next 50 years you will do one thing, or many similar things sequentially, but that you benefit from spending 50 years doing many different things. Such is the pursuit of happiness afforded to those scholars who think in the long view.

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