

Career Advice From an Oldish Not-Quite Geezer

By Robert J. Sternberg MAY 26, 2015

Over the course of my career, I've given and received a lot of advice. Much of it was wrong. Sometimes it lacked the perspective that comes with age and experience. So now, as an official "oldster" at 65 (proof: thanks to my age, I just got \$25 off upon joining a botanical society), I offer the following advice, from someone who has thought and written about academic careers for 40 years.

Put your family first. Academics often have trouble doing that. I know I did. Starting out in academe at age 25, I had so many career issues to worry about — getting hired, getting publications, getting grants, getting promoted, getting tenured, getting promoted again, getting (I hoped) awards. The crucial word there is "getting."

Like many academics, I was more concerned about getting than about giving, and giving to my family always seemed as if it could wait another day. The trouble is, the family really can't wait. Intimate relationships can grow rusty, and children just grow up. I'm lucky that my kids — so far! — have turned out well. But I've seen many academics wait too long to attend to their family relationships, only to discover there's not much of their relationships left.

You can't count on your publications and awards to take care of you. You need your family now, and you'll need them more later. More important, they need you now.

Make your health a close second. When you are in your 20s and 30s, you often can get away with not eating well or exercising enough. In those years, your not-so-great health habits may not show themselves in any tangible way. But they will show, probably starting in your 40s, and certainly by your 50s. And then you'll be well on your way to the "I should have taken care of myself sooner" phase.

You can't always control your health. Some people have to stop working when they get older, while others can work in only a limited way. But you can help nudge things in the right direction with a lifetime of eating smart and exercising regularly.

Save as much money as you can. Years ago, I remember my faculty mentor retiring and blurting out to me, "I'm rich!" Chances are, you won't be doing the same. If you think you will, that's rich — and that's about all the richness you are going to get.

There was a fairly prolonged period in which stocks kept an upward trajectory and interest rates were high enough to make bonds an attractive investment. Today the stock market goes up and

down in fits and starts, and interest rates on bonds are at historic lows. The upshot is that many people reach an age at which they might want to retire but can't. Fewer and fewer academics are on defined-benefit plans, while more and more are on defined-contribution plans — if they have any retirement savings at all. The latter usually don't cover the full cost of what today is a much longer and more expensive retirement than was true in the past. So start saving early, and save as much as you can.

If you're in the wrong place, get out. Most academics today have multiple jobs over the course of a career. At some point, there is a pretty good chance that you'll land in a department (or even an entire institution) that feels dysfunctional.

In your 20s and 30s, you might somehow convince yourself that "things will work out." As you get older, you realize that a bad match between an academic and an institution usually stays that way. If you really care about teaching and your university doesn't, the university is probably not going to change. If you care about excellence and the people around you take pride in their mediocrity, chances are that will not change. Rather, they will perceive you as just a grand annoyance, or as a threat. So if you don't fit, start looking before you're told to start looking.

Stay away from jerks. Academe, like any other profession, attracts its fair share of creeps and dirtbags. You can waste a lot of time trying to figure out how to deal with them. The reason people are still trying to figure that out is because no one ever quite has.

The best thing you can do is to stay away from them, to the extent possible. You've got better things to do. The time you spend trying to deal with them, or avenge yourself against them, is time lost to far more productive endeavors.

If you're not having fun, something's wrong. Virtually no one goes into academe because the pay is so fantastic or the fringe benefits so marvelous. Academics just don't get Wall Street-type bonuses.

Rather, most of us go into academe because of intellectual passion for a subject or for teaching. It's a place where we can enjoy our work and make a decent living doing it. (Yes, that's true mainly for those on the tenure track, and yes, those positions are tougher to come by.) If you're not having fun, then ask yourself: Why not? What can you do to make the job more enjoyable? Do you need a new course to teach, a new area of research, a new type of student, a new avenue of community outreach? And if you can't make your work fun, consider the possibility that you are in the wrong job.

Be true to yourself. Looking back, I find it hard to believe how much pressure I experienced to be someone I'm not — to do research in "hot" areas that didn't actually interest me, to write grants I didn't really want just to get the money, to give students grades they hadn't actually

earned, to serve on committees to which I had nothing substantive to contribute. Well, you get the picture.

Once you start to sell out your integrity as a professional and even as a person, the slope becomes slippery. In the short run, you sometimes will pay for being true to yourself. In the long run, you will be glad you maintained your integrity. When you look back from age 65, you will only take pride in having lived up to your own expectations.

Don't tie up too much of your self-esteem in someone else's evaluation of your work. Academe is not for the thin-skinned. In the course of a career, you get lots of flak thrown at you. If your self-esteem depends on other people's evaluations of how good you are, you're very likely going to spend a lot of time feeling badly about yourself.

Moreover, sometimes you will be judged by people whose work is inferior to your own. Get used to it.

But don't let others, whose opinions often are not worth much, be the deciding factor in your self-assessment. Listen to critics but, in the end, find your value from inside yourself. And if you can't value yourself from within, you never will find value from without. Because there will always be one more person to please, one more stone left unturned.

Take stock periodically. You will probably reach a point in your life when you forget why you're doing what you're doing. You neglect to reflect on that as the years go by and suddenly realize that whatever your original purpose was has long since been lost.

You can maintain that sense of purpose — or recover it — but only if you periodically ask yourself whether you still have it and, if not, what you are going to do about that.

Keep asking yourself what you want to be doing in five years, or 10. When I was starting out, I had an image of a linear career progression. My career has ended up, as is the case for most people, being very nonlinear. I moved up the faculty ranks but also got involved in professional organizations and in university administration. Neither of those things was part of my original career plan. On the contrary, at age 30, if anyone had told me that someday I would be doing administration, I might have thought they were nuts.

But people's interests change over time, and a passion you feel during one stage of your career may turn into a drag in the next. Keep asking: Where is my career going? What goals do I want to reach?

Have a hobby. See the world. Or both. Academic work can be all-consuming. What with teaching, research, and service, there is always something, and usually too much, to do. It's easy to lose perspective and let your career consume more and more of your personal life.

That's why it's important to have a hobby. From time to time, you need to get away from your job, but you also need to have something to get away to. Having an outlet actually will make you a better academic, because after you take a break, you will be able to return to your work refreshed instead of burned out. And you will have something to do when you retire.

The same goes for travel. Many academics think of seeing the world as something they'll do after retirement. But a lot can happen between then and now. If you want to see the world, don't wait until "someday." You may even find that the perspectives you gain from observing other cultures will help you in your teaching, research, and service.

Help others. Academics can be quite selfish. Of course, *you're* not. And it's true, if you don't look out for yourself, you may find that no one else is looking out for you, either. But if that's pretty much all you're doing, you're in trouble. At the end of your career, you are likely to take the most pride in how you helped others, not in what you did to advance yourself. And others are likely to look at you the same way: Were you interested only in No. 1? Or did you have time to aid friends, family, and colleagues?

Take some risks. In your 60s and 70s, your biggest regrets are likely to be not about something you did, but about all the things you didn't do, the opportunities you passed up. Faced with a "sensible" career risk, go for it. Grow from it. Some risks will fail. Some of mine certainly have. But you'll be a wiser and better person for those failures, rather than someone who got stuck in a small world and was afraid to leave it.

Your most important legacy might not be your research. I was super-professionally oriented in my earlier days. I never thought I'd be 65 and saying that the most positive and meaningful difference I've made is through parenting my (five) children. I always thought that my research would be my legacy.

But when I ask my students, none of them recognize the names of my famous advisers. Their work continues to matter, but often people have forgotten who did it. I hope my work continues to make a difference, in the sense that it gives way to the contributions of the future. Our students and their students are not here to perpetuate our ideas, but rather to incorporate — often without attribution — our ideas into the ideas of tomorrow.

That's it. I hope that by the time you reach my age, you'll feel that your life and career have made the kind of difference you had hoped to make. Me? I'm not there yet, which is why I'm still trying — for example, by writing this article.

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