



Careening through a Career: Or a Vagabond Geographer

Craig E. Colten*

Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, 70803 USA

**Corresponding author: Phone: (225) 578-6180; Email: ccolten@lsu.edu*

I've never met anyone else with quite the same career trajectory as mine. The fact that I have received two academic promotions in the course of my career, but I have never been an assistant professor is unusual. One could attribute that to stupidity (why would I endure repeating the associate to full process twice), but I prefer to think of it as ingenious (more on that later). How I managed to reach the rank of Professor, without ever enduring the right of passage of Assistant Professor is quite simple. I couldn't get an academic job when I completed my degree in 1984 – the last real low point in the academic market before the before the Big Recession in this century.

With grim prospects in academe, my first choice of employment, I got lucky and accepted a soft-money research position with the State of Illinois that I expected to hold me over until the job market improved. To my pleasant surprise, the job was quite exciting, and it evolved into a hard-money research position, at least until, after eight years on the job, the budget axe terminated that phase of my career. I managed to cobble together grant funding to cover my salary for a couple of years as I turned my eye back toward the academy. Maybe its me and not the job market, but I did not find it easy to jump back into an assistant professor position with nearly 10 years post-Ph.D. experience.

In the course of my public-sector work, I had made some contacts in the private sector and after the axe fell, I learned an acquaintance was looking for someone to manage a Washington, DC-area office for her small consulting firm. We exchange letters and I went out for an interview.

And quite quickly, I found myself working in the nation's capital – doing comparable work to my state job, but in a private-sector setting. The big differences were that I had to write many more proposals, supervised more field researchers scattered across the country, and spent more time managing operations than cogitating on the big questions. Also, in the business world, it is not good policy to say "no." So, you grasp at every contract that comes your way and ramp up to meet the client's needs. This means less time for training staff unlike a graduate program. It also taught me how to maintain a positive appearance, even when feeling a bit overwhelmed.

While I was in DC, the good folks at Texas State University suggested that I should consider applying for one of the positions that had been created for the new Ph.D. program there. I did and when offered the position, finally, I was able to land in the academy – as an associate professor. Thus, I spent about twelve years to reach that plateau, but never held the entry level title. I went up for promotion a couple of years after arriving in San Marcos, and my colleagues rewarded me with a new title. However, when I relocated to LSU, the university offered me a position at the associate level, with tenure. So I took a demotion, with security, and successfully went through the promotion rigamarole during my second year in Baton Rouge. The ingenious part of my story is that I was able to get a salary bump for that promotion at both universities. This a horribly long-winded way of saying that I've been through the promotion process as many times as most of

my colleagues of comparable rank, only I followed a different sequence

A few nuggets of wisdom can be found in this story that, I hope, can help guide emerging scholars through the tribulations of the T&P process. First, it is so important to take advantage of promising opportunities. By taking a soft money job, I took a giant leap of faith, as did my intrepid wife, but the rewards were many. My position was in a Quaternary research center. I was surrounded by a group of young energetic archaeologists, palaeontologists, and palynologists. Each research group was headed by a Ph.D. with a number of research assistants. So, it was much like a graduate department, without classes. Our primary purpose was research and it turned out to be an exciting atmosphere to work in. While this was a grand adventure, with highly satisfying work, I did miss teaching.

In addition, by taking that position which came with a specific research project – which did not neatly match my dissertation – I was able to launch into a new research agenda. In the long run, it gave me an entirely new topic from my dissertation work. And this position enabled me to develop networks that I would not have made in a university setting. Ultimately, these contacts enabled me to move seamlessly into the private sector when state government downsized.

And that leads to the second lesson: build networks. Build them in graduate school, on your campus, in the profession, and in allied professions. A small California consulting company opened the door for my move to the private sector. I don't think they ran an advertisement for the position and it certainly was not a position I would have learned about through my immediate colleagues. I had come to know the principal through my involvement with professional associations and learned about the position by in a chance conversation at a conference. My government work was similar to the company's core business, and with a decade of relevant experience I was in a good position to compete for a managerial position. Contacts paid off again in my next career move as well. Because I had stayed active in professional associations while working for government and in the private sector, my eventual colleagues at Texas State knew of me and my work. So my two big professional moves came as a result of professional contacts – not mentors.

I was fortunate that my government job supported professional involvement, and I continued to attend AAG and other professional meeting. I

reported on my on my work, served on committees, and maintained good contacts with the scholarly community. I also taught and gave guest lectures at nearby universities to keep a finger in the academic pie. A couple of schools signed me up as adjunct and I even served on thesis committees. And, perhaps most importantly, while outside the academy, I published in scholarly outlets. This, as much as anything enabled me to move back to a university position. So I worked both sides of the fence – the academic and the public/private research world.

By the time I sat down at my desk in my first full-time professorial position, I had considerable experience, but not much in the internal politics of promotion and tenure. I was horribly naive. Nonetheless, I went around with my C.V. in hand and asked colleagues what I needed to add to my record to earn promotion and tenure. This was an extremely illuminating experience and helped me shape my C.V. so that all my non-university experience was presented in a way that matched up with university expectations. After working on a museum exhibit project for 4 years, and garnering substantial grant and foundation support, I wanted that huge effort to receive due consideration. To help explain the underlying effort and value of such a project, I asked a highly respected colleague with museum experience to write a letter equating the effort behind a museum exhibit with the effort behind a journal article in order to bolster that part of my track record. As a consultant I had written many expert witness reports, but they were confidential, and I learned my colleagues would not put much stock in them in terms of promotion. So, I mined these reports for publicly available content and prepared a series of publications for academic journals, without betraying any confidentiality agreements. In addition, I think I scored a few points when I included a decision written by Federal District Judge's that cited one of my academic publications – drawing a connection between my applied and academic work. So my advice to those with experience outside the academy is to present your accomplishments in ways that are meaningful to your colleagues.

Shortly after arriving at LSU, I was selected as department chair and soon discovered that I did not have great insight to share with my assistant professor colleagues wanting advice on how to prepare for promotion. Fortunately, my predecessor kept the dossier of a recent successful promotion case in the office, and I would share this with faculty as a guide to preparing their own files. It might be worthwhile for those of you on the verge of the T&P process, to ask

recently promoted colleagues if you could peruse their file. This can be a valuable insight, and most people are eager to show off their accomplishments.

I have two other brief, but hugely important tips. A healthy department, that is collegial and supportive of its pre-tenured faculty, commonly has a culture of respect. In a discipline with a great range of topical and methodological specialities, be sure to show respect for the type of geography done by your peers – or in the case of mixed department – the type of scholarship done by your peers. To trash quantitative methods or to dismiss critical social theory is not an effective path toward departmental collegiality. By attending guest lectures given by visitors using methods other than your own demonstrates you are respectful of that approach, even if you do not use it. While you may not find the methods your colleagues use appealing, but that does not mean you can't respect it.

Finally, it is so very important to show your face around the department. Unlike when I was in graduate school, many of my colleagues have “writing offices” at home where they do much of their serious work. Nonetheless, it is important to be around the department. Since many departments are no longer neatly clustered in one convenient wing of a building, you may have to make an effort to get that face time: have coffee or lunch with colleagues, attend department functions, and by all means attend faculty meetings. Make sure your colleagues get to know you. I'd much rather be denied tenure or promotion because my colleagues made a clear decision that they didn't want me around, than that they didn't know who I was after six years in a department.

As an academic vagabond, I've had some remarkable experiences in government, the private sector, and in the academy. I have had great opportunities and received tremendous satisfaction in each. In the nearly thirty years since I graduated, the one bit of advice I give my graduate students is “do good work.” That as much as anything can build the academic track record, the collegial foundation, and professional networks for success.