



## A Forthright Reflection

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“Think hard about it.”

Bob Bednarz approached the panel as the participants were preparing to move to the next session, and asked Sarah Bednarz and me, “Why didn’t you tell them not to do it at all?” I responded by saying I chickened out and showed him the phrase above that I had written in the notes adorning my conference program.

Fortunately, the lack of forthrightness on the panel can be rectified in this essay. When considering a career in academia, any responsible faculty advisor or faculty mentor for the newly hired should be telling you something about their take on the future of academia. The academia is facing severe challenges. Some will reconfigure the university, as many know it. There are opportunities and challenges for the assertive student seeking a career in academia, but careful thought on your decision is necessary.

The beginning of my geography career should echo many readers’ experience. I started as a Physics and Astronomy major only to have Calculus II become an insurmountable barrier. I had ignored my father’s advice about studying something related to international studies and the environment when picking a major. Additionally, I ignored the fact that in my first year of undergraduate work, my geography and geology courses were my favorites to study for and engaged me. Changing majors in my sophomore year, I went on to earn BA and MA degrees in geography from the University of Kentucky. Subsequently, I began a new International Studies doctoral program at Old

Dominion University that was not a good fit in terms of offerings and research topics. Frankly, I found myself missing the intellectual energy of geography. Florida State admitted me to their new doctoral program in geography in 1995. Since middle school, I had wanted to earn a doctorate so that I could be an astronaut, and despite a change in discipline, earning a doctorate was still my goal.

My first academic appointment was at the Florida A&M University School of Business and Industry, during the last two years of my doctoral work (2001-2003.) I held back-to-back visiting assistant professor posts, a decision that while beneficial to me financially, extended my doctoral program.

My next post was at the University of Oklahoma, a two and a half year renewable term appointment in the Department of Geography (now Geography and Environmental Sustainability, DGES) in January of 2005. This was renewed for five years and was subsequently converted to a tenure-track post. The OU post has been focused on teaching and advising, comprising eighty percent of my efforts. I earned tenure and promotion in the summer of 2013. Because my post was teaching and service focused, I am dealing with how to reboot a career into a more typical research trajectory expected for most tenured faculty at my university. It is a unique opportunity, one that I am grateful to my colleagues to have.

Both of my academic appointments emphasized teaching and advising responsibilities and thanks to being the sole instructor of classes throughout my doctoral program (a double-edged

sword at best), I believed I was prepared. What did surprise me was the amount of extra work that a graduate student rarely sees unless teaching multiple classes on their own, or running discussions sections. The amount of time and energy that advising took at Florida A&M and Oklahoma were the biggest surprises. As a former resident advisor and assistant hall director, I enjoyed working with students but it drains a person. Doing faculty advising well means a commitment to learning degrees, university regulations, the ins and outs of various processes on campus and transforming yourself into a resource for students, something that is not usually formally recognized for the amount of work it takes to do it well.

Fortunately, I did find I understood the demands of an academic career, even though graduate life did not communicate the totality of what I was taking on. The biggest challenge was keeping my job. Clearly that sounds melodramatic but when the first four contracts I signed were for non-tenure track posts, with clear end-dates, that become the goal. You have to learn what is important in each position, what the department, college and university truly values, and how to deliver well enough to make it painful for a department and university to release you. In my specific case, the number of undergraduate majors I advised continued to grow slowly, until the introduction of an Environmental Sustainability degree. After the new degrees were introduced, DGES experienced explosive growth. How does one person adequately recruit, serve, and provide guidance to 180-plus majors, and still try to maintain quality teaching and the semblance of a research program? That was the challenge, one that has not really ebbed at this stage of my career.

For most professors in my department the expectation is to produce two articles per year on average, pursue research grants, and demonstrate solid teaching (or improvement over the tenure-track period) and service. My own post was weighted toward service and teaching, but some research effort was expected. Recently, DGES produced a set of standards that reflect flexible, yet consistent evaluation criteria. Within research, there are multiple ways for a professor to earn points in a category. For example, it is possible to publish four articles and receive similar scores to those who applied for multiple grants and succeeded with one or two. Teaching and service categories also reflect the fact that faculty have different strengths and can earn credit in diverse ways. Weightings can be varied by the nature of the

appointment and tenure-track faculty can concentrate efforts with better understanding of the process.

The essay is supposed to end on advice from the survivors of the tenure and promotion process. I want to return to the first words of this essay, "Think hard about it." The changes in academia are coming very quickly, so fast that from the time you begin your graduate program to the time you complete your doctorate, or from the time you accept that first tenure-track post to the time you submit the dossier, the nature of what we do will likely have changed due to shifts in the political economy of the higher education-industrial complex (my apologies of President Eisenhower).

For all stages of career paths, the expectations of research productivity are greater thanks to perceived efficiencies facilitated by information technologies. Our ability to teach more courses online, again with the perceived efficiency of the online environment, will only ratchet up expectations and force you to compromise ideals unless you are very diligent in understanding new learning platforms and are innovative in their application to your courses. Even advising models that emphasize efficiency over connection and quality interaction are increasingly technology driven. This is unfair to graduate students and only marginally better for assistant professors being asked to do it all by administrators who had lower bars to clear for tenure.

However, this is a space for advice. Graduate students need to seriously pursue grants and mentors need to invest the time in developing these skills. My one regret during my graduate program was that I never wrote a NSF grant proposal. This is something my advisor noted as well, but he built his career on voluminous publications, not funded research. It was a model I emulated as well. My own funding attempts were limited to a Fulbright proposal that I did land. During my time at Florida A&M, I was part of a team that landed a private company's education grant for course development. If your university offers grant-writing workshops, attend and incorporate these lessons in your own work so you can demonstrate funding potential.

If there are programs aimed at preparing future faculty, attend these as well. Some graduate schools offer shadowing programs and guest lecture opportunities. If these do not exist at your program, ask why not. To support your job seeking efforts, present at conferences, network, and publish during your doctoral program, in-line with your subdiscipline's norms (solo-authored or multiple-

authored works.) Applicants lacking publications rarely land campus interviews.

For new assistant professors, tenure-track and non-tenure track, get involved, but smartly. While many decry heavy service loads for assistant professors, with departments sheltering them (in theory), I would encourage assistant professors and their mentors and chairs to find service opportunities that support a person's strengths and role within the department. Placing the young, superstar researcher on university teaching committees makes little sense, but placement on a research focused committee can pay off for the department. Limit the service, but think strategically about the types of service that showcases a person's talents and interests to the campus and helps build their local network.

Additionally, seek out mentorship outside your home department, people that can help you situate your efforts into the larger context and provide you information about resources available that may not be well known within your department, particularly if the unit is top-heavy with senior associate and full professors. This also applies to mentors off the campus within your subdisciplines, as they will be able to suggest potential dossier reviewers that will be fair in their assessments.

Another issue is to pay attention to your teaching in a way that is congruent with your institution's valuation. If you are at a comprehensive university where teaching comprises the vast majority of your effort, attend workshops and even organize AAG sessions that engage with teaching. This produces a documented effort to improve your teaching. However, balance this with the true valuation of teaching. No one is expected to be perfect in the classroom upon arriving to campus, but establishing a record of improving evaluations, efforts to improve, and even attempts at innovations that impacted student evaluations demonstrate a commitment.

Finally, let me return to the first line of this essay. At a time when what we do is increasingly devalued in the shifting sands of our political economic situation, it is incumbent on you to be sure you really want to participate in a market that holds absolutely no guarantees for doctorate holders in geography. It will be difficult, and only those who are willing to work hard at it, learn to play the game by your university's rules, and continually adapt will thrive, land jobs, and progress to tenure. Think hard about it. I do not regret my decisions, but as with all choices, there are costs.