Forget This: Choosing to Leave Academia after Tenure

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I had never been served a "DFW" notice, but my colleague in the next office had.[1] My student evaluations were above average, but the new system of merit pay would inevitably rely heavily on them. To deal with our university's budget crisis, fall enrollment had increased 19.1% from 2008 to 2013, meaning a marked drop in student ability and, more importantly, the University's commitment to academic standards.[2] And then there was the pandemic of plagiarism no one seemed to notice. The kindly woman in charge of the Office of Student Conduct told me that only 100 out of 13,000 students were reported for plagiarism every semester. Just across the soybean fields in Lafayette, the new president of Purdue publicly voiced his desire to end tenure.

These themes will be returned to below, and are relevant to my decision to "leave academia"—in other words, my job as an associate professor of political science—soon after receiving tenure and being the recipient of my University's most prestigious research award. Although in one sense I "left academia," I am now more involved in my field than ever before. I now support myself as an independent consultant, mostly by providing data to political scientists and the public, conducting data analysis and reports for both peer-reviewed publication and public consumption, and through political consulting.

This piece first discusses my decision to leave academia, and discusses what I am doing now in a second section. I emphasize the aspects of my decision I believe will be most useful for others while choosing their own careers. An online supplement provides more details.

I should note three things before I proceed. First, I do not wish to single out my former institution for negative treatment, nor does it need to be. Second, it is understood that my experience as a professor differs from the experience of many, but I offer it for others to consider. Third, it should be noted that I was very successful as a professor and left on good terms, which implies my perspective cannot be written off as an apology.[3]

LIFE AT A LARGE STATE UNIVERSITY

If you are a graduate student who does not go to one of the top 12 programs in political science, your odds of getting a position at a "research one" school are greatly reduced (see Masuoka, Grofman and Feld 2007). If you want to be a professor, your most likely options are teaching at a liberal arts college or at a large state school where you teach at least six classes a year. What I have to say applies to the latter.

It is important to me that I promote "the public good" in my job, a preference many share. I do not mind working long hours for low pay, as long as I am making the world a better place. But changes in higher education make promoting the public good as a professor difficult. Administrators at large state schools respond to a system of perverse incentives. At worst, success is measured by the number of enrolled students, at best by the number of degrees granted, and never based on the skills and competencies students acquire. Although an oversimplification, professors' commitment to professional norms regarding academic standards hold these drives in check.

A good case can be made that higher education has become more hierarchical over time (Slaughter and Taylor 2016). Since the balance of power has swung firmly in the direction of administrators, pressures have mounted for faculty to relax academic standards. Devices such as "DFW" rates, turning a blind eye to plagiarism, and overreliance on student evaluations are aspects of this shift. Nothing hurts "evals" like conflict, and if everything is going smoothly, with no upsetting bad grades or demanding assignments, the odds of conflict go down.[4]

To deal with the lack of motivation and preparedness of my students, I emphasized short and frequent homework assignments. But if students do not complete them, penalizing them appropriately results in—drum roll—very high "DFW" rates, and a discussion with your chair about what you did "wrong" in the class. The threat of low grades loses its efficacy when it is not credible. Comparisons with other professors' online grade distributions indicated I was a fairly hard grader, but I still relaxed academic standards to an unwarranted degree.[5] A race to the bottom in grades is fueled by both the threat of exit, and the threat of students re-allocating effort to easier classes. These incentives are abetted by the allocation of resources to departments on the basis of total majors.[6]

As executive officer and president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and also as a grievance advisor, I heard a lot about the bitter conflicts between chairs and faculty. In a brief time period, two departments saw exoduses of five junior faculty each, because of badly behaving chairs who were fully backed by their deans. Aside from these, I observed enough disputes to indicate that a substantial proportion of professors were having them. Many of these disputes were not about what chairs perceived to be inappropriate behavior, but were instead about discouraging unpopular research topics, disagreements about pedagogy, or plagiarism issues. The primary determinant of job satisfaction is how well one gets along with one's immediate supervisor (Higgens and Durbury 1999).

When considering whether you want to pursue being a professor, a profession with highly reduced mobility, consider the fact that there is a small but non-trivial chance you will be involved in a lengthy and upsetting dispute—let's just call it 10%.

Another problem with being a professor is the "salary trap." If your inclination is to take your job seriously and work long hours, your hourly pay may become uncomfortably small. In my case, I calculate from a work log that in my eighth year as a professor, my hourly wage was $20.74. Although my salary was unusually low compared to similar institutions, many professors are faced with low hourly wages because of long hours and mediocre salaries.

The question "what specific activities will I be engaged in and for how many hours a week in a particular profession?" is an important and perhaps little appreciated one that one should pose while considering a career. "Loving" a field of study is not a good reason to pick a career. The online supplement provides details of how I spent my time as a professor. Department meetings, email correspondence with students, and service activities took up a lot of time. Some service activities were useful (i.e., admissions, advising), while others were of dubious value (i.e., writing a student retention plan). The bottom line is that people who do not control budgets have no real policy making power, and so decisions about how to direct resources are primarily made by administrators. This limits the feelings of efficacy one can derive from service work.

over three-fourths of my working hours since leaving academia on activities that are not income generating in an immediate sense, although this has had to change in the last few months.

My primary career goal is to be successful within the subfield of state politics through solid and innovative research and to advance my subfield's progress. Although I have only been a consultant for one year, my business plan for achieving these objectives is as follows.

1) Create good will and demonstrate my competencies with data collection by continuing to make datasets publicly available.
2) Post reports pertaining to current events to develop a reputation for rigorous and unbiased analysis. A recent example of this is my analysis of issues pertaining to the Supreme Court case *Evenwel v Abbott*, heard on December 8, 2015.
3) Publish articles in peer-reviewed journals.
4) Obtain contracts and grants for data collection. Most of my contract work has involved collecting data that is directly related to my own scholarship goals. For example, I collect data for my own research, and then sell it to other scholars.
5) Obtain jobs as an expert witness in election law proceedings.

All of these five activities build off each other in obvious ways. The first three generate publicity that lead to contracts, grants, and work in election law proceedings, which in turn yield income which can be used to buy time, which can then be used

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Another problem I had as a professor was that I generally become very involved in whatever I am doing. As a result, I would over-prepare for class, and spend too much time giving feedback to students on papers, etc. This left little time for research, which I would make up for over the summers, and which left far less time for even longer term investments—learning new skills. I would read about new methodologies and see I was being left behind. If you are not the type of person who can set aside at least a few hours every week for things that are not of immediate concern, this is something else to consider about being a professor.

Given my misgivings about institutional support for "doing the right thing," low salary and not having enough time to devote to my research objectives, it is easy to understand why I left. If you, like me, believe that higher education is driven by incentives that make promoting the public good difficult, it may not be the calling for you. The potential for conflict, low pay, and a hardnosed assessment of how you'll probably be spending your time as a professor are other things to consider.

CONSULTING

Since leaving my job as a professor a year and a half ago, I have made my money through consulting. I have chosen to spend

to collect more data and publish more articles. Part of this strategy builds on the reputation I've already acquired of making large datasets publicly available. New norms for transparency are working in my favor, as I have a reputation for documenting my work and being careful generally. Becoming a consultant after attaining tenure also helps establish one's credibility.

The advantage of hiring a consultant is that they have a comparative advantage over the people in one's institution for a specialized task. Given my long experience and competency with data collection, I can provide data to an academic for less cost than having a graduate student do it, and at the same time, deliver a higher quality product. Because I can do such tasks efficiently, my hourly wage is far higher than the student I replace. Since leaving academia, I have been able to learn new skills, further increasing my efficiency, namely by automating tasks through writing code.

The necessity of having specific methodological skills (R, Python, etc.) is now in vogue, which is as it should be. But from what I've observed, methodological skills interact with extensive substantive knowledge to yield a far more effective skillset. In the recent past I have seen several major mistakes committed in methodologically advanced studies that resulted from shortfalls in basic factual knowledge of a

subject area. Beyond that, knowledge of problems with assessing causality in a particular area are essential (i.e., endogeneity issues, what variables must be controlled for, etc.). Last, "knowing R" (or Python, etc.) is important, but fully integrating this knowledge into a substantive area by having an archive of pre-written code and knowledge of combinations of commands that are particularly effective in a substantive area is very helpful.

2. Fall enrollment has increased another 9.1% between 2013 and 2015.
3. The fact I left on good terms can be verified by the fact that I am still formally affiliated with the university where I was a professor as an Educational Affiliate.
4. Butcher et al (2014) took advantage of an exogenous shock at Wellesley College, and found that lower grades do result in lower student evaluations. Carrell and West (2010) took advantage of random assignment of students to required courses later in a sequence. They found that the type of teaching that results in higher student evaluations in a course is not related to better

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Self-development, creating good will by promoting the public good, working independently at a fast pace on interesting projects….what's there not to like? The particular collection of preferences and opportunities that have led me from professor to consultant may be unusual, and probably do not apply to many. The lack of predictable income has been a problem but I'm guided by the notion that I will be provided for if I do good work. There are other aspects of my lifestyle that would make my career choice impossible for others, such as uncommon frugality and not having children. But I present my experiences and observations for those who are considering what to do with their political science PhDs.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/S1049096516000883. ■

NOTES

1. This is when the percentage of students with Ds, Fs and who withdraw from a class, is "too high."

student performance in later courses, and in fact students "appear…to punish deep learning" (page 429).
5. My former institution no longer posts grade distributions.
6. Butcher et al (2014) also found substantial declines in majors for departments that reduced their grades the most.

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