

Reflection: Late Entry into the Academic Workforce

Malathi Raghavan*
Purdue University

How late is too late to begin an academic career? How often is this question even being asked? To whom does it matter?

My personal quest

I was well into my 40s when I had to make a decision to leave a one-of-a-kind position in my field to return to academia. I was never too far away from the academic world in the first place, but due to a combination of life events and personal responsibilities, I never whole-heartedly allowed myself to aim for a tenure-track (TT) position. I was content to be a Research Academic staff member at a large, research-intensive university and then to work in the area of Accreditation and Certification in a professional, not-for-profit environment. A majority of my working years until now have been filled with concepts, concerns, and strategies about health professional education. So without giving it much serious thought, tenure, the holy grail of academic lifestyle, had not been on my list of career goals for several years.

But then an academic opportunity arose that appeared to be a perfect fit for me. A new position in outcomes assessment, a relatively new area of work in veterinary medicine, was created at Purdue, where I earned my Ph.D. It was as if I had been accumulating the skills for just such a position for the previous 10 years of my career. It would not be for a TT position, but a clinical-track (CT) position, a first of its kind within the framework of university faculty responsibilities. In the health sciences, there has been an increasing trend of non-TT faculty positions and so the track being clinical did not faze me. I would not come to fully comprehend until later, the nuanced differences between TT and CT positions, but during decision time, I was only focused on the fact that it was a university faculty opportunity. I began to seriously consider starting my work life all over again. Only the question of how late is too late weighed heavily on my mind.

I have known a handful of people leaving academia as a mid-career move (and thereby leaving their hard-earned tenure behind). But the only ones I knew who *entered* academia in their 40s were those who started a Ph.D. later in life (i.e., a mature or returning graduate student). Typically, they completed their Ph.D. within about three years, helped by their real-world work experience (and steely self-discipline), and were well-positioned internal candidates in the days when budgets weren't tight. They had no gap years between their Ph.D. and their faculty position. But how many did I know who, as sole providers for their families, leave distinct positions in their fields to re-enter academia? None personally. What did I remember of academic demands? Was I ready for yet another learning curve? What uncertainties would I

* **Corresponding Author:** Malathi Raghavan, College of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University, 625 Harrison Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907. Email: raghavm@purdue.edu.

Recommended Citation: Raghavan, Malathi. 2019. "Reflection: Late Entry into the Academic Workforce." *Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and ADVANCE Working Paper Series* 1(2):26-31.

possibly be facing? Not knowing who I could turn to for advice, I did then what I have learned to do in times of doubt: put my life in the context of those who came before me, even if I knew them only as public figures. Or as hidden stories behind data points.

And so I googled. I hit PubMed. I searched the archives of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. All in the hopes of acquainting myself with late-entry academics and understanding their unique challenges and career longevities and trajectories. I wasn't sure what I was expecting to find but I was surely disappointed to find few systematic studies on older faculty aspirants, applicants and entrants. No reports on successful proportions or survival rates, as far as I could tell. Either there were strong but isolated voices raising the possibility of ageism in academic hiring (McKee 2014; Cowen 2015) or there were successful stories, positive 'case-studies' of those who had made it, presumably, despite some odds (Gregoire 2016). I was grateful for both, but neither helped me with my situation. The alleged discrimination against older applicants for TT positions did not apply to me (even if only because I had internalized the message and removed myself from TT applicant pools, effectively not contributing to data that could help systematically answer this concern at a population level). Nor had I done anything that gave me permission to compare myself with those who were superstars in their field. I was merely looking to understand the survival curves of the average and above average older entrants beginning their academic careers relative to the younger freshly-minted Ph.D.s. with ties to their academic advisors and mentors still in place.

Age-related trends in academic workforce

To be fair, there were several motivating articles and compiled lists online about successful late bloomers (Dance 2017). But the late-blooming academics showed up only among the lists of Nobel laureates! (Corbyn 2011). I knew enough to recognize that most were working in their fields, if not on their specific Nobel-Prize winning projects, for years and years before attaining that level of recognition and reward. However, equally depressing were the reports that “on average, scientists become less productive as they age” (Over 1982).

The online forums for research career questions, followed by answers from members, were the most discouraging because they revealed hundreds of people like me searching for answers and settling for anecdotes and opinions from strangers, most of whom were disillusioned with their own research careers taking a circuitous route, via multiple places.

A 1993 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty suggests that new faculty¹ in the fall of 1992, like senior faculty² then, earned their highest degree in their early thirties (31-32 years) but did not assume their fall 1992 position, on average, until six years later compared to 2-3 years later for the senior faculty (U.S. Department of Education 1998). In other words, there was a gap of about 6 years between degree and new faculty even in 1992. But whether the 2-3 year gap in the senior faculty was a 'period cohort' effect or a survivor effect, I could not tell, as it was cross-sectional data. New faculty, more than senior faculty, had prior work experience, and

¹ New faculty were defined as those who in the fall of 1992 were in the first seven years of their academic career.

² Senior faculty were defined as those who in the fall of 1992 had eight or more years of full-time college career experience.

specifically, prior work experience outside academe and outside teaching, before beginning their faculty positions in the fall of 1992.

At a time when diversity of thought and experience is valued in academia and non-traditional students are welcomed into colleges, we have little updated data and no longitudinal studies that I could access to understand age-related outcomes in academic career. Either age at entry into academic careers has so little variability, or is a highly sensitive issue, that outcome studies are hard to design, or it elicits little to no curiosity or concern to the established academic community. But it was vital for me to understand how I will fare in my new path. I learned that the average ages for attainment of tenure and full professorship are 40 and 55 years, respectively (Chou 2015). While faculty tenure and promotion achievements were available as institutional reports from universities, age at entry, unlike gender and minority status, was rarely parsed (Penn State 2014).

My Colleagues, My Networks

Dr. Patricia Martens, a senior researcher at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, entered the research world in 1999 at the age of 47 when she earned her Ph.D. in health sciences (Silversides 2015). This did not stop her from earning some of the highest recognitions and awards in Canada even though her research career was relatively short. She died of mesothelioma at the age of 62 in the year 2015 (Silversides 2015). With over 300 published articles, reports, book chapters and abstracts, and 400 conference presentations, she became a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and of the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences and was invested into the Order of Canada. Dr. Martens received the R. D. Defries Award, the highest award from the Canadian Public Health Association, and was named a Justice Emmett Hall Laureate for contributing to health research.³

Pat, as she was known to all at the University, started out as a high school chemistry and mathematics teacher. She also had years of parenting, farming (together with her husband, she worked a 640-acre farm) and community-building experiences under her belt before starting on her Ph.D. (Silversides 2015). Having been active on the La Leche League, she proposed her master's and her Ph.D. thesis projects studying barriers and designing an intervention, respectively, to promote breastfeeding within a First Nations community. Silversides (2015), while highlighting Pat's cheery, positive attitude, quotes Ms. Monique Vielfaure Mackenzie, executive director of Regional Health Authorities of Manitoba, as saying, "She had a knack for making whoever she spoke with feel like the only person in the room...She was never intimidating, despite all her accomplishments." Indeed, I, the author, was personally at the receiving end of Pat's kindness and support when she saw value in my idea of evaluating a unique, long-term, first-of-its kind legislation in Winnipeg for a specific public health outcome. She supported my initiative with necessary funds from her salary award and collaborated with me, at my request, in her capacity as a senior co-investigator. We published two manuscripts together (Raghavan et al. 2013; Raghavan, Martens, and Burchill 2014) one of which has been downloaded, in its entirety or as an abstract, 43,432 times since publication in 2012 (Raghavan et al. 2013). I represent only one of the many researchers, students, mentees and others whose careers she has touched. I choose to believe that her habit of going out of her way to help others came from her lifelong experiences of working with people from different backgrounds. Her

³ Dr. Martens' biographical details are drawn from Silversides (2015).

entry into academia appears to have been enhanced considerably, not diminished, by its relative lateness.

It has been just a little over two years since I took the leap and re-entered the academic world. Most other new faculty are at least 10 to 15 years younger than me; some are likely younger by a full generation gap. However, among the faculty are those who entered academic workforce later in life *and succeeded* in attaining tenure or promotion (if on non-tenure track). I have been lucky enough to meet one or two of them and listen to them speak about their unique challenges and triumphs. A tenured faculty member at Purdue speaking on a panel about ‘Differences in Academe’ shared her experiences as a late entrant into her TT life. It was liberating to affirm that I was not alone. But I also listened to conversations from people who had anecdotal evidence about how age could have been a factor in those who did not attain tenure and were not around to tell us what went wrong.

Recently, I spoke with Dr. Krishna Nemali who moved from industry into a TT position at Purdue in 2016.⁴ I wanted to know what motivated him to make a mid-career change to a different employment sector, what he hoped to accomplish as an academic, and what challenges he expected to face, if at all. I was especially curious about any differences in the way we navigate our new responsibilities, given that he is in TT, I am in CT; he came from industry, I from a non-profit organization. Whether our gender and personality shaped our expectations and influenced our experiences was also at the back of my mind.

First, about the similarities. For both of us, Purdue’s advertised opportunities were the first positions we aimed for this time around and succeeded in being the top candidates. Earlier in life, just after completing our PhDs, we kept our options open for different reasons, despite our interest in TT, and accepted the first offer each of us received. We are both primary bread-winners and have also moved around a lot across geographical locations. It would be safe to assume that in choosing to apply for a position in a small university town we had hoped to settle down in one place.

However, despite acknowledging that industry is ahead of academia in discovery activities and in the availability of funds and resources, Dr. Nemali did not think one employment sector is superior to the other. For him, academia and industry are on par with each other and complement each other. He had collaborated with academics even while working in industry and felt comfortable knowing he had his academic networks. I, on the other hand, having never lost the idea of the ‘hallowed halls of academia’ from my student days, perhaps set myself up for some unnecessary, early internal anxiety, if not stress. Dr. Nemali also experienced very little lag time between arriving at Purdue and beginning his program. This has not been my experience. As my position was newly created in an upcoming area of educational administration (outcomes) and I am the first (and only) person in my unit, it took my department and me a few months to get me into the thick of things. Having no grants to transfer, as I was not doing full-time research in my previous position, and having not explored the option of start-up funds, it took me a while to identify topics of mutual research interest and get started on sustainable projects. Dr. Nemali specifically emphasized how industry experience helps one to identify resources needed as an

⁴ I thank Dr. Nemali for setting aside time to be interviewed by me and for giving me permission to write about his career transition and to use his real name.

early independent researcher and it occurred to me that I did myself a disservice by not having some industry or more networking experience under my belt.

Academia attracted Dr. Nemali because of the potential to work with relative freedom in multiple ways, given his responsibilities in research, extension and teaching. From choosing need-based research, the scale of the research questions ranging from small to big; interacting and training clients; and being able to teach and train students – he can be involved in all of these, unlike in industry. Academics’ work, he points out, is “more broadly useful, not always profit-motivated.” His goals are two-fold: establish an industry in Indiana in his area of expertise – controlled-environment agriculture – and attain tenure and promotion at Purdue in a fast-track. But he is not prone to worrying about it. He is of the mindset that he should pace himself to do what is expected in his program, and tenure will follow. He is happy for the departmental support he has received. His advice to his peers on TT is to spend a majority of their time focused on activities valued by tenure committees.

Asked about challenges specific to academia, he said, without missing a beat, “work-life balance.” Dr. Nemali finds it puzzling that while living in a small-town, the balance he once achieved in a bigger city eludes him. But then again, he explains, industry spent resources on its employees’ personal development and work-life balance. During annual assessment, a quarter of his annual goal setting focused on personal development issues. Other challenges, in general, for those with early careers in industry include lower average salaries in academia and far more concern about finding funds for research. Yet one of the advantages of coming to academia with several years of industry experience is that the perceived gap in experience and workplace hierarchy between senior and junior faculty members is minimized.

Taking Pat’s and Dr. Nemali’s experiences together, I am left with these questions: is the start of an academic career at a mature age truly a handicap or at least a perceived disadvantage? Are gap years between attaining a PhD and accepting a faculty position a liability? Should we even rely on anecdotal evidence to feed our fears and biases regarding age as a limiting factor? While I take strength in my colleagues’ stories in building myself up, in the long-term I plan to conduct a systematic study that could potentially and unequivocally answer this question for academics who insist on evidence base. I am planning to use narrative approaches such as case studies and feature articles profiling late entry academics, in conjunction with systematic data collection, to elucidate factors associated with success at tenure or promotion using quantitative methodology and analysis. The latter approach will require long-term planning and access to multi-institute data.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges Dr. Krishna Nemali, Assistant Professor, Horticulture & Landscape Architecture, College of Agriculture, Purdue University, for his time and his interests in speaking with me on this topic of interest. The author also thanks the editors and two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and helpful suggestions to improve the manuscript.

References

- Chou, Mark. 2015. The Rise of the Young Professor. *Chronicle Vitae* (Online). Retrieved December 13, 2018. (<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1174-the-rise-of-the-young-professor>).
- Corbyn, Zoe. 2011. Experience Counts for Nobel Laureates. *Nature* (Online). Retrieved December 13, 2018. (<https://www.nature.com/news/2011/111107/full/news.2011.632.html>).
- Cowen, Tyler. 2015. How Bad is Age Discrimination in Academia? *Marginal Revolution* (Online) Retrieved December 14, 2018. (<https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2015/02/how-bad-is-age-discrimination-in-academia.html>).
- Dance, Amber. 2017. Career Change: It's Never too Late to Switch. *Nature* (Online). Retrieved December 14, 2018. (<https://www.nature.com/naturejobs/science/articles/10.1038/nj7675-289a>).
- Gregoire, Carolyn. 2016. Are you A Late Bloomer? The Careers of Eminent Scientists Offer Hope. *Huffington Post* (Online). Retrieved December 13, 2018. (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/science-success-age_n_5824a19ee4b07751c390d9b2).
- McKee, Robert J. 2014. The Age(ism) of Diversity. *Inside Higher Ed* (Online). Retrieved December 13, 2018 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/08/13/essay-age-discrimination-faculty-hiring>).
- Over, Ray. 1982. "Does Research Productivity Decline With Age?" *Higher Education* 11(5):511-520.
- Penn State Senate Committee on Faculty Affairs, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment. 2014. Faculty Tenure Rates: 2013-14 Annual Report. Retrieved December 13, 2018. (<http://senate.psu.edu/senators/standing-committees/faculty-affairs/faculty-tenure-rates-2013-2014-annual-report/>).
- Raghavan M, Martens PJ, Chateau D, et al. 2013. "Effectiveness of breed-specific legislation in decreasing the incidence of dog-bite injury hospitalizations in people in the Canadian province of Manitoba." *Injury Prevention* 19:177-183.
- Raghavan M, Martens PJ, Burchill C. 2014. "Exploring the relationship between socioeconomic status and dog-bite injuries through spatial analysis." *Rural and Remote Health* (Online) 14(3): 2846. Retrieved February 11, 2019. (<https://www.rrh.org.au/journal/article/2846>).
- Silversides, Ann. 2015. Researcher Patricia Martens Turned Dry Data into Stories. *Health Policy* 10(3): 10-13.
- U.S. Department of Education. 1998. *New Entrants to the Full-Time Faculty of Higher Education Institutions*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 98-252.