Coming to academia through the “back door”

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Just last month, I had the incredible joy of hooding my first two PhD students (both young women) at the University of South Carolina’s graduation ceremony. I felt very much like the mama bird who was having her baby birds leave the nest. I could have not been more proud. These amazing young women were not only my students for 5 years, but they are also like daughters. One has just started a postdoc at UC-Berkeley, and the other, a postdoc at the US EPA. We had many previous conversations regarding their future careers. Where would they go? What would they want to do? Both are extremely talented and smart and really could do anything they want. In particular, they are both very capable of becoming professors (which is not the case for everyone), and they could also go into industry or a government lab. In these discussions, they mentioned that they might like to take the path that I did....

My path was very unconventional, and not one that I necessarily planned. When I was finishing my PhD research at Emory University, a general chemistry professor mentioned that there was an EPA lab in Athens, GA. I had never heard of it before, but it turned out that it was internationally recognized for environmental research. I was lucky enough to get a postdoc position (due to some mass spectrometry experience I got in graduate school), and when the federal hiring freeze lifted, I was extremely lucky to get offered a permanent position. I loved it there, and thrived. It was an ideal place to make a difference for the environment and human health. And, through links I made with other EPA labs and outside universities, I was able to develop several multidisciplinary collaborations, which is important for solving big environmental issues that we cannot do alone.

However, after almost 25 years at EPA, management changed, and I decided to make the leap to academia. After

telling a couple of friends I was looking to leave EPA, things happened very quickly, and the University of South Carolina made me an offer to become a professor (with tenure!). And, not just an ordinary tenured professor, but an *endowed chaired professor*... It was amazing. I remember telling one of the female professors at USC that I could not believe USC is giving me tenure... I’ve never taught before... What if I’m a horrible teacher? She quickly responded that they knew I would be a good teacher because I was a good speaker. They had more confidence in me than I had myself. This was a whole new world for me. Not only would I have to teach for the first time, but I would be writing grant proposals. USC was extremely gracious in allowing me to have a semester off to set up my new lab. I had to order everything—from beakers and spatulas to chemicals and mass spectrometers. But, it was an exciting time, and I especially loved teaching and mentoring students. Teaching was by far the most challenging... Imagine taking analytical chemistry when you are 19 years old, and now, you are 51 and have to teach it! Thankfully, I got to shadow a terrific professor for this class before I had to teach it, and USC also had me teach a graduate class of my own choosing (I chose mass spectrometry!) before venturing off with the more difficult undergrad class. It’s been an amazing 6 years so far, and I’m very happy I made the decision to switch to academia.

So, back to my first PhD students... Why was my unconventional path appealing to them? Of course, that’s because they would not have the stressful 6 years of trying to get tenure, and could have a “normal life,” including getting married and having children. They think it is especially stressful and challenging for young women who want to start families, and I agree. I see how hard it is for young women, even when they are given one extra year on the tenure clock for each child. Interestingly, I know a young female professor who just got tenure after having 4 children! She is a superwoman in my book. For sure, it can be done, but for sure, it is very stressful.

So, I essentially came through the “back door” into academia, not having to worry about getting tenure. Of course, I did

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not even realize this back door existed and it wasn't part of a grand plan. But, as professors, we are role models for our students, and they watch us and see the paths we take. For sure, if you decide to try to take this path, starting a government lab career first, it will be important to build a scientific reputation, with lots of publications, presentations, awards, and other such achievements in order to be offered tenure later on. But, it is a possibility. And, not one that most students would ever think of. So, students (and government scientists), be encouraged! You do not have to stay in the same job forever, and there is more than one path to your dream job, including a back door.

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