



ADVICE

A Professor's Last Crucial Decision: When to Retire

By Deborah K. Fitzgerald | MAY 30, 2018



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Congress had just amended the age-discrimination law in 1986 to prohibit mandatory retirement when I started my academic career. Higher education was exempt, however, and institutions could still force professors to retire at 70. Yet at that point of my career, nothing could have been further from my

mind than my own retirement plan.

As a young scholar, I believed that academics died with our boots on. One of the great things about being part of a "thinking" profession was that, barring illness or death, thinking would never end. My research and teaching would just get better with time, and my students and colleagues would value my wisdom and experience. I continued to believe that in 1993, when higher education's exemption expired and professors could no longer be forced out at 70.

Now that I am turning 65 myself, I can see that the ignorance of youth served me well. Unless I just put my fingers in my ears and sing "la la la," I have to admit that I grossly underestimated the challenges associated with figuring out when and how to retire.

For one thing, it is impossible to understand — at age 30, 40, even 50 — what age 60 and 65 feel like. As one of my friends said, "I knew that I would get old. I didn't know that I would get this tired."

After 30-plus years of grading papers and exams, giving lectures (yet again!), hiring young colleagues, attending faculty meetings, serving on committees, writing grants, and going to conferences, academic life can begin to feel ... a little stale, a little repetitive. When that happens, people begin to contemplate retirement as an opportunity to make a fresh start at something new and possibly unrelated to their academic career.

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But another reason that academic life in our 60s is hard: Many of us are no longer willing to do things that, earlier in our careers, we used to do gladly or had to do to advance our careers. Teach a night class now to increase enrollment? Not gonna happen. Chair a thankless and hopeless committee? No, thanks. Publish a really good book every five years? In an ideal world, yes. In reality? Not likely.

So the obvious solution is to just retire, right? There are two big problems with that:

- **Not all of us can afford to.** Money is a key reason why many faculty members keep working. It is hard to accept a big pay cut — which is what most retirement arrangements involve — when we are still the sole or primary breadwinner. In addition, some of us didn't plan ahead financially. I know there are those (mostly economists?) who figured out their retirement options in their first month on the job. But the rest of us didn't, and some of us even pushed aside financial planning until really late in the game, like at age 60, by which time our options were limited.
- **Not all of us are prepared emotionally.** Some faculty members aren't ready to give up the soft benefits of academic employment — our identity as a scholar, our respected role within the department, the university, and society at large. We like having a place to go to every day, a place to park, a place to attend lectures and social gatherings. Even professors who dislike their colleagues and their campus enjoy the status of being a professor.

To understand why today's senior professors find it so hard to retire, consider how we got our ideas about professorial life. My cohort (the baby boomers) grew up thinking we were invincible in body and mind — an important reason for our reluctance to accept the end of our academic careers. Once federal law no longer allowed institutions to force faculty members to step down at 70, many of us stopped thinking about it and largely resisted making any fun plans for our retirement.

For institutions, therein lies the rub. Academic departments are dependent on two groups of scholars: junior ones (who bring energy, new ideas, and excitement to the enterprise) and senior ones (who bring reputation, gravitas, and experience). When seniors choose not to retire, and juniors can't be hired because of a fixed or declining number of faculty lines, the intellectual balance of a department gets out of whack.

As academics, we know very well the importance of new ideas are to educational strength. And the only way to generate them, for most departments, is through the timely succession of faculty. Ultimately, faculty retirement is not just about you — or me. It's about the continued health and vibrancy of the department and the institution that have given us so much over our careers.

Clearly, campus administrators need to do more to support the comfortable retirement of the most senior scholars. But what, exactly?

Talk about retirement options early and often. Department heads should hold open conversations about retirement planning long before we turn 65. Many academics would agree that it makes sense to retire by age 70, but, absent actual discussions or agreements,

keep putting it off. I know of one department that has developed a respected internal norm: Everyone should retire by age 70, and everyone does.

Keep emeritus professors involved in real ways. Departments should develop a robust set of options on this front. Some take great pains to include retired professors in nearly every activity, except those related to voting on hires or policies. I've seen others make use of their retired professors' deep experience by asking them to serve on occasional committees. That takes some of the pressure off of midcareer faculty members, to whom falls much of the heavy burdens of departmental life.

Offer them an office in the department. If there's space (a big if), why not let retired colleagues — especially those who are research-active or still teaching a course or two — keep their offices for some specified number of years? Having a place to go is one of the most important reasons faculty members are reluctant to retire. Space is at a premium on most campuses, though, so perhaps part of a building could be dedicated to a set of open workspaces, of the kind popular in the tech sector. Faculty members could come and go in that communal office, running into old and new friends, working on their laptops or just reading, buoyed by good coffee and an intellectually stimulating environment.

Cater to the individual. Everyone has different needs and interests that make retirement difficult. It could be money, it could be parking on campus, it could be reliable tech help, it could be funds to attend annual conferences in one's field, it could be assistance with moving. Each of those issues can be managed, if the upper administration works through them with department heads.

As for me, I will retire no later than five years from now, when I turn 70. Over the next five years, I hope to teach less and write more. I also plan to volunteer more for useful/interesting committees and less for dull/draining ones.

Many deans and chairs are happy to arrange such preferences for senior professors — in exchange for a written promise that we will retire on a fixed date. Called a "wind down" at my university, it is a nice way — and a faculty-friendly way — for academics to enjoy our last years on the campus. Meanwhile, the institution can plan better for our replacement and can make use of the best each of us has to offer. (Note: To avoid litigation, deans and chairs cannot suggest such arrangements themselves, but are usually happy to entertain proposals from a senior professor.)

Academe is unlike other professions in many ways; one is that it depends upon the intellectual energy, daring, and ambition of young scholars. We senior scholars need to get out of the way, graciously and with dignity. A great deal of the power, glory, and heart of our departments and universities is there because of our work, but we need to recognize when it is time to pass that on to the next generation.

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