

AN ACADEMIC CAREER



As an undergraduate, I worked in a professor's lab, and I saw him as a workaholic without a life. I also viewed the academic life as something I would never aspire to, given that so many of my other professors could be similarly described. Now, as a professor myself looking at 60, I wonder what I would say to my former self, how I would explain why I did it (academia, that is), and why I continue to love it?

All this self-reflection was prompted by discussions in a monthly postdoc mentoring lunch that I lead at my institute. Some postdocs openly ask, "Is it worth it," just like I did back then. They wonder why someone would subject themselves to a life so driven.

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Admittedly, I do have a spasm of guilt when I try to “sell” the idea of university faculty track. It is certainly something to go into with eyes wide open and with as much information as one can gather.

What drives the decision to pursue an academic career? For most of us, it is great curiosity and passion for our science. After my masters program, I spent a year working in the consulting industry. I hated the structure of organizational rules and I found the repetition and narrowness of the scientific tasks boring. I spent a year after my PhD working at NASA. It was thrilling on many levels, but again, I chafed against the bureaucracy and my limited scope to study what I wanted. I simply hate rules. I love freedom.

Beyond professors’ love of their science, the rejection of the conventional workplace structure is perhaps the most common reason that academics love academia, despite its adverse effect on work–life balance. My life could be described as “always working; never working,” but I like to frame it and think of myself as an “*engaged workaholic*.”⁴

This was different when I had young children at home. Then, it was an either-or situation, work at work or be home at home. Now, as my children reach adulthood, my work life blends into my personal life, but my wife and I try to combine my research and conference travel with add-on trips of our own. I was rarely able to do this years ago when a speedy return to parenting obligations drove my travel decisions.

Freedom, of research topics, travel destinations, is a drug. The deadline-driven life that I see my friends in the consulting industry still living (even in their later career) is mostly a self-imposed one in academia. It is that freedom to set your own schedule that is also so appealing. At the same time, however, academic work–life balance becomes most clear over the course of a career, rather than during one’s first few years. There is almost no work–life balance in the pre-tenure years. Saying otherwise is simply misleading and untrue. For my first five years as an academic, I worked most nights and weekends. But, overall, and during a 30-year career, I can attest that one can indeed achieve a work–life balance to rival that of many other PhD-level occupations.

Apart from the often-discussed hubbub of faculty and committee meetings, an academic working life is the ultimate selfish pursuit: It’s a curiosity-driven life, which is also addictive. Then there is the fact that even as you age, your incoming PhD students and postdocs will always be young with fresh minds. As they run with your ideas, this added inspiration is a significant bonus of the job. Plus, basking in your former students’ own academic-career success is perhaps the ultimate reward. I relish attending conferences and workshops where I can watch my former students and postdocs lead the field.

But if work–life balance in academia deeply worries you, ask yourself if you would truly work 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. outside academia. As a PhD student, you are probably already wired to overachieve. If you were to work in a 9–5 environment,

you might be the one to lead the union, volunteer to organize workplace events, or work nights to move up the corporate ladder. And at the end of an academic career, retirement can be like a permanent sabbatical (my plan), where unlike a PhD research career in industry, academics can retain Emeritus status with their university and play at research until the bitter end.

Ultimately, an academic job is not 9–5. But it is never, ever, boring. And, as with other professions such as emergency-department doctor, travelling salesperson, or police officer, the hours and the nature of the work are not for everyone. And that's okay because there are a multitude of things one can do with a PhD outside academia.

But this book is not about that. It's about demystifying the academic career track. Taking that track is a willing assumption of risk.

But for those who take that risk, it is often well worth it. So, in the words of David Bowie, let's now “turn and face the strange!”

...A spirit of indomitable perseverance has characterized nearly all successful scientists.

*William Ian Beardmore
Beveridge, 1908–2006,
Professor, Cambridge University*