

Thinking About the Endgame

BY TOM GARRISON

EVERY CAREER has a trajectory—one's professional arc has a beginning, middle, and end. We academics are in the envious position of being able to shape the contours of the arc to suit our personalities and circumstances, but eventually the inevitable must be faced: we are going to leave the classroom and lab, and somebody is going to replace us.

Successful professors quickly come to realize that this best-of-all-possible jobs requires a careful balance between accepting benefits and rejecting a tendency toward inaction. On the one hand, we are given the freedom to pursue research that is exciting and to teach to others what we have learned. Our students return with tales of personal and professional successes, and our peers appreciate the original research and writing produced in our labors. We actually get paid to do what we love! On the other hand, we are professors 24/7/365—we represent our institutions and areas of specialty to the public at all times, we deal with students' questions and problems with invariable courtesy, we are obliged to maintain currency in adjacent fields,

and we work with administrators who sometimes do not share our priorities.

A strong work ethic, the urge to require only the very best of one's self, and the ability to respond positively to the needs of various constituencies has seen us through decades of service. But now it's time to think about taking a step back from the lectern and surrendering the plankton net to somebody new. Can we find someone to step in?

The last time our department hired a full-time, tenure-track professor was 34 years ago! My aging colleagues and I have shepherded clutches of dedicated part-time faculty members and herds of teaching assistants to teach and counsel about 1,000 marine science students a semester (the vast majority are nonmajors). At long last, we were given the green light to hire a new faculty member. Ours is primarily a teaching institution (a California community college), but we manage our department to be equivalent to a small university department with co-equal obligations in teaching, research, and community service. Are there young

people ready to join us?

Yes indeed! We found a large group of qualified folks ready to join us in our work. The customary screening narrowed the field, and we were left with seven remarkable people. All were qualified marine scientists with advanced degrees. What did we ask of them? *In order of importance*, we asked:

- Are you **enthusiastic** about your work in the marine sciences? Why did you enter our field? Did you have inspiring mentors? Do you enjoy teaching, writing, and research? Do you like working with students? (Why is this the #1 qualification? Look around your own department. The most effective teachers and researchers are those who can't wait to get to work in the morning, who welcome students during office hours, and who devour journals to find out what's new. They write. They are enthusiastic. *That's* what we're looking for!)
- Do you really **know** marine science? Not just your specialty, but the broader topics and their implications

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in economics, public policy, and—of course—the related fields of meteorology, geology, astronomy, and others. (Breadth of knowledge is essential in our undergraduate teaching mission. The overused word “relevant” comes to mind here—we are careful to emphasize the “so what” parts of our technical explanations.)

- Can you **teach**? Show us. (All the applicants were asked to prepare a brief lecture on primary productivity using whatever teaching aides they needed. Did the presenter simply read PowerPoint slides? Did the presentational tail wag the content dog? Can this candidate actually explain concepts clearly and with good speaking skills?)
- What **research** have you done? How did your investigation contribute to a greater understanding of our field? (Does the work pass the “so what” test? Was the experimental protocol appropriate? Where was it published? What plans do you have to continue your

research if you are granted a position in our department?)

- How do you feel about **community service**? What have you done in your present position to contribute to the public understanding of science?
- Where have you **traveled**? What interesting marine-related things did you see and do? (I strongly believe a good professor is a well-traveled professor; getting out of town is a valuable experience that brings depth to a teacher’s repertoire.)

The three finalists were all superb, well-spoken, enthusiastic scientist-teachers of whom any institution would be proud. In the end, one was selected, and she will join our faculty this fall.

Now comes the hard part. An ossified departmental culture—no matter how successful it has been—must change as time flows. (Remember, it has been 34 years since our last full-time hire!) We must provide guidance without being insistent. We shall surrender to the call

of the new (Online classes? Over my dead body! Well...maybe.). We will go with the newly invigorated flow.

When we old-timers were starting out, somebody gave us the freedom to try new ideas. We had been selected for our jobs through a process very similar to what our new recruits have just gone through. Our deans had confidence in us. We weren’t told what to do—we were allowed to sink or swim. That freedom to try new things (and confidence in the Darwinian process of retaining what works) will be given to the next generation of professors. That freedom to succeed is the most valuable lesson we can leave with our eventual successors. I will watch this with great interest—I’m not going anywhere just yet, but when I do, I know the department will be in good hands. ☑

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