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Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I earned a PhD in physical oceanography from Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, San Diego, in 1996. My dissertation focused on variability in ocean currents and heat transport at El Niño-Southern Oscillation time scales.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

After graduating, I spent a couple of years as a postdoc, six months at Scripps and 18 months at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. I then returned home to New Zealand to take up a job as an oceanographer at the National Institute for Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA). At the time, I felt lucky to have landed a permanent research position with a guaranteed salary and relatively secure funding. I was also happy to not have any teaching commitments. During this period, there didn't appear to be many academic opportunities available in my field in the United States.

I stayed at NIWA for about three years and worked on some interesting projects. I felt well prepared for the job after serving my "apprenticeship" in the United States. However, I started to feel more and more that I was not that well suited to academic life. I liked the actual research, but I didn't enjoy the promotional aspect of the role. I was also trying to think of options where my work might have a more direct positive impact on people's lives and society. However, my main trigger for leaving was less noble—I had just bought a house and was struggling to pay the mortgage on a New Zealand scientist's salary.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

My biggest constraint in searching for another job was that I wanted to remain in New Zealand, and more specifically

in Wellington. In hindsight, this constraint worked to my advantage as I had to consider a more diverse range of work options. Initially, I looked at advertised positions for any role that needed modeling or analytical skills. I hoped that I could find something outside the financial/banking sector, but I was willing to consider anything and everything.

I talked to fellow "escapees" from academia, and they all said the same thing—you just have to get your first job and after that it is easy to move to different roles. In the end, my first job came through a recruitment agency. I had read the job description and not even considered it because it was written in what appeared to be a foreign language (which I now know is public-sector speak). I also thought they wanted a miracle worker. However, the agency insisted, and so I got a position as an evaluator in the government science-funding agency. My job was to collect information about the benefits arising from government-funded research in order to demonstrate that the money was well spent—and hopefully to secure additional funding for science in future. I was called an evaluator, but it was primarily a social scientist role in which I conducted interviews with scientists across all types of disciplines and also with people who used the research results, such as environmental managers, policymakers, and manufacturers. It wasn't the sort of job I had expected to get, but I found it really interesting in terms of the topics covered and for broadening my perspective on the world.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

I moved from the science-funding agency into several different researcher/statistician roles in other government policy agencies. Over the past 10 years,



I have shifted away from the qualitative research methods used in my first job outside oceanography into quantitative statistical analysis. I have worked on a wide range of projects relating to economic development policy, agricultural environmental policy, and criminal justice policy. The common theme across the projects is that I used statistical/data analysis techniques to assess whether government policies were effective, how they might be improved, and/or whether there were any unintended consequences. For example, I recently worked at the New Zealand Treasury where I used a large government database to measure the impact of different types of criminal sentences on the subsequent employment prospects and re-offending patterns of convicted offenders. This is useful contextual information for judges who wish to understand the impact of their sentencing decisions on people's lives. In a prior project, I undertook an econometric evaluation of the impact of government grants on the subsequent economic growth of businesses. In that study, I used a large business-centric database to match businesses that received a government grant with similar firms that did not (the control group), and compared their economic growth over time. The results showed the types of firms that benefited the most from public funding for research.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

This year I decided to make another change. I left public service to become a consultant. I still work for government agencies undertaking statistical analysis, but being a consultant gives me more flexibility in terms of projects and free time.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

I think my education in oceanography prepared me really well for a range of different jobs (though I doubt that was the intent!). The skills that I find most useful relate to data analysis, statistical analysis, computer programming, and writing. Less tangibly, but possibly most important, I think I picked up a commitment to integrity and quality in my work as part of my education.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

I am really happy with my work life now. I spend most of my time actually doing research. The work is interesting, and it is commissioned by people who are interested in using the results to improve government policy. I have found people who work in public service to be just as passionate and committed to improving society as scientists. I have never felt like my work was misused. Having said that, there are many factors that come into play when making final decisions about government policies. It can be sobering for a former scientist like myself to find out how little impact any research evidence has when compared with public perceptions or politicians' views. I have learned to lower my expectations that my work will have a direct impact on people's lives!

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

My main concern when I left academia was that I was so over-specialized that I was not employable outside oceanography/geosciences. I would recommend that you think of all the skills you developed during your degree that you can apply in completely different roles.

If you are seeking work outside academia, it pays to be open-minded. When I accepted my first job in the science-funding agency, I thought I was going to the dark side. However, I learned a lot from exposure to different world views, particularly those of the people who need to use the research results in order to do their jobs better.

If you are looking for a job outside academia, create a nonacademic version of your CV. People outside of academia are not that interested in a long list of publications and presentations. They won't be able to tell the difference between good journals or bad. They will think you are smart because you have an advanced degree, but you need to be really explicit about your skills. Also, focus on the "softer" skills. Employers like to know that people can work well in a group and aren't weird recluses, so demonstrating you have people skills is important too. ☑