A winding path to satisfaction

When I speak with my students about their future careers, it is clear that many feel there is only one path to success and that any deviations will be catastrophic. My own academic path might seem to support this belief. On the surface, it appears quite linear: undergrad, grad student, postdoc, faculty member. But if you look deeper, you will see the series of roadblocks and revised plans that led me to where I am today. Using my own experience as an example, I try to convince students not to fear bends in the road. In fact, these deviations often help us develop, both as scientists and as people, and lead us to our true passions.

When I started my undergraduate studies, I had wanted to be a medical doctor for as long as I could remember. I dutifully took my pre-med prerequisites and fluffed my resume with medical-related activities that were interesting but didn’t inspire me. During my second year of college, everything changed. I took a microbiology course and became fascinated with bacteria—and with the way that researchers studied them. I more or less begged the professor to let me join his lab, and I soon became hooked on research life.

As I got close to graduating, I started thinking about how I could make research part of my long-term career. I was terrified by the thought that my many years of methodical planning for a medical degree would be for naught, and I had no idea if I was properly prepared to pursue a Ph.D. But my passion for research trumped my insecurities, so I applied to several schools. I received one stinging rejection—but also a few acceptances. After deliberating for a while, and convincing my parents that changing my career path was not the end of the world, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program.

My road was set again. I would get my degree in 4 years (maybe 5), do a postdoc, and become a professor at a research-intensive university. Everything was falling back into place—or so I thought.

My first 3 years of grad school were rough, to say the least. I enjoyed the science, but I didn’t feel I was on the path to becoming a thoughtful, independent researcher. I wondered whether going to grad school had been a mistake, and I found myself again struggling with the possibility of leaving a path in which I had invested significant time and energy. After much soul-searching, I decided to stay in grad school but move to a different lab. I found a fantastic mentor who gave me the freedom to make mistakes, self-correct, and grow as a scientist. And I did get my Ph.D.—in about 6 years, not the 4 or 5 I had initially expected.

My struggles made me realize the importance of good advisers and teachers, and I found that I wanted to play the role of enthusiastic mentor myself. So, when I finished my degree, instead of pursuing the high-powered research track I had initially planned on, I shifted my outlook once again and applied for college teaching positions. But a dearth of responses stimulated me to pursue a different kind of teaching opportunity: a postdoc position with a microbiologist who is also a dedicated educator. Fortunately, she was willing to take a chance on me and my less-than-stellar publication record and to support my desire to teach, so I readjusted my trajectory once more. I meticulously crafted a 5-year plan that included a research project, a strategy to improve my publication record, and some teaching at the graduate level. I even bought a house nearby.

Then, less than a year into my postdoc, a job announcement caught my eye. It was for a tenure-track position focused on teaching, where I could also pursue research with undergraduates. I wasn’t sure I was ready, but I knew I couldn’t pass it up. Exactly 1 year after starting my postdoc, I got the job, and I absolutely love it.

Is my story complete? Nowhere near. And as it continues to unfold, I know that I will need to be flexible and remain open to the interesting, unexpected possibilities that arise.

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