

WORKING LIFE

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Losing, and finding, a home

By Barbara A. Wanchisen and Heidi A. Schweingruber

During one of our breakfasts several years ago, Barb revealed what felt like a dirty secret: “I don’t feel comfortable at academic research conferences anymore.” We both felt that way, but were nonetheless shocked to have it out on the table. When we were academics—Heidi as a postdoc and a short stint as a research professor, Barb through tenure and beyond—small research conferences were our intellectual home. They were where we presented our data, learned about the newest discoveries in our fields, and explored new directions for our work. We met people with shared interests who might become lifelong colleagues and friends. But with our transition to the nonprofit policy world, we lost that home.



ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT NEUBECKER

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After leaving academia, we continued to attend many of the conferences that had formerly been places of such personal and intellectual invigoration. Surely, we thought, we would still find reward in connecting with former colleagues, learning about others' research, and sharing updates on our own endeavors.

But the feeling of being outsiders quickly emerged, and only grew over time. It was often difficult to find relevant sessions to attend. Few if any people suggested going for a drink, having a meal, or even attending a lecture together. The mere mention of nonacademic work often brought blank stares and an almost palpable lack of interest. Some even asked, “Didn't you get tenure?” mystified that we had left academia.

Admitting to each other that we had both struggled with painful feelings of rejection was deeply cathartic. We realized that during our time in academia we had internalized expectations about academic success that are emphasized at conferences—namely, advancing one's own research program. In our new work, this goal was not meaningful. We needed to find a new intellectual home.

Slowly, we developed a network of friends and colleagues who, like us, were expatriates from the academic world. We met scientists who were involved in public policy, attended meetings with them, and became involved in joint projects. In time, our networks expanded to include people in government, nonprofits, foundations, professional organizations, and advocacy groups.

This collection of like-minded colleagues became the new professional home we were looking for, where we celebrate each other's wins and commiserate over difficult losses. We share our frustration about the difficulty of building connections between researchers and policymakers and celebrate together when our work behind the scenes leads to new legislation or opens up new areas of research.

The two of us have also found new conferences that focus on policy and the application of research to social problems—topics seldom covered in typical

academic research conferences. And we still attend larger academic conferences. We look for—and sometimes give—talks on topics such as applying science to public policy and interdisciplinary discussions about research that could affect national concerns. Encountering colleagues who are focused solely on research can be uncomfortable, but we have learned to embrace what these larger conferences can offer.

At the same time, we have virtually abandoned the small, highly focused research conferences that were once a mainstay of our academic lives. Moving away from communities that used to be a central part of our identity was bittersweet, but we no longer felt at home there.

Going from one professional world to the next is a process, and the emotions are mixed and messy, but the rewards have been worth it. And some day, a move to a new phase of our careers might mean we have to again rethink our definitions of “success” and “home.” But now we know that’s OK.

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