



A WORD FROM...

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Photo courtesy of Wayne State University

Stay in Academe or Try Something New?

In September 2020, I left academe after 35 years to take a position as director of the Center for Communications Research, Princeton (CCR Princeton). Together with the Center for Communications Research, La Jolla (CCR La Jolla) and the Center for Computing Sciences (CCS) in Bowie, Maryland, we comprise the Center for Communications and Computing, a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) that is a division of the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a nonprofit headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. We are not US government employees, but rather work on a long-term contract from the National Security Agency (which we call “our sponsor”) to address mathematical and other problems related to national security. My predecessor as director, David Saltman, wrote an article in the *Notices* recently describing in more detail what we do.¹ My purpose here is to explain why I decided to make the change and compare working in this environment to that of academe.

After completing my PhD, I embarked on a traditional academic career in mathematics with postdocs and faculty positions at several universities. I had little teaching experience as a graduate student, and when I started teaching after my PhD, I was absolutely terrible. I worked hard to improve, and by the time I was tenured, I was a well-respected teacher who inspired students. About the time I was promoted to professor, I thought about the future. Did I want to be teaching calculus when I was 65? Then I got an opportunity to serve as chair of the department, and my trip to the “dark side” of academic administration began. Over the next 20 years, I served as chair of two mathematics departments, dean of faculty, dean of the college of arts and sciences, and finally associate provost at a variety of institutions with different cultures and serving a wide range of students. My experience in administration has given me deeper insight into the structure and business of universities.

Academe is wonderful in many ways. If you are a tenured professor, it is one of the most stable and satisfying forms of employment, but much less so if you are not tenured or work in difficult conditions. It generally has excellent benefits and you get to work with a lot of smart and dedicated people. In my role as professor, I enjoyed teaching, research, and service; as an administrator, I enjoyed hiring excellent faculty, doing my part to help students graduate, fundraising, launching new and evaluating existing academic programs, alumni engagement, and many other roles.

However, I began to question some of the basic assumptions and processes of higher education, and got a close-up view of some of the dysfunction in universities that mirrors what we see elsewhere, including in politics. After six years as dean and having to cut my budget constantly, I had doubts about whether our business model was sustainable.²

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¹David Saltman, *Careers in Classified Research Mathematics*, *Notices of the AMS*, April 2021, p. 535, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2267>.

²Curtis Bennett, Robin Forman, Phil Hanlon, Herbert A. Medina, Sastry G. Pantula, Wayne Raskind, and Rachel Vincent-Finlay, *Reflections of Mathematician Administrators in the Year of the Plague*, *Notices of the AMS*, Volume 68, Number 8, pp. 678–687, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2330>.

Thus, I thought about making a change. When I interviewed for this position at CCR Princeton, I asked my (now) counterpart at CCR La Jolla, Ryan “Skip” Garibaldi, who left a professorship at Emory University in mid-career, if it was a difficult decision giving up a tenured position. He replied, “I only wish I had done it sooner!” It is relatively late in my career, so the risk was not as great for me.

I had worked at CCR La Jolla as an adjunct and enjoyed it very much. The problems are relevant, deep, complex, and make good use of a mathematician’s skill set. Nonprofits other than universities tend to be more mission driven and this was refreshing for me. If you ask a university professor what their mission is, you might get some funny looks and answers. In my experience, many academics think their university’s mission statement is not relevant to them or that it is too generic. Our mission is to address the problems of our sponsor, which we work on together with other partners in the intelligence community. However, we are much like an academic institution in the way we go about it. I may be called “director,” but I don’t really direct our research staff much more than a department chair in a university directs the research of their faculty. I am honored to work with equally smart, motivated, and dedicated staff who take our mission seriously.

The working environment at our centers is very collaborative and informal, there is no classroom teaching, and there is little service of the type that is expected of faculty in academe. When I asked the research staff about committees at CCR Princeton, I was told that they could remember only one, and that was to choose the color of the carpet when we moved into our building in 2002! Harry Truman once said, “it is amazing what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.” Because we can’t tell people outside of our community the details of what we do, there is little external fame to be gained. We don’t have to write grants and are much more flexible about how our research staff publishes (internally). To be successful, you should be willing to learn new subjects, and we understand that this takes time. Since most of our work is done in our building, there are very few after-hours activities or tasks such as email. This makes for much better work-life balance than academe. I do miss engaging faculty, students, alumni, and members of the community. It has been an adjustment going from a very public position like a dean to one that is much less so.

When I arrived at CCR Princeton, I wanted to reexamine how we recruited research staff. For the most part, we hired people who were already in the community: by having participated in our summer program, SCAMP; or in programs at our sponsor such as the Director’s Summer Program (DSP) and Graduate Mathematics Program (GMP); or recommended to us via the “old boy network.” I wanted to emulate CCR La Jolla by forming a hiring committee and advertising on Mathjobs to cast a wider net.

In conclusion, I would say that if you are in academe, you like what you do, and you feel reasonably supported, then stay. If you don’t feel respected or question what you are really doing there, then explore other opportunities in the nonprofit, government, or for-profit sectors. If you want a more meaningful mission, then a nonprofit or government position might work better for you, whereas if you want to make more money, then a for-profit might fit. When I was deciding on a career and told people that I wanted to be a mathematician, they would often ask “what can you do with that besides teach?” Even way back then, there were many other things you could do and so many more now. Mathematicians are smart and can learn new things quickly, and that makes us in demand. Find a way to take advantage of that to do something you really love with sufficient compensation to allow you to live the life you want. If you are or will soon be a US citizen and would like to employ your scientific skills to serve the country, please give us or our sponsor a call.