DEAR LABBY: I am a fifth-year cell biology graduate student doing basic research at a major research university. I am ambitious, worked hard during my rotations, and was rewarded by being accepted into the best-known lab in our department. It has been a lot of work, but so much fun, and I have just had a major breakthrough that will be my first paper in a major journal. I have always had my heart set on doing basic research and teaching in a university setting like the one I am in. However, I just took a course in my graduate program designed to help students find the best possible fit for their careers. In it they discussed appropriate training and how to apply for positions in industry, teaching, government, the legal profession, scientific writing, advocacy, etc., but the one career they didn’t discuss is academia! Why would the faculty in my department not advocate for the job they have? Should I change my plans and think of another career?

—Need Guidance

DEAR NEED GUIDANCE: Stick to your plan! Unfortunately, it is quite common for a careers course not to discuss academia under the incorrect assumption that you must know all about it. Of greater concern is the frequent perception that an academic career is too difficult to consider. Graduate students hear stories about the difficulty in obtaining an academic position, and then the stresses of writing grants, publishing, teaching, getting tenure—who would want such a life? Once considered the only worthy career choice for PhDs, it is academia that is now regarded as the “alternative” career, and, as you note, it is sometimes not even mentioned!

Labby has had a very rewarding life in academia, so let’s turn it around and think honestly and positively. Of course, an academic career is hard work as it requires the passion and devotion that you already have. Let’s consider all the pros and cons.

The first con is the shortage of academic positions. Yes, there are far fewer positions than people seeking them, but this shouldn’t deter you from setting your sights high. A lot of basic biology departments have elderly faculty who will likely retire over the next decade, so the situation may ease a little.

When you get your desired position, you will be amazed by the generous set-up allowance—usually in the range of $1 million—that will provide funds to buy equipment and
recruit students. This means that you will have time to get exciting preliminary data before submitting your first major grant application. And the joy of training and sharing your expertise with new graduate students is so thrilling and rewarding, as you teach them how to approach and solve fundamental questions. And don’t forget the continuing thrill of new discoveries like the one you have just made! And then classroom teaching looms on the horizon—perhaps you will teach a course that is only peripheral to your expertise. Yes, it is a lot of work, but you learn the subject in so much depth that it is almost certainly going to help you in your research.

And what about writing grants and papers? Clarifying your research goals and plans can be a very gratifying activity as it leads you to think carefully of what really matters and also place your work in perspective. The same can be said of writing papers—but here you get to put your work in context and show the world what you have discovered!

Labby has seen many new faculty share their excitement in getting established and succeeding. Those with these positive attitudes generally do great research, inspire their students, are excellent teachers, and sail through tenure. What other position has the possibility of providing a life-long job doing what you have a passion for? Of course, it is hard work, and there will be ups-and-downs, but that is true of any worthwhile endeavor.

To summarize, as Walt Disney is famously reputed to have said, “If you can dream it, you can do it!” Good luck!

—Labby

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