

Reflection on the Double Academic Career

Maxime C. Cohen¹

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After more than a decade in academia and countless conversations with colleagues, I have reached a much better understanding of what it truly means to be a university professor. Last year, I reflected on the teaching dimension of our profession in my monograph, “[Eight Years of Business School Teaching: Personal Reflection and 47 Pieces of Advice](#).” The positive feedback I received from many junior colleagues (including several I had never met) was both humbling and rewarding. This year, I felt compelled to turn my attention to another facet of academic life: the career pathways that emerge “down the road,” particularly after securing tenure.

While an academic career is certainly not for everyone, it can offer a deeply fulfilling professional life for many. Graduate students often ask me what motivated my decision to pursue this career. Although the reasons vary widely from person to person, my own choice was shaped by two main forces: luck (through a series of serendipitous life events) and the influence of inspiring role models. I was also drawn to the flexibility and intellectual freedom that academia provides: the ability to choose problems that evolve with my interests, manage my own time, and engage in activities that bring genuine joy. Teaching students, collaborating with talented graduate researchers and colleagues, and contributing to society by shaping future generations are privileges I value greatly. Finally, I always believed that transitioning to industry would remain a viable option if the academic route did not work out, whereas moving from industry into academia can be considerably more difficult.

Many junior colleagues also often ask about the opportunities that arise later in an academic career. Just as I was inspired by several of my senior mentors, I feel a strong responsibility to share with graduate students and early-career researchers the breadth of professional possibilities that academia can offer to motivated and ambitious individuals. These conversations often reveal an underappreciated reality: the academic path is far more expansive and flexible than it initially appears, with numerous avenues available well beyond the pursuit of tenure.

¹ Maxime C. Cohen is the Scale AI Chair in Data Science for Retail and academic director of the Bensadoun School of Retail Management at McGill University. He is also the Chief AI Scientist of the CIUSSS West-Central Montreal (Jewish General Hospital) and a Scientific Advisor in AI at IVADO Labs. He actively advises corporations and startups on topics related to AI, pricing, retail, and data science. The opinions presented in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views of any affiliated or collaborating institutions.

In this spirit, I decided to synthesize many of the conversations I had over the years and, more specifically, to articulate my thoughts on a valuable—yet rarely discussed—aspect of academic life: the possibility of building two sequential careers.

Before diving in, several caveats are in order. My perspective is shaped primarily by my experience as a business school professor in North America, particularly in operations management, management science, and business analytics. Still, many of the ideas presented here extend—at least in part—to related fields such as finance, strategy, economics, information systems, and marketing, and even to disciplines beyond business, including computer science, engineering, and law. This reflection is personal, inherently subjective, and naturally influenced by my personal experience and environment. Yet I hope it will nonetheless offer useful insights to graduate students and junior faculty navigating their own paths.

The first academic career

The first stage of an academic career is centered around securing a faculty position and earning tenure. Although the specifics vary across disciplines and institutions, the general path typically involves completing a Ph.D. in 3-6 years (sometimes followed by a postdoctoral appointment), and then spending an additional 4-10 years as an assistant professor before undergoing the tenure review.

The central requirement during this period is to publish scholarly work in reputable academic journals. What counts as “reputable” varies across universities and communities: journal lists differ, quantitative metrics such as impact factors only partially capture quality, and departments often hold distinct norms and expectations. Alongside research, junior faculty must also teach effectively (and sometimes design new courses). Service to the institution and the broader academic community is another key component, which includes serving on committees, participating in editorial boards, organizing conferences, and taking on other professional responsibilities.

In essence, success in the tenure process is evaluated along three dimensions: research, teaching, and service—with research carrying the greatest weight at most institutions. Research contributions are typically assessed through the number and quality of published papers, the reputation of the journals, and the scholarly impact of the work, often measured through citations. External letters from senior faculty at peer institutions also play an important role in evaluating a candidate’s standing in the field. Depending on the university, additional factors may be considered, such as grant activity, training of graduate students, or even patterns of collaboration (e.g., number of co-authors and their seniority levels). Ultimately, every tenure case is assessed

individually, with significant differences (both in terms of the process itself and in terms of expectations) across departments, disciplines, and universities.

The opportunity to have a second career

Up to this point, nothing is particularly surprising; these elements are well known within the academic community. What is far less recognized, however, especially among graduate students and junior faculty, is that once tenure is secured, professors have the opportunity to cultivate a second career (often part time) alongside their ongoing research and teaching activities. To my knowledge, this possibility is rarely discussed openly. Yet the range of second-career possibilities available after tenure is remarkably broad. Professors can pursue these paths part-time while maintaining their commitments to research and teaching, and many choose to explore more than one option over the course of their careers. The options below illustrate the diversity of trajectories that can unfold once the traditional milestones of the academic profession have been reached.²

1. Continue excelling in academic research and teaching. Some professors choose to continue pursuing research and publishing academic work as their main focus. An interesting option can be to explore new topics, new methodologies, or even entering new fields. Several professors decide to take time to learn new skills, understand open problems in adjacent disciplines, and explore multi-disciplinary collaborations. Working on a multi-disciplinary project can be exciting (and often has the potential to yield highly impactful work) but may be risky for junior researchers. It's often seen as a "high-risk high-reward" endeavor. For example, it can be unclear (and uneasy) to identify the right outlet to publish multi-disciplinary work. It can also be hard to satisfy the requirements of two disciplines with different standards and conventions. Other professors may expand their intellectual footprint by writing books, comprehensive review papers, or thought-leadership articles. Some professors explore the option of broadening their reach and democratizing access to knowledge by writing large-audience books or starting a podcast or a newsletter. Others dedicate time to be editors in journals or president of academic societies and communities. Finally, some professors focus on developing teaching material and writing innovative case studies. As you can see, just in this first option, there are many potential alternatives to explore.

2. Focusing on executive teaching. Some professors choose to develop and teach several executive trainings, which can be both intellectually stimulating and lucrative. However, not all universities offer this option and this is mainly relevant for professors in

² Another possible path is to leave academia entirely and pursue a full-time role in industry or government. Although such transitions are increasingly common and span a wide range of opportunities (e.g., consulting, big tech, startups, or public service), they are beyond the scope of this monograph.

business schools. The motivation here can be to train the next generation of managers and executives by designing innovative courses to equip managers with important skills for the future corporate world. Offerings can include both traditional courses (e.g., strategic thinking, finance, supply chain operations) as well as novel courses (e.g., agentic AI, blockchain & fintech technologies, cybersecurity). It's possible for professors to offer such sessions to specific companies or via university programs, or even formal degrees (e.g., executive MBA).

3. Opting for leadership academic roles. Another interesting career path is to explore academic leadership roles, such as becoming a department chair or an associate/vice dean. Some professors decide to get more actively involved in their universities (e.g., within their faculty or at the university level). This type of role can have a tangible impact on the education system and on the future of academia. A typical path could be to start by assuming a smaller role (e.g., program director) and then climb the ladder step by step (e.g., department chair, then associate/vice dean, then other more senior roles, such as Dean, Vice Provost, or Provost). This path often requires moving universities to go up the ladder and accumulate significant experience in launching initiatives and programs, fund raising, hiring professors, and improving the reputation and ranking of a school. This type of career focuses on advancing the administration and often requires decreasing the time dedicated to research and teaching activities.

4. Launching or co-founding a company. I've seen several professors founding or co-founding their startup. Once securing tenure (which can be seen as stability and financial security), one may naturally feel more comfortable taking the risk of starting an entrepreneurial journey. Years of academic research, knowledge, and expertise can be leveraged (sometimes together with past students) to launch a commercial product or service. Another possibility is to join an existing startup as a scientific or strategic advisor or as an early employee. This latter option still provides the flexibility to continue research and teaching activities, while participating in an entrepreneurial journey. A common way is to start this journey during a sabbatical year. I witnessed many successful examples of professors launching their startups post tenure in various fields, including operations management, information systems, marketing, computer science, and engineering.

5. Consulting in the private sector. This is perhaps the most common path and has a myriad of options. In my field, I've seen many colleagues consulting for large technology corporations, such as Alibaba, Amazon, Didi, Google, IBM, JD.com, Lyft, Meta, Microsoft, and Uber. Engagements can be for one day a week (e.g., the Amazon Scholar program), spending the summer as a visiting researcher, or spending a sabbatical year. Other possibilities can be to consult for financial institutions (e.g.,

banks, hedge funds), nonprofit organizations, management consulting firms, or economics and litigation consulting firms. A different option is to serve on boards of public corporations by providing strategic advisory inputs. Oftentimes, professors try to find companies that are closely related to their research expertise. Doing so allows them to access large real-world datasets, learn about the timely important problems faced by industry practitioners, and deploy state-of-the-art solution approaches on the field. It's naturally easier to find such opportunities with companies that have a research arm and are close to the research world than with smaller firms. Such experience can also be valuable both from a research and teaching perspective. Professors can learn important practical skills and update themselves on best practices, which can ultimately inspire new research ideas for academic publications and modernize teaching material.

6. Being engaged in public activities. While this option is a bit less common in my network of colleagues, it's also an option that can be considered. More specifically, some professors explore opportunities in the public sector (e.g., serving on city and municipal councils, museum and school boards). Other options include writing op-eds or white papers on important societal topics, trying to influence certain political movements, participating in economic and political forums, and working alongside regulatory bodies and government agencies. In a way, this is a great avenue to have a tangible social impact and strive to make the world a better place.

Conclusion

The possibility of cultivating a second career, often with an array of meaningful and rewarding options, is truly one of the great privileges of academic life. Yet this opportunity is seldom recognized early on; I certainly did not appreciate it until much later in my career. What is even more remarkable is that many professors successfully pursue not just two careers, but several, combining multiple paths either sequentially or even concurrently. Of course, excelling in any of these endeavors requires sustained dedication and effort, and it can take time to discover which path aligns best with one's strengths and aspirations. But as I often tell my students, the most important thing is to enjoy the process and to find purpose and excitement in the work we choose to do. The abundance of options only expands the possibilities for fulfillment.