ack in the 1980s, when I began my research on human aging, I believed that within the next few decades we would find a way to live 300 years with healthy minds and bodies. I optimistically planned to hold a professor position for about 30 years, retire for 5 years, go back to school for a fresh education for 4 years, and start a new career for 20 more—repeating this cycle many times. But a year ago, when I was 66 years old, the liberal arts college where I had spent most of my career offered me a generous retirement package. By then, no longer certain of reaching 300, I was happy with my relatively long career. Nonetheless, being presented with the option to retire took me by surprise, and I was dismayed to be asked to leave.

My first struggle was whether to accept the offer. “Should I abandon a well-paid, tenured teaching position that I dearly love?” I asked myself. I would miss meeting and teaching interesting new students each year. But during the past few years, I had read so much about the scarcity of professor positions that I knew that some of those students I loved teaching, and many others, were now talented young scientists who wanted my job. I also knew they would cost my institution, which I greatly value, far less than I did.

The offer, which was presented to me as “the opportunity to do the many other things you have wanted to do,” had its appeal. I would be able to devote myself to research on the human health span without the obligations of teaching and the administrative duties connected with being a faculty member. And I still felt energetic and ready to tackle new career challenges.

The conditions also seemed right. My personal financial situation was robust enough that I could make ends meet if I retired. As for research, I mostly wanted to pursue clinical trials, which would not require lab space. I negotiated access to the institutional review board for clinical trial approval, and the college also agreed to continue managing my research funds. I signed the retirement agreement.

What surprises lay ahead of me!

I missed being in a classroom full of enthusiastic students even more than I had expected. To fill the void, I became a substitute science and math teacher in local public schools. Another challenge was finding ways to stay physically and mentally engaged now that I wasn’t going to college every day. I started taking yoga, karate, and singing lessons and spending more time reading science, nutrition, and consciousness journals.

But finding grants for the research I want to do has proved to be the greatest struggle. The college has a grants officer, but she is busy assisting current faculty members, so I am on my own. And although there are many grant sources designated for young scientists, there are few for older ones, especially retirees, who are taking new directions. Seeking just $200,000 to run a clinical trial on a cancer treatment has been an ongoing struggle.

My current approach is to team up with a younger professor who agreed to be my co-principal investigator on a grant proposal. We are still waiting to find out whether we will receive funding, but even though the odds are long, I feel that partnering has made the proposal all the stronger.

Finding where I fit in the scientific community and how I can best continue to contribute has been difficult—and I am not alone. With so many senior faculty members nearing retirement age but not yet ready to abandon science, it would be wonderful if institutions, granting bodies, and scientific societies would recognize what we have to offer and give us more support. They could, for example, set up grant centers, job opportunity and consulting services, and social networks for people like us. Ultimately, if senior scientists partner with the younger generation while also leaving them room to develop their own careers, it could benefit us all.

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