

By Richard C. Larson

What are you waiting for?

When I was hired as an assistant professor in 1969, mandatory retirement at age 65 was the law of the land for tenured faculty members. I was 26 years old at the time, so that seemed impossibly far away. But by the time I was 50, two amendments to federal law had removed all age limits. I could stay in my tenured position forever! That's how, in 2011, I found myself still an active professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge at age 68. I might still be in my tenured job today, if not for a meeting that year with the official who administered my federal research funding.

The official asked me to investigate how eliminating mandatory retirement had affected the availability of positions for new assistant professors. The question struck me as important but not personally relevant—until my colleagues and I got our results.

Our initial intuition was that there would be no substantial long-term effect. We expected to find that the number of open positions dipped just after the law's two changes. After all, the number of available tenure-track faculty slots is essentially fixed—at MIT, there are approximately 1000. To create room for a new faculty member, an existing one has to leave. But after a brief dip, we thought, retirements should return to normal, creating room for new recruits.

One word for such intuition: wrong! Through modeling, we discovered that eliminating the retirement age had reduced the number of new slots for MIT assistant professors by 19%, from 57 to 46 per year. Put simply, without a mandatory retirement age, senior faculty members are much slower to leave. When our paper was published, I viewed it as just another finding. But eventually, I had serious reflections about what the results really meant.

Around that time, I had hired a postdoc named Navid Ghafarzadegan. He was a superlative young scholar. Yet he worried that, like many postdocs, he might not be able to get the tenure-track position he sought. There are simply too many applicants seeking too few positions. And I began to realize that I and other professors older than 65 were blocking the way of many young scholars who seek academic careers. I started to wonder whether it was time for me to step aside, but the idea of leaving the job I had been tied to for so long was hard to swallow. (In the meantime, Navid secured that tenure-track position and is now an associate professor with tenure.)



“Professors older than 65 were blocking the way of many young scholars.”

would get to choose which projects I wanted to do and be paid accordingly, up to 49% of my previous salary. I could also access retirement and pension funds. My wife and I would be able to spend more time together and with our children and grandchildren. Decision made!

I submitted my tenure resignation in 2017. I've enjoyed every minute since, busy as ever but only on activities I select—such as MIT BLOSSOMS, a project I co-founded to create interactive video lessons for high school math and science classes. I feel lucky to have this option. Too few institutions offer these types of transitional positions to ease the challenge for us senior professors. At 74, I in essence removed 9 years from someone else's career. I should have stepped aside sooner. ■

Richard C. Larson is a post-tenure professor in the Institute for Data, Systems, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

Science

What are you waiting for?

Richard C. Larson

Science **362** (6414), 610.

DOI: 10.1126/science.362.6414.610

ARTICLE TOOLS

<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/362/6414/610>

PERMISSIONS

<http://www.sciencemag.org/help/reprints-and-permissions>

Use of this article is subject to the [Terms of Service](#)

Science (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.

Copyright © 2018 The Authors, some rights reserved; exclusive licensee American Association for the Advancement of Science. No claim to original U.S. Government Works