

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

September 19, 2011

chronicle.com

Manage Your Career

Globalizing Your Academic Career

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We all love a great adventure story that transports us to faraway lands. Reading those stories can rouse the imagination, but why not live your own adventure and literally transport yourself to another world?

Thomas Friedman argued in a recent article in *The New York Times* that career paths aren't stable ladders anymore—they are entrepreneurial ventures calling for creative steps. In academe, one of those creative steps may be to work overseas. As American colleges and universities globalize, faculty members and administrators have the opportunity to globalize their professional careers as well.

One of us is a search consultant who has worked with foreign institutions and with American candidates for administrative positions. The other is an American academic who taught overseas for more than a decade and has recently returned to the United States. Drawing on our experiences and conversations with expats, we offer advice here to inform your thinking about pursuing your career overseas.

Academic communities are transcending national borders.

Once it was relatively uncommon for an American academic to pursue a position outside the United States, but now the landscape for careers in higher education is changing, with opportunities multiplying around the world.

Many models of global higher education are developing, including the creation of entire institutions (e.g., King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, in Saudi Arabia), overseas campuses (e.g., Cornell, Georgetown, Northwestern, and Texas A&M Universities, among others, in Qatar) and specially defined programs (e.g., the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Alliance for Research and Technology, in Singapore).

Which will thrive and provide attractive places to work, and which will not? That's an important question without easy answers for someone considering an overseas appointment, especially an administrative one that will entail building and marketing an institution against increasing competition. Only you can decide how much risk you are willing to assume.

Go—but stay connected. Don't be afraid to take a post overseas, but do not risk becoming "out of sight, out of mind" back home. Being forgotten by colleagues will make it much harder to build on your international experience in the next stage of your career.

What kind of commitment do you want to make? Overseas opportunities vary widely. If your institution has a campus in another country, you might seek a short-term assignment there. That has the obvious benefit of allowing you to work within the structure of your own institution and, presumably, remain on the same payroll.

A slightly deeper commitment might be an overseas teaching assignment during a sabbatical or a summer. To get the most out of that experience, plan ahead. Identify potential colleagues and research collaborators, track down archives or other data, and arrange for research-related travel. If you don't do those things in advance, you will waste precious days after you arrive and may run out of time to complete your project.

For a more substantial commitment, you may want to consider actually taking a full-time position at a new university, for a fixed or an indefinite period. Depending on the country, that can be an immersion experience that is likely to have the deepest personal and professional impact.

Short-term opportunities for administrators are more limited and will very likely be built on networking rather than formal

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pursuit of advertised vacancies. If you know the right people and are in touch with them at the right moment, you may have the opportunity to spend a few months or a year setting up a new program overseas, or tackling a problem in which you have expertise.

However, most administrative roles call for a longer commitment, and most administrators seeking to go overseas would be well served by following the normal route: applying for vacancies advertised in U.S. publications.

Anticipate complexity and delay. Once you arrive at your destination, it is likely that setting up shop—both personally and professionally—will take longer and require more energy than you anticipated. It helps to think of the transition as part of the cultural adventure you are looking for.

Depending on the terms of the overseas assignment, your home and/or host institution might assist you with issues both practical (visa, bank account, housing) and professional (long-distance computing access, grant-submission assistance, office-space issues). For an administrator, an international move is more likely to carry personal and professional support.

However, there are many things no one can do for you. For example, even if the institution is grounded in the English language, the more you can learn of the local language, the better. And grasping the culture of the region will facilitate your transition and in some cases be dispositive.

Family matters. The array of alternatives for overseas pursuits places varying degrees of demands on family members. Your spouse or partner, children, and aging parents will have much more at stake in your plans to teach abroad for a year than if you are away for only a short time. Taking a full-time job overseas puts the greatest demands on other key people in your life.

If significant others plan to join you in your travels, don't make assumptions about their views and the quality of life they will find. You may think that your teenager would never leave her familiar high school and BFF's for a year or an indefinite period in Europe, but she could surprise you with her adventurous spirit. You may think that the schools overseas will not be adequate to your son's special needs, but they may be the equal of any school in the United States.

To come at this from a different perspective, you may assume that the rhythm of daily life will be the same elsewhere as it is at home. But many things take a lot longer, and can be much more complicated, for you to do as a foreigner. Employment for a trailing spouse or partner may be easy to obtain or difficult, depending on local laws and norms and on your partner's area of expertise. Check out those things before you assume that the situation will be either excellent or unworkable.

An overseas work experience can profoundly enrich your teaching, research, and/or administrative capabilities. There may be material benefits, too, as some overseas posts (but definitely not all) offer generous compensation packages. Think about your professional development in creative and adventurous ways, and you might find a world of global opportunities that are deeply engaging in the short term and transformative in the long term.

In a subsequent column, we'll discuss bringing your career back home, and look at ways to make it easier to return to work at U.S. institutions.

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