



Panel: Busting a Career Move? When and Why or Why Not?

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Dr. Carpenter is Founding Dean of Engineering at Campbell University. She is Chair of the ASEE Long-Range Planning Committee and a member of the Engineering Deans Council as co-chair of the EDC Undergraduate Experience Committee. She is also a member of the Executive Committee for the Global Engineering Deans Council. Carpenter is a past Vice President of Professional Interest Councils for ASEE and past President of WEPAN. Currently she chairs a Pilot Program Ad-Hoc Committee for the Gulf Scholars Program for the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. She is an ASEE PEV for General Engineering, Dr. Carpenter regularly speaks at the national level on issues related to the success of women in engineering and innovative STEM curricula.

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She is a technical leader in Advanced Manufacturing and Materials for the Naval Surface Warfare Research Center in Carderock, MD. She works closely with the all DOD branches supporting insertion of Additive Manufacturing technology into the fleet and serves as a leader and technical expert for the Division, Warfare Center, Naval Sea Systems Command, Naval Research and Development Establishment and Department of the Navy in additive manufacturing, materials, and manufacturing processes. While in academia her research team was skilled matching newer manufacturing techniques to distinct material choices and the unique materials combination for specific applications. She is also renowned for her work in the Engineering Education realm working with faculty motivation for change and re-design of Material Science courses for more active pedagogies.

Dr. Beena Sukumaran, Rowan University

Beena Sukumaran has been on the faculty at Rowan University since 1998 and is Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering. She is currently serving as Vice President for Research. Her area of expertise is in micro-geomechanics and she has published over 100 peer reviewed conference and journal papers including several papers on engineering education and the unique undergraduate curriculum at Rowan University, especially the Engineering Clinics. She has been involved in various outreach activities to recruit more women and minorities into engineering and is Program Chair Elect of the Women in Engineering Division of ASEE. She is the recipient of the 2011 New Jersey Section of ASCE Educator of the Year award as well as the 2013 Distinguished Engineering Award from the New Jersey Alliance for Action.

Women in Engineering Division Interactive Panel: *Busting a Career Move? When and Why or Why Not?*

Abstract

This interactive panel will explore the issue that across our careers as academic faculty and/or administrators, we all wonder: When is it time to move on? Should we move on? How do we move on? This panel is focused on addressing these questions. Panelists were selected to provide a breadth of perspectives. Panelists provide insights in the paper and during the panel into a) choosing not to move on and remain at an institution, and b) choosing and explaining why they moved on. Panelists explore what benefits and costs arose from each decision. While diverse panelists were selected, the organizers realize that the panelists offer only their own experiences, and so there will be focused time for questions and input from the participants. A broad range of experiences and wisdoms regarding this challenging decision are shared in this manuscript as well as during the interactive panel discussion on career self-authorship.

Introduction

This paper presents perspectives from four women in engineering who started at four different academic institutions, but each followed unique pathways to achieve career goals. The content of this paper was generated by collecting the individual responses of each panelist to a set of prompts including:

1. Did you encounter a period in your career where you experienced reduced satisfaction with your work situation? What were the strategies you employed to move beyond this period and self-author the next phase of your career?
2. If you decided that a transition was needed, what resources did you seek to aid in your decision?
3. What other work/life factors affected your thought process and decision?
4. Did you decide to move from your institution? Why or why not?
5. How much of your transition was strategic and expected versus how much was opportunity-driven?
6. What benefits and what costs have you realized from your decisions?
7. What tidbits of wisdom or advice would you offer to those considering a major transition?

Resources and Literature Relevant to Career Transitions

According to Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb¹, women trying to advance in their careers continually experience what is called *second generation bias*. That is, “cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage”. This type of bias covers things like a lack of female role models; gendered work expectations, structures and career paths; and a lack of informal networks of peers or near peers, along with a scarcity of sponsors. It also includes something called the double bind of being viewed as both competent and liked (both of which, research shows, is very challenging for women in leadership positions because female stereotypes are at odds with leadership stereotypes so women as leaders don’t fit our biased mental models). Unfortunately, both competence and being liked matter when selecting a leader or rating them as qualified.

With respect to experience, Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb¹ also note that women tend to be assigned operational tasks in lieu of strategic roles (which we typically give to men). The former are viewed as lower-valued tasks and less likely to be those we expect of leaders, while the latter are clearly leader-type responsibilities. Another issue for women is unconscious or implicit bias, which disrupts the learning cycle for becoming a leader. Bias contributes to behavior from others that erodes women’s confidence and consequently their ability to see themselves as a leader (as well as others’ ability to do so). Ibarra and Petriglier² suggest that because of second generation bias, younger women view the cultural descriptions and expectations of leaders and leadership as simply unattainable. Namely, this type of bias prevents women from engaging in the image and identity formation that would align them with our cultural prescriptions of a leader’s identity. Recognition and affirmation are also important to identity development of leaders, notes¹, and more challenging for women to garner. As women move up the career ladder, they also experience heightened visibility, compared to their male counterparts, which results in much greater focus, scrutiny and criticism of their decisions, appearance, strengths and weaknesses.

With regard to women administrators in higher education, Jo³ notes that voluntary career transitions for women were most often the result of either conflict with a supervisor, a lack of advancement opportunities, or an incompatible work schedule. When looking at the career trajectories of women in STEM, Hart⁴ notes that the gendered subtext or narratives, gendered organizational logic and gendered notions of the “ideal worker” all hinder and disadvantage women as they seek to succeed and advance. Hart observed that women in STEM identify far more barriers to career advancement than supports. In particular, the issues that women ranked as the most problematic barriers included a lack of informal networks; the burdensome and unfair division of departmental “labor” which falls to women; and the ambiguous, chilly and unwelcoming climate surrounding the paths to and processes associated with promotion and leadership.

Resistance to change is somehow greater in academia than in other companies and industries⁵. The practices and policies in the academic framework are designed to minimize risk and maximize stability. This can create a level of comfort and complacency or frame a mindset that all answers should be known or fully discussed before moving forward with a decision. However, career transitions inherently include unknowns. When faced with unknowns, learning

how to ask questions and from whom to ask those questions can be particularly valuable. If moving into a leadership or managerial position, a recommended book is “Her Place at the Table: A Woman's Guide to Negotiating Five Key Challenges to Leadership Success” by Deborah M. Kolb, Judith Williams, and Carol Frohlinger⁶. Supporting resources augment the book^{7, 8}.

Career Transitions

Strategies and decisions related to career transitions begin within each individual and are a complex network of aspirations for career achievements, the desire for impact, as well as connectivity and logistics with families, friends, and colleagues. The role and importance of these complex factors are apparent in panelists responses. Individual responses to each of the seeded questions are provided followed by a summative and reflective discussion edited by all panelists.

1. *Did you encounter a period in your career where you experienced reduced satisfaction with your work situation? What were the strategies you employed to move beyond this period and self-author the next phase of your career?*

Panelist 1: Yes, I reached a point as a research active faculty who had just achieved full professor where I realized that years of hard work would sometimes net a low number of citations of the published work. We motivated the research with ideas of how this knowledge could impact and improve society, yet less than 100 people had read it. It felt like the effort wasn't having the impact that I wanted. Further, there had been a couple of experiences at conferences in my professional field where other researchers dismissed or diminished our group's work. I was experiencing Imposter Phenomena⁹ episodes during conferences that haled back to my days in graduate school. My students and I had recently received a scathing, unprofessional review for a manuscript¹⁰ and my satisfaction with the research treadmill plummeted, I came to the conclusion that I should instead focus on commercializing our work so that it didn't remain buried in the literature and could be translated to improve society. The second conclusion I came to was that if my own research wasn't good enough, I had been successful enough that I knew how to play the research funding game and could teach others to be more successful with their research. In reading the literature since, I've become aware of the growing evidence of significant bias against women when they propose research ideas and present their findings¹¹ as well as the reduced citations of their published work¹². Despite this evidence, there remains a persistent mindset asserting that men and women have equal opportunity¹³. I had internalized this compounding bias such that it effected my confidence in my group's contributions. Thus, the first conclusion was invalid, but the second conclusion was valid and warranted, so I applied and was selected to serve as an Associate Dean for Research in my college at my current institution. This was a rewarding decision as discussed below.

Panelist 2: There have been several times in my career where I felt that I had plateaued in my current role. By that, I mean that I had learned the majority of what I could from my position and done most, if not all, of what I considered the “interesting” work that I could accomplish from there. At the same time, I was looking to continue to learn and grow, utilize my experience and skills to make a bigger difference, etc. Sometimes I have had an opportunity (and the personal

flexibility) to move to a higher position (both within and external to my own institution). Sometimes I have looked to fill these needs through activities external to my “day job,” for example, with a leadership role in a national organization or program. Deciding whether or not to do an external move is often not clear cut, either with regard to timing (I don’t think there is ever a “perfect” time to move) or with regard to what and where. It requires some serious self-reflection to decide what do I want to do next? What type of positions might be available to me as a next step? Where would I like to be (geographically, institution size and type, etc.) and where am I willing to go (which is a different question)? It can be helpful to talk with a good friend, a colleague who has recently made a similar move, or an executive coach. They can often help you clarify your thinking, narrow your focus, and identify skills and strengths that you might not see in yourself. In fact, interviewing several people in roles that you are considering can be a very valuable strategy.

Panelist 3: I have experienced reduced satisfaction with my work situation at several times in my career. I realized after achieving full professor status that I needed to give back to my department and volunteered to be department chair. After 5 years, I transitioned to department head. I derived satisfaction from department level administration and was quite good at what I did from any measure of success. I also realized I had hit the glass ceiling and would need to move to a different institution to have any career advancement opportunity. I had some job offers but could not move due to family reasons. I hesitated to pursue some opportunities because of my fierce loyalty to the institution. During this phase of my career after serving 7 years as department head/chair, I was extended the offer to serve in the President’s office in a position outside my comfort zone. It was also a temporary position and therefore with some hesitation, I stepped into this role. I found that I could make a difference at a much larger scale and embraced the position. At the end of the first year due to my performance and ability, I was offered the position of Vice President for Research. Strategies I employed to move past this period was to seek out opportunities, “lean in”¹⁴ and embrace change. I also had to tell myself not to question my abilities and fight the impostor syndrome. Most women will not seek out opportunities unless they believe they have all the qualifications for the position. I would suggest rejecting all the stereotype threats¹⁵ and step into leadership opportunities. The ability to serve as a role model for women and people of all genders is something that should not be discounted when deciding on next steps.

Panelist 4: Yes, I reached this point when teaching and advisement loads were creeping up, salaries were stagnant and support staff were diminishing. It was becoming more difficult to perform expected functions of the job. Our engineering college administration was dictating the type of research that would be credited. Strategies I employed included finding peers outside of my University to work with and to commiserate with. I began talking with the Government lab contacts I had to see if job opportunities existed and the answer was a resounding YES. The government labs are serious about diversity. The labs were performing similar technical research and they appreciated the engineering education experience and research portfolio I brought.

Summary: Assessments and feelings of reduced satisfaction were noted by all panelists. In response, each started looking for other opportunities. These opportunities included leadership within their own institution, national opportunities, or exploring options at other institutions or organizations.

2. *If you decided that a transition was needed, what resources did you seek to aid in your decision?*

Panelist 1: I did decide a transition was needed. As I moved into a supporting leadership position, I sought out every resource and training opportunity available. I attended one local half year program followed the next year by a national year-long program. I also kept in touch with mentors. One mentor was great to talk to about “moving chess pieces”. He had excellent advice that tended to delve into the multi-step consequences of one choice versus another choice. I met monthly with a mentor at my institution who never really gave advice, but instead told stories that I could reflect upon to discern the implications within my institution of one strategy versus another one. My partner was also invaluable because he could remind me to be the adult, assume the best of intentions of others, and remain persistently pleasant.

Panelist 2: As I mentioned above, talking with people who have recently made a similar move can be helpful. If you have decided to pursue an external move, start searching for open positions and make sure several of the higher ed search firms get to know you. A large portion of their value comes from their ability to find good candidates that the university would not likely find otherwise. While not all search firms are the same, a good firm will want to get to know you and send well-matched opportunities your way. They can also provide feedback as you interview, etc., to help you improve. It helps if you have the luxury of time so that you can practice the entire interview process, hone your skills, and find a really good match. It is important to remember that you are interviewing the institution as much as they are interviewing you.

Panelist 3: During the transition from department head to Vice President for Research I sought out advisors at the institution who were in various leadership positions. I also talked to individuals in leadership positions at other institutions. My spouse, who was already in a leadership capacity in industry was also someone I turned to for guidance.

Panelist 4: I did decide a transition was needed. I spoke to friends in my work network and began applying for other opportunities. I used contacts I had made at various engineering events. My husband was also a push because he had retired from another institution of higher education with a stellar reputation but one in which employees were expected to be on call 24-7, literally. He reminded me that much of work is a “Game of Thrones” and to be on my guard and strategize how I should “play the game”. Playing the game of thrones is exhausting and pulls creative energy that should be used for research or other academic endeavors. In addition to networking with research contacts I spoke with friends and family to aid in the decision process.

Summary: After periods of reduced satisfaction, all panelists decided a transition was needed and explored options. Seeking advisors and mentors was the most common strategy employed. Professional resources like leadership training and an executive coach were identified as valuable options.

3. *What other work/life factors affected your thought process and decision?*

Panelist 1: I've stayed at the same institution for each job transition over the last 10 years. My partner is local to the region and likes being near his family. My kids have a network of friends. We've customized our home, our land, and our lifestyle matches the region. If I became extremely miserable and pushed, my family would likely move, but it wouldn't be easy or smooth. In addition, I've found myself heavily invested in the institution growing and evolving since it has so much potential. One of my mentors indicated that he and his partner had decided that once their kids started high school, they were going to stay in one place until the last child finished high school. My conclusion has been that family is forever, while an institution is not a forever relationship. Thus, my family and I have prioritized family first.

Panelist 2: As a wife, mother and an only child with elderly parents (for whom I provided a decade of care at the end of their lives), my decisions had to incorporate these responsibilities. I was not willing to uproot our family while my children were in K12, but I was able to find opportunities to advance within my own institution while my children were still at home. These opportunities were not without challenges. I was asked to assume a 12-month role while my children were in elementary school. I was interested in the job but not willing to work all summer while they were young. I was able to negotiate a 10.5 month contract, with the understanding that I would work half-time in the summer (not half a day every day, but by the end of the summer, I would have been there half the time). This allowed me to stay home with my children some of the time and work all day, for example, while they were at day camp. My father was in the nursing home for almost five years, so I was not able to even consider a move during that period. I did move 1000 miles from my family after both of my children were in college/graduate school to assume my current position. That type of decision was clearly a family-decision, not one that I could make by myself. I have found that it helps to take a broad view. Nothing is permanent. We (my family) have pulled together to do whatever it takes to "make it" today. That might be different from what we did in the past or what we will have to do in the future. Whether it was juggling dance/t-ball/piano schedules for children, making daily trips to the nursing home, or frequent trips to the ER and managing hospice care with gravely ill parents, none of these challenges was permanent. You are often limited only by your creativity and ability to think outside the box.

Panelist 3: My decision was definitely affected by my family. During my daughter's high school years, I did not seek out a change in my career path. A transition to a new place and new school would have affected her. I was also part of a dual career family and hence any new location would need to accommodate my spouse's career as well. Because he is a non-academic, it required looking for positions in urban areas with more opportunities.

Panelist 4: I was able to make the transition because my husband had also made a transition and we were already living in a different state. Our four children had all completed graduate school and were off living fantastic lives. The family ties to the area were severed. Ultimately, I asked myself do I want to struggle in an unhealthy environment and be stressed alone or do I want to find something new and exciting! The decision was to search!

Summary: Different dimensions of family affected each panelist's reflections and ultimate decisions. Partners/spouses as well as life stage of children played a key role in exploring and prioritizing options.

4. *Did you decide to move from your institution? Why or why not?*

Panelist 1: I moved institutions over 10 years ago after earning tenure and promotion, but have not moved recently. The tipping point on my move from my prior institution was a salary inequity that persisted over multiple years. Even with an external offer, the department chair refused to match my salary with that of a colleague who was a man and was hired at the same time; both of us were promoted and tenured the same year. At that decision point, it was 50 years since the equal pay act and it was unacceptable that with prestigious competitive awards, I was valued less than a person who had not earned competitive research funding. In reflection, that was the best career move I could have made. The climate and bias built into processes at my prior institution would have likely trapped me into "Associate for Life" position. In moving institutions, my research was treated as valuable and I earned full professor in five years.

Panelist 2: Yes, after twenty-six years I decided to "retire" from my institution to accept a position as a founding dean of engineering in another state. Personally, my family was in a position to make such a move viable for me. While I had enjoyed a long and engaging career at my former institution, there were no additional opportunities for me there for the foreseeable future. I was ready to advance to the next stage and to do so, I had to move.

Panelist 3: I decided not to move from my institution at that particular juncture because of opportunities that were made available for me at the institution itself after waiting a long time. I am also fiercely loyal to my institution and have found that can put you at a disadvantage in terms of negotiation for salary and resources. I have contemplated moving at various junctures.

Panelist 4: I decided to move. There were multiple factors. One factor was a salary inequity with peer institutions in the state that persisted over multiple decades and a Dean who chose not to address it. Another tipping point was when a group of us were being continually threatened and harassed by powers that be and went through appropriate channels and no change came about. I realized my health was suffering. I would arrive at the office and was on a constant state of alert, feeling constantly vigilant. Additionally, there was a clear lack of communication or negative communication from the department level and lastly job creep that had occurred as multiple (<5) faculty had left for various reasons without replacement. Teaching loads and student's demands rose — resulting in an increase in lab and lecture courses, requests for letters of recommendation and meetings with students. It was time!

Summary: Decisions to move organizations and positions varied greatly between the panelists. While a number stayed in one institution until family situations changed, a majority of panelists sought out and obtained positions that were very different and uniquely challenging for their skill sets.

5. *How much of your transition was strategic and expected versus how much was opportunity-driven?*

Panelist 1: Any changes in career are a combination of opportunity and strategy. Open positions tend to define the opportunity while our individual preparation and approach when applying for the positions determine the strategy. In my own case, when I was restless or unhappy, I started looking for opportunities and when those opportunities arose, I tried to put my best foot forward. I know some people have an ultimate career aspiration to achieve a position or title. I've discovered I'm motivated by impact. I've sought out opportunities where I felt I could have a substantial impact or positive influence. If I lose sight of being able to contribute on a project, I find myself slowly disengaging. Thus, my strategy has to always revolved around maintaining focus on goals.

Panelist 2: It was really a combination. I was ready to move and looking for opportunities. This position (founding dean) was very unique, an excellent fit for my skills and experience, and offered an exciting and unusual chance to put into practice all that I had learned over my 26-year career.

Panelist 3: My transition was mostly opportunity driven. I was offered a position, which allowed me to demonstrate my leadership potential. I did not expect to be offered a promotion but was afforded the opportunity.

Panelist 4: I left a tenured position so my transition was not expected but I do feel it was strategic and opportunity driven.

Summary: In reflection, most panelists felt their decisions were strategic and were subject to opportunities available at the time they made their decision to change.

6. *What benefits and what costs have you realized from your decisions?*

Panelist 1: My last career change was to move into a prominent leadership position. Due to administrative changes at my institution and the decisions that followed, I was told 5 months after starting that the unit I was overseeing was going to be sunset and reorganized into other departments. Within the transition, I was asked to stand up an entirely new unit. The scale of change was greater than our campus has experienced in over 40 years. It was a quick decision. On the onset, no one really knew the magnitude of tasks and efforts to achieve the transition. The transition has been successful according to key metrics, but it has been a draining task.

Panelist 2: I have enjoyed putting together a great team of faculty and staff and leading them to build an innovative, 21st century engineering program in a vibrant region with numerous industries focused on engineering. I have had to use a variety of new skills to create a vision, work with entities both internal and external to support that vision, and communicate the value and message of what we have built to a variety of audiences. It has provided me with new platforms and opportunities as a dean that were not available to me before. Building a successful and innovative school from scratch has also been a very large task and a great deal of work.

Moving far away from my family and the region where I have lived my entire life has been both interesting and, at times, lonely. I absolutely love my new home state, but at times I also miss my old home state.

Panelist 3: I have definitely benefited from the new position. I have figured out some of my strengths in the leadership arena including networking, maintaining a cool façade even during times of stress and leadership under stress. The position has definitely taken over my life and I have learnt not to put the job above my other commitments to family and friends. I have also learnt to speak up more though it does come at a price. I have also learnt that I cannot and will not sacrifice my principles and ethics for any position. The costs have been due to stress from the new position.

Panelist 4: As far as I am concerned, it is all benefits. Many times at the university, I would tell myself "Money and power are not important." I told myself I was changing the lives of the students I influenced. I do believe that was true and I was an excellent educator and mentor, but this decision to leave was for me! The Naval Surface Warfare Center appreciates all of my skills. The DOD briefs I am a part of are fascinating and the nature of the problems we have the opportunity to try and solve matters! The practicality of the research and people I get to interact with on a daily basis are exciting.

Summary: In an ensemble, panelists felt there were more benefits than costs for their position changes. Benefits were largely related to increased job satisfaction and enjoyment of new challenges. Costs were largely related to maintaining balance with their life.

7. What tidbits of wisdom or advice would you offer to those considering a major transition?

Panelist 1: From my observations over the years, individuals who feel trapped or who feel that they don't have choices in their career or in their life can start to display characteristics that are mentally unhealthy and even poisonous to their colleagues. Thus, I've concluded that it is essential that faculty remain in the mindset that staying in their position at their institution is their choice and they chose it again year after year. Mental health and wellbeing is essential for individuals to thrive and be productive. Building from this premise, I think it is important that individuals choose to seek a better or more exciting opportunity. When individuals are in the mindset of running from an unhealthy situation, they are usually unable to market themselves in a manner that leverages and shows their talents. Thus, my tidbit of wisdom is to run to something instead of run from something.

Panelist 2: Think carefully about what you want to do and why. You need to be ready to move (it is not easy so be prepared!), so don't apply if you aren't willing to take the leap. You should also assume that once you start to apply, others will find out (no matter how careful you are or "private" the search is). Invest some time (and perhaps money) to talk with others (maybe an executive coach) to help you figure out what you want to do and the best way to go about it. Have conversations up front with your family or significant others to make sure everyone is on board and any concerns are discussed up front. Once you get an offer, you may not have long to decide. If you do decide to move institutions, reach out and get to know several of the major

search firms. They can be a big ally in your search. In the meantime, look for professional development opportunities focused on leadership (and women in leadership). Take advantage of opportunities to gain and practice new leadership skills on your own campus or elsewhere. And don't get discouraged if it takes a while to find a position. Hundreds of people apply for positions like department chair, dean or provost. Take your time and find a good match for you.

Panelist 3: I always tell folks seeking out leadership positions that the time has to be right for you based on personal and professional considerations. There is no reason to rush to assume a position especially if that means sacrificing everything you value. I have also asked women to seek out opportunities if your institution does not provide you with suitable chances for advancement, it is necessary to move on and seek out other opportunities. I have also asked them to negotiate for themselves though I have not been very good at doing so myself. It is also important to attend leadership training seminars or workshops because it provides good opportunities for networking. It is also important to network both within and outside your institution. I have been very lucky to have professional mentors outside my institution early on in my career and they have helped me along.

Summary: Commonalities in advice included reflecting upon your own motivations and interests and leveraging those in a manner that increased opportunities and thus job satisfaction.

Conclusions

Assumptions about engineering faculty and researcher options and barriers when seeking meaningful career transitions are broadly explored through the eyes of four individuals. As discussed throughout this paper, career self-authorship follows many pathways, but is important for mental health and job satisfaction. Some described abrupt career trajectory changes while others employed strategies of finite trials to develop and hone skills for new positions.

Discussions reveal that transitions are challenging because of uncertainty and that one cannot definitively know all implications of change. In exploring this landscape, the stories reveal that risks can lead to greater rewards and job satisfaction. Panelists noted that their outcomes enabled significant personal and career growth and provide perspectives and encouragement for other faculty/professionals who have plateaued to become exploring options for change.

This paper described steps we can take to help explore these challenges in both our careers and personal life such that we can achieve the most empowered and rewarding careers with the greatest impact on others.

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