

Going Feral! Or “So long, and thanks for all the fish...”

Philip A. Schrodt, Ph.D.
Parus Analytics LLC
Charlottesville, VA 22901
schrodt735@gmail.com

Full URL

<https://asecondmouse.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/going-feral-or-so-long-and-thanks-for-all-the-fish/>

Posted on August 1, 2013

Going Feral! Or “So long, and thanks for all the fish...”

Posted on [August 1, 2013](#)

You just know when it is time to quit. So yesterday, 45 years after first enrolling in university classes, 40 years after teaching my first independent class, 37 years after obtaining a tenure-track position, and 31 years with tenure, I collected my final paycheck from Penn State and henceforth will be engaged in full-time consulting.

Not, mind you, retirement. To the contrary, I’m rather busy at the moment, and intend to remain so for the foreseeable future, even if I’m not entirely convinced of the assertion that one of my projects will be funded “in perpetuity.” Rather: “I’ve left to pursue other opportunities and get my fat Boomer butt out of the way.”

Or as I prefer to think of it, “going feral.”

The broader topic of why the boomers in general should get out of the way will be pursued in a future “7 Reasons...” essay. For this one, I’ll just look at my own circumstances.

So why now? Why give up a sinecure that pays three or four times the median income and if you just want to do absolute minimum—and plenty of Boomers do—involves maybe 10 hours a week, if that? [1] Let’s start with the reasons that were *not* relevant to my decision:

- To the best of my knowledge, my health is fine. While I am at an age when doctors are advising many people to think twice before buying green bananas, I seem to have nothing amiss that can’t be solved by a couple of hours a week of yoga.[2]
- I’d like to think I’m still “in the game”: Over the past year I’ve written two successful NSF proposals and continued to secure research contracts. My final class at PSU—a graduate course on event data—went quite well [3], arguably one of the best I’d ever taught, though I’d attribute much of that to the students.
- Nor am I particularly concerned about losing my technical edge: I’ve still got 20-somethings coming to me for programming advice [4] and I spent yesterday working on the [successor program](#) to the TABARI automated event data coding system.[5] Written in Python, not FORTRAN. Despite the mythology of programming as a young person’s game, long experience helps. As the jazzman George Shearing said of his classic “[Lullaby of Birdland](#)”: “Took me fifteen minutes to write that tune. Fifteen minutes and twenty-five years in the business.”

- This was not a snap decision: I've been considering it for the better part of a year and a half, and gave formal notification back in March before I went to the International Studies Association meetings. So this is not news to some of you.

So what is going on? As ever, I will provide seven reasons:

1. I'm not ill, but I am getting older. And, hey, Boomers, so are you! The exhaustion following a three-hour class is physically painful; and waking up at 5 a.m. thinking about what needs to be done for a class the next day is no longer my idea of fun. I don't have the energy to pull all-nighters or anything close to them. In 40 years of teaching, I missed only one class due to illness, and that was in Cairo. Quit while you're ahead.

My father died at the age of 49 [14], my [late wife](#) at the age of 50 and one of my dissertation advisers at 38, a closer encounter with mortality than many people experience in this day and age. I follow a religious/philosophical tradition that asserts that old age and death are inevitable, even if in America this is considered fatalistic.

So am I flipping the bird to [Lord Yama](#) and making a bold statement that I'm not going to die as soon as I stop attending faculty meetings? The experience of my immediate predecessor at the University of Kansas, Cliff Ketznel, who died mere weeks after retiring, terrorized a generation at KU faculty who subsequently stayed on long after they should have retired. As is the case for at least one embittered dean—and one now-deceased coach—at Penn State, who seeing Lord Yama in the rear view mirror figure the best strategy is to slam on the gas to try to stay ahead. But Yama is patient and inclusive, and awaits us all.

Even Pope Benedict decided to retire when he didn't have the strength to do the job well. And unlike the Pope—or Queen Elizabeth II—I am choosing to quit while I can still imagine that I've got energy enough to live by my wits, rather than coddled by some institution. That isn't going to last forever.

2. Unexpectedly, writing [Seven Deadly Sins](#) rendered me useless as a methodological instructor. I am convinced that garbage can models are worthless, but in order to get tenure at any place worth getting tenure, you've got to publish garbage can models, and lots of garbage can models, and that is not going to change any time soon. In my former subdiscipline, the response to [Achen's 2002 critique](#) of garbage can models was a journal-length methodological suicide note, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* Vol. 22, No.4. I'm not going to win that battle.

There is absolutely nothing worse than the stereotypical old fart in the cluttered office telling people “It’s all crap!!!”—while pulling down, year after year, a handsome if static salary—and I’m perilously close to that. In classical Chinese philosophy there is an oft-repeated motif of the sage who writes a book and then departs beyond the frontiers, never to be seen again. Perhaps *7DS* is that [non-]book.

3. While I have been fortunate in my set of departmental colleagues at Penn State, the institution as a whole is phenomenally weird, following a North Korean governance model without the transparency [6], and with an Office of Sponsored Programs—OSP, the Office for the Suppression of Productivity—that has the tapeworm as their mascot. In discussing my decision to leave with a colleague who is an ardent supporter of the system, I referred to PSU as “an authoritarian hellhole,” which elicited the reply “Well, it is that...” [12] Suffice it to say that the serial pedophile Jerry Sandusky found a welcoming and protective environment at Penn State not out of luck, but rather as an all-but-inevitable consequence of the institutional culture.

Ah yes, the Sandusky affair: more than eighteen months and still going strong—in fact with the forthcoming [criminal trials](#) of three senior university officials, the impending release of the long-delayed Federal investigative report on [university violations of the Clery Act](#), and the [rumored settlement](#) with more than two dozen of Sandusky’s victims, it is going to be even more in the news.

Since the scandal broke, rarely a week goes by without at least one front page story in the local papers on the topic. Ever since the imposition of the NCAA sanctions, an exceedingly vocal subset of the university community has viewed itself, not the children molested by Sandusky, as the victims, and the supporters of Paterno [7] have clearly adopted that Vietnam-era slogan “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.” The departure of administrators has become so endemic that one person has noted “We’ve long passed the point of rats leaving a sinking ship: this is ships leaving a sinking rat.”

One of the more obnoxious t-shirts available on the commercial strip adjacent to campus—mostly bars, “bookstores” specializing in athletic wear and tchotchkie glorifying Joe Paterno [15], and, well, more bars—says: “State College: a drinking town with a football problem.” Pretty much hits the nail on the head. And isn’t very funny now...it’s actually rather sad.

4. Due to technological changes, I no longer really need the resources of a large institution. Computing power?—I’ve now got a machine with 8 Gb of memory (upgradeable to 32 Gb) and a 1.2 Ghz processor. And that’s just my phone. Cluster computing I can get from Amazon

or Google using my credit card; dozens of companies can provide web hosting. Email account?—free. Wireless internet hotspot?—\$30 addition to my Verizon plan. [20] Blog—free!

Penn State—at least until someone reads this essay—has allowed me to maintain access to paywalled electronic resources but I use these only rarely: all of the reference material I need, particularly for technical support, is free on the Web. Despite the library being literally next door to my campus office, I rarely set foot in it. Those 46% indirect costs go for what???

5. There is a broad consensus that one of the defining characteristics of late middle age—Boomers, that’s you—is that you start realizing there are a lot of things you are never going to do. Yep.

I’m not unhappy with what I accomplished during those 40-odd years in academia—though I am prudently waiting at least a year before blogging a self-assessment of that—but for the most part, it’s done. And frankly even some of those things I could continue doing, for example publishing in 4-letter journals, I’d just be getting in the way—Boomers, that’s you—of people who need those zero-sum resources more than I do. Like to get tenure.[8] I’d like to think I’m still doing research that is interesting, but once the work is written, it is out there on the web where anyone can find it, so why go through the agony of dumbing down the work for a major journal which will then hide it behind a paywall?

At my age, you look around and see a curious bifurcation in your peers. Almost everyone in my generational cohort has dropped completely out of the research scene. But many of those few who remain are fabulously productive—Gary King, Todd Sandler, Mike Ward, David Collier—and I can’t hope to keep up. On the 2013 admissions committee, I saw that only three or four of 135 applicants expressed any interest in working with me, and one of those spelled my name phonetically.

Curiously, my interests now—and for a number of years—have been in facilitating the bottom-up “[disruptive innovations](#)” that I could use to settle long-forgotten slights, from publishers, four-letter-journal referees and the like. But even this is the sort of thing a young person should do: kid, be a [pirate](#), don’t just join the Navy.[16]

6. The other transition that occurs in late middle age is the realization that you are in the final stages of an [iterated Prisoners’ Dilemma](#) and the maximizing strategy—”maximizing”, not “ethical”—is defection. Over the past year barely a day has passed without my noticing I’m hampered in big ways or small by some absolutely idiotic rule whose origins are...well, no

one seems to know either the origin, or whether the rule actually exists, but “we have to do it this way.” Indeed, in *any* large institution, most of the rules exist to make someone *else’s* job easier—or CYA—and those rules are completely indifferent to what it takes to do *your* job. You lose patience with that sort of thing.

At Penn State, I was accepting a salary to produce cogs and cannon fodder for an academic machine, and with a [couple exceptions](#), that fate is what students knowingly came for, and it would be irresponsible for me to provide otherwise.[19] Can’t take the heat?—or the contradictions?: get out of the kitchen.

7. And finally, when you find yourself beginning to feel sympathetic with many of the stereotypical negative things people say about academia, it is time to go. You start to recognize just how much of what seems trendy and oh-so-cool right now, whether theory or methodology, is utterly transient, with an expected lifespan approximating that of a gerbil, and on the theoretical side, often as not is merely a poorly updated re-hash of some school of thought current 3,000 or more years ago. University “governance” produces phone-book-sized [9] reams of detailed regulations and meticulously parsed course descriptions, and yet the student takes away a mere two-page transcript of letter grades matched to 32-character course titles, and in any case their job interview will turn on how cleverly they can answer the question “How many golf balls will fit in a 747?,” not on their nuanced understanding of the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian War.

Academic institutions have changed little since the post-WWII expansions of the 1950s, while the world around them has changed dramatically. What little change has occurred appears focused on the proliferation of pointless administrative positions whose sole purpose is to make the institution more expensive and less efficient. An imitation of the US auto industry in the 1960s. We know how that turned out.

The response I received to this news at ISA had an interesting twist. As I expected, *most* people around my age or older completely understood the decision, and it seemed to make some think “Well, if he can do it...”, though a couple age-deniers seemed quite upset. As I expected, people in mid-career didn’t like the decision at all: I’m rejecting what is the center of their lives, and it will be their center for another decade or two and—I think this is a big issue—it raises intimations of mortality. Americans do not like mortality.

The surprising reaction was people at the beginning of their careers: they were enthusiastic, perhaps because I’m showing that the academic life—which can look pretty grim (and is) at that point—does not have to be a life sentence.

And the [few] folks at ISA from outside the universities: Hey, now you get to come to the zoo and see what it looks like from outside the cages.

So, how's it workin' for ya?

I actually moved out of my university office about a month ago, and since I'm the type who generally put in forty to fifty hours a week in that office [10], that's been something of a psychological dislocation. My first effort at securing independent office space fell through—welcome to the real world—though I seem to have located a lovely alternative. I've incorporated an LLC, secured an assortment of [web domains](#) covering this, have my own health insurance [11] and my own business phone. For all its foibles—no place is perfect—we're staying in State College for the time being, though if you know of some pleasant town close enough to DC to drive but far enough get out of the Beltway traffic and prices, I'm interested in suggestions.

I've always plastered my office door with cartoons, and so [obnoxiously] left the following when I departed:

<http://bestofcalvinandhobbes.com/2012/02/final-calvin-and-hobbes-its-a-magical-world-lets-go-exploring/>

It's a magical world: let's go exploring!

Footnotes

13.08.04: A couple of additional comments and clarifications on the original post [can be found here](#).

[1] A long-past-his-prime senior professor at Kansas was notorious for arriving in class lugging a reel-to-reel tape deck from which he would play recordings of lectures he had presented in earlier years. I'm not making this up. He stayed in the classroom, however, thus avoiding instantiation of the urban legend of the professor's tape recorder playing to an empty room filled with the students' tape recorders.

[2] On my most recent physical, I checked off that single symptom—occasional low back pain—on a list of about sixty items. My physician remarked, “You know, some people check off almost everything.”

[3] A decidedly different experience than my final upper level class at KU, which was an absolutely disastrous evening class on international conflict at KU's ill-considered extension campus in Kansas City which attracted Iraq and Afghanistan war vets (very, very good) and 20-year-old slackers who thought the class would be easy (very, very bad). The final meeting was cancelled by a major winter storm replete with widespread warnings to stay off the roads, and yet, due to some policy which to this day I don't understand—population control?—I could only cancel it following protracted email exchanges with the administration.

[4] I took over management of the web page for a [local organization](#) and at the next meeting, a farmer from western Pennsylvania—unconstrained by the niceties of academia—looks me over and says “You look too old to be a web master.”

[5] Yet to be named: I am considering two possibilities, one staid and sophisticated, the other a bit edgy. Yeah, like with that characterization I haven't decided? Stay tuned...

[6] There is almost certainly a small fortune to be made in Federal whistle-blower suits here in [Happy Valley](#). But as one of my early mentors in the ways of large bureaucracies, the late Claude Ferguson of the U.S. Forest Service, quite literally became a [case study](#) in what happens to whistle-blowers, I will leave those windfalls to people more risk-acceptant than I.

[7] Paterno: what did he know and when did he know it? I am inclined—based on the [Freeh Report](#) and stories like [this](#)—to believe Paterno was fully aware of Sandusky's crimes. But a remarkable number of people around here—intelligent people, not just the thuggish knuckle-draggers who fill the papers with outraged letters—believe him innocent. With three top administrators now facing a criminal trial, where witnesses will be under oath and presumably acutely focused on the potential downsides of perjury, perhaps we will finally get some answers. I think I'll wait until those trials are completed—and the release of the Dept of Education investigation of PSU violations of the Clery Act—before writing about living through this very, very odd period.

But any vindication can only go so far: I cannot think of any scenario where Paterno can escape—at best—the conclusion of being someone who after [endlessly] setting himself up as the most important person in the university—famously criticizing the liberal arts faculty as being unworthy of the football team [17]—came to a position of saying to himself, “So, Jerry exploits his position on my staff to abuse children, but the university administration think that's okay, so it must be okay.” The best summary I've seen of Paterno is that he imagined himself as Aeneas, but in the end was King Lear. Bullseye.

[8] Those NSF grants?—I'd like to think I'm providing public goods there, though I may be deluding myself.

[9] What used to be phone books...

[10] Genuine hours: For decades I've been doing consulting, sometimes billed hourly, so I log my time, more or less accurately, in half-hour chunks. Fifty hours is a lot: most people I know who claim that have, in the absence of contemporaneous written documentation, essentially no idea of how much they actually work. Those who claim eighty or more hours per week are either lying or should be institutionalized.

[11] Boomers: if that's the only reason you are keeping someone else out of your job, really, at the income level of a Boomer professional, health insurance is not that big a deal—you aren't working at McDonalds. Though by the way, don't count on institutional health insurance continuing: Penn State, ever the leader in things nefarious, has embarked on a concerted effort to drive its least-healthy employees off its self-financed group health insurance and presumably onto the Affordable Care Act health exchanges. Which except for the fact they are going about it in a back-handed "This is for your own good..." fashion, might be a good thing: The *New York Times's* house conservative Ross Douthat, who is right more often than he is wrong, observes that getting businesses out of the role of providing a social safety net is not necessarily bad for the economic system.

[12] There's an old *Far Side* cartoon that shows two guys standing next to a coffee urn in Hell—flames licking around them, demons with pitchforks. Caption: "And the coffee's cold! Man, they've thought of everything!"

Pretty much the approach of Penn State to the "exit interview." Signaled from the start by the choice an interviewer who had been at PSU for 50 years!—how did they even find such a person?! But not exactly an unbiased observer nor someone with a broad range of academic experience.

It went downhill from there: the individual had only the vaguest knowledge of the institution outside the narrow confines of a department, and certainly not the vicissitudes of sponsored research. When I mentioned my very positive experiences with the High Performance Computing center, the response was "We have a high performance computing center?" The possibility that the Sandusky/Paterno scandal was hurting the institution was a *completely* alien concept: after all, we still have undergraduate "Paterno Scholars," [18] right along with our "Kim Jong Il Chair in Enlightened Supreme Leadership" and the "Ibn Saud Fellowship in Religious

Toleration.” [13] It was quickly evident that, presumably by design, absolutely nothing is going to result from anything I said. Happy [Happy Valley!](#)

[13] Okay, I made those up...

[14] [Legionaire’s disease](#), then unrecognized. About a decade later the spores of [Legionella pneumophila](#) were found in the cooling tower of the office building where he had worked.

[15] In Happy Valley, “409” is not merely a cleaning solvent.

[16] Is it mere coincidence that Janice Thomson left a promising academic career shortly after completing a book on pirates?

[17] Or words to that effect.

[18] Resumé filters in HR departments across the country are presumably now programmed to discard any applicant who asserts this qualification. We strongly discouraged our students on the academic job market from including the Penn State logo in their slides [21], and in the wake of the Freeh Report at least one major Federal program administrator was alleged to have exclaimed “That’s the last penny I’m ever sending to Penn State.” Happy Happy Valley.

[19] And they get positions. In contrast, I dread the karmic repercussions for the decades I spent as an enabler of the KU Ph.D. program, for which there is absolutely no justification. I’m betting I’ll find that the coffee is cold.

[20] No, I’m not planning to work out of a coffee shop. Though plenty of independents do.

[21] While I personally witnessed a faculty member vociferously making this recommendation, I have been informed subsequently that it is not official policy.

Posted in [Higher Education](#), [Methodology](#) | [15 Comments](#) | [Edit](#)