Careers As a University Professor

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What they do:

- Teaching:
  - Undergraduates.
  - Master’s or PhD students.

- Research:
  - This is in the research-oriented universities, e.g. the UCs, Stanford, etc.
  - Create new knowledge.

What you need to get into the field:

- A PhD (or for the professional subjects like medicine, a professional degree).
- An intellectual curiosity.

Job availability in the future:

- There will continue to be lots of openings, but also lots of applicants.

Pros and cons:

- Pro: Interesting work! Always learning new things, always batting ideas around with colleagues and students, always creating new knowledge.
- Pro: Enormous freedom.
  - You are essentially your own boss.
  - Do research of your own choice, whatever interests you.
  - Teach the way you want.
- **Time freedom**: Only a few hours a week when you must be at a certain place at a certain time. This flexibility allowed me to participate in my daughter’s school field trips, etc. You are off during summers and interquarter/semester breaks.

- **Pro**: Status.
  - You are respected for your expertise.
  - I’ve been called to testify before Congress several times.
  - I’m engaged as an expert witness in litigation.
  - You are part of an international academic community. When I showed up without prior arrangement at the University of Hong Kong, I was welcomed, taken out to lunch, and asked to return the next week to give a talk. Visiting professorships, etc.

- **Con**: Politics.
  - Everyone in academia was King of the Hill when they were kids, but they can’t all be King now. Some take it badly.
  - Every profession has politics, but academia can be worse.

**Compensation:**

- Large variation—from school to school, field to field, etc.
- At UC, most people are hired above the base scale. Most beginning professors are probably making somewhere around $60,000-80,000. People at the high end are well above $200,000.
- These are 9-month salaries. They are typically supplemented by
  - Summer research salary (extra 20% or so).
  - Consulting, serving as expert witness etc. (currently typically over $400/hour).
  - Book writing (highly lucrative for some, not for most).

- **As with most fields, being at the high end of income typically requires being aggressive and making personal sacrifices.** For example, one way to increase one’s salary is to move to a different university every 10 years or so, but this uproots your family.