



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Actuary Magazine

October/November 2014 – Volume 11, Issue 5

FROM INDUSTRY TO ACADEMIA:

TEACHING AS A SECOND CAREER

What did I want to do in retirement? I had few hobbies, having immersed myself in work and family. I was offered a full-time faculty position. I was going to teach. **By Abe Gootzeit**



My first class began at 2:15 p.m. on Monday, Aug. 26, 2013. The course was Math 372—Statistics III, and it covered the concepts of inference and hypothesis testing. Mostly junior students had registered. All had studied the content for Society of Actuaries (SOA) examinations P (Probability) and FM (Financial Mathematics) in courses taught by accomplished actuarial science professors. Many had passed one or both of these exams. Newly retired from my 38-year career as an actuary, it was my turn to stand in front of the classroom and impart my hard-won knowledge and experience.

I had retired just a few months earlier from RGA, where I worked for six years. My actuarial career was long and fulfilling. It afforded me the opportunity to do whatever I wanted during retirement. But the fact

Because I was not a traditional teacher, I challenged myself to think of ways I could engage students that would complement their already excellent educational experience.

remained that for the first time since my sophomore year in high school, I was without a summer job.

FACING RETIREMENT

What *did* I want to do in retirement? I had few hobbies, having immersed myself in work and family. Over the years, my wife and children had heard me mutter that maybe I would try teaching when I retired. Back then, it all seemed so far away.

Maryville University is situated less than two miles from RGA. With its 100 credentialed



actuaries working in St. Louis, RGA is the largest local employer of actuaries. More significantly, among the approximately 50 Maryville alumni who work at RGA, some are passionate about their alma mater. Some were convinced I would be a good addition to the actuarial science faculty and could bring a complementary business perspective to the program. They facilitated introductions between the College of Arts and Sciences dean, the program

director, and me. While I had some initial trepidation, Maryville University recognized that my professional skills—above and beyond my actuarial knowledge—would serve me well as a credible faculty member.

I was offered a full-time faculty position. I no longer had to agonize about what to do after retirement. I was going to teach.

The last time I had been in a college classroom was December 1974, while in graduate school in Syracuse, New York. I left to join Unity Mutual Life's actuarial



program when I was two courses short of a master's degree in math, which I subsequently completed. I was completely unfamiliar with actuarial science when I joined Unity. My personal experience through the credentialing process was self-study. I didn't use study aids, attend actuarial science classes, or participate in study groups. It turned out that I was good at taking exams (a positive attribute for an aspiring actuary). I became an FSA in 1980.

Because I was not a traditional teacher, I challenged myself to think of ways I could engage students that would complement their already excellent educational experience. I pondered three sayings I remembered from years past—two from the hallways of my daughter's high school and one from RGA's CEO:

- *"Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything learned in school."*—Albert Einstein



- There isn't a single correct solution.
- You will work in teams.
- What you learn today will need to be supplemented with lifelong learning, as the world continues its rapid change.
- Most importantly—we must learn how to inform, communicate and influence skillfully.

- *“It’s more important to question the answers, rather than answer the questions.”—Voltaire*
- *“The best time to pass is on the curve, not the straightaway.”—A. Greig Woodring*

I also recalled key findings from the SOA 2009 Employer Survey; excerpts below:

- Actuaries’ strengths (in trustworthiness, quantitative skills, and attention to detail) very much align with traits respondents find important when looking to hire risk professionals.

- Actuaries are seen as falling short when it comes to managerial skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability and flexibility, and effective communications.

This information helped anchor my thoughts as I prepared for the classroom, and focused on the realities of the business world:

- Actuaries are businesspeople who address problems in risk.
- All relevant information may not be available.

After discussions with the program director and faculty, I was assigned three courses for the fall of 2013: Linear Algebra, Insurance and Risk, and Statistics III. During the summer, I prepared for teaching. I pored over the material, and held discussions with two faculty members (one full-time and one adjunct) who taught the courses most recently. I watched videos of the Linear Algebra course online, prepared by the author of the text. I wrote notes for most of the classes I would be teaching, prepared quizzes and exams, and thought about how I would manage the classroom. Where sensible, I intended to supplement normal



classroom lectures with group projects, outside readings and guest lecturers.

TRANSITIONING TO TEACHING

On Aug. 23, as I walked through the



hallway to the classroom, I watched as 33 students streamed into the room for their Statistics III class. I was more nervous than at any time I could remember; more nervous than when I gave podium presentations in front of hundreds of people at SOA meetings, or presented to boards of directors, or testified in front of regulators.

I awkwardly made it through my introductory comments. The students took turns introducing themselves (for my sake—they obviously knew each other very well). I began teaching.

There is only one way to describe my performance in that first class: terrible. I couldn't keep the concepts straight; I was unable to control the classroom; I was tongue-tied and couldn't verbalize the words I wanted to use. My students were confused and frustrated.

Statistics III was my only class that Monday; the other two classes started the next day.

Immediately, I questioned my decision, my ability to teach, the school's decision to hire me, and (most of all) my sanity. Why did I think this would be a suitable "retirement" job? At the very least, I realized that I had a long, tough road ahead of me. The swagger and ego that developed over a long, successful business career were firmly in check, replaced by humility and listening. I stumbled through those first classes with varying degrees of ineffectiveness. Comments from students' third-week feedback forms (used for new teachers) ranged from concerns about the class being dull to students feeling lost and frustrated.

IT STARTS TO GET BETTER

Then, something quite extraordinary started to happen. Students took the time to give me pointers, and they offered encouragement. Student feedback at the end of first semester and during second semester improved considerably. They mentioned my "passion" for the subject, my ability to incorporate "real-life applications and stories," and even



LESSONS LEARNED: AN ACTUARY CHANGES CAREERS

A U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) report published in July 2012 revealed that younger baby boomers (people born in the years 1957 to 1964) held an average of 11.3 jobs from ages 18 to 46. The BLS has never attempted to estimate the number of times people change careers in the course of their working lives, since there is no consensus on what constitutes a career change. Nonetheless, a quick Internet search reveals many believe that, on average, people make between three and seven career changes during their working lives.

Actuaries are extremely well-suited to changing jobs and careers. We solve ill-defined business problems surrounding risk. In order to be successful, we must take a holistic approach, assessing and analyzing inputs and data from a wide array of sources. We must learn to work in teams, listening to and working with, our colleagues. The “best” solution generally doesn’t exist; we understand there are a range of results, and we attempt to quantify the probability of each occurrence. And, most importantly, we learn to communicate, inform and influence skillfully. These talents and skills make us particularly well-prepared to change jobs, and careers!

Even though I had worked as an actuary my entire career, becoming an assistant professor of actuarial science was a huge change for me. I learned some important lessons during my career:

- **Know yourself.** Change can sound seductive. Honestly assess your skills, potential contributions and needs before embarking on a change.
- **Do your homework.** There must be a skills match between you and the job, as well as alignment of success criteria between yourself and a potential employer.
- **Be prepared to listen.** Talk less and listen more ... actively listen! As much as possible, take advantage of the experience and expertise your new colleagues can share with you.

- **Be patient.** It takes time to become comfortable with any new situation. Know that there will be frustrations and pitfalls along the way and factor those into your progress assessment.
- **Know that success may look different.** Identify success characteristics of the new situation; these could be quite different from your past career experiences. Recognize and celebrate the successes you achieve.
- **Be confident.** Our actuarial careers taught us how to assess and analyze problems of all types; these skills are transferrable to other disciplines.
- **Have an exit strategy.** Even after sufficient time, preparation, learning and patience, it’s possible the new situation is not a good fit. Recognize when it is time to exit and find a way to leave gracefully.

I went through each of these steps. I had “always” thought I’d enjoy teaching and could contribute to a university actuarial science program. I spent months preparing for the change (although my preparation still left me woefully unprepared!). I left my ego at the door and worked hard to learn from my new colleagues, who were extremely gracious with their time and help.

As a Maryville faculty member, “success” means assisting students to develop their academic, business and interpersonal skills. These criteria are very different from when I was an actuary. It’s important to recognize—and celebrate—those new success stories.

During the first academic year, when I was asked, “How is it going?” I consistently deferred my answer. I want to get through two years before determining if this is a good match for me. I’m anxious to hear my answer!

All About Education

THE SOA IS CONTINUALLY EVOLVING

to meet the current and future needs of candidates, members, employers and the public. Learn what's new in the way of education at the SOA 2014 Annual Meeting & Exhibit.



Session 66 PD, "Update on Pre-Qualification and Continuing Education," will review recent changes and preview what is to come in 2015. Updates on all components of the associateship and fellowship pathways will be provided along with plans for 2015. Also included will be an update on professional development opportunities, including 2014 accomplishments and plans for 2015.

"E-Learning, Business Analytics and You," (Session 115 PD) showcases e-Learning as an effective way to learn new skills. This will be illustrated via the Applications of Statistical Techniques module followed by a presentation of the wide range of modules available for professional development.

For more information about these sessions and the annual meeting offerings in general, visit SOAAnnualMeeting.org.

my sense of humor. Students seemed to appreciate the fact that I acknowledged my limitations and they began to root for my teaching success. I was "approachable" and "straightforward," and my mistakes made me "seem more human." They said with a little more confidence I could be a "strong asset." Maryville's actuarial science students are smart, hard-working, patient and polite. They couldn't have been more helpful.

I also received support from my new College of Arts and Sciences faculty

associates. The dean, assistant dean and two science faculty members "checked in" at least daily. They gave me their time, wisdom and encouragement, and invited me to watch their classrooms. This combination of student and faculty assistance was invaluable; I wouldn't have lasted a full academic year without it.

Candace Chambers, Ph.D., professor of chemistry, was dean of the college during my first year. In her annual review she wrote: "He clearly puts in significant

time and effort, and the feedback from his students indicates that while he started out a bit rough, he has won them over and is learning to use his strengths—which are considerable—to teach in his own style. It is clear that he cares not only about his teaching, but the curriculum for the entire major." And after observing my class, Gabriel Colbeck, Ph.D., assistant professor of biology, wrote: "I felt excited to have been in class with an expert who knew important details about something very relevant to all of us. This can be difficult even for veteran teachers."

While these are gratifying words, it took a lot to reach that point. In the beginning, everything was new, and a struggle. It took me long hours to prepare for class and grade quizzes and exams. I was able to incorporate guest lecturers, outside readings and group projects in two of my three classes. During





my second semester, I created a group project in Corporate Finance that involved projecting a simple income statement for the sales of a new insurance product—the instructions I wrote were four pages long. I slowly gained confidence.

For my Insurance and Risk class, I asked the students to select projects reflecting the risk concepts we were studying. Project topics included:

- The risk that the nuclear power plant owned by Wayne Enterprises in the Batman movie, “The Dark Knight Rises,” could be turned into a nuclear bomb
- The cultural, reputational and financial risks involved with investing in a Super Bowl ad
- Risks associated with the Target credit card breach
- Risks posed to Penn State from the Jerry Sandusky scandal.

I received emails from students when news stories reminded them of topics we discussed. For example, a student sent an email indicating that while browsing through the news online, the student found an article about the Toyota recall. Since the class discussed this issue several times in Insurance and Risk, the student thought it might be something worth discussing in class. Another email referenced our class discussion on the Target credit card breach, and one student forwarded a link to an article on recalls after we discussed the Johnson & Johnson



handling of the Tylenol tampering scandal in the 1980s.

More importantly, several students who were concerned about their future found their way to my office to talk about career planning, which is another way in which my industry experience is an asset that can be leveraged on behalf of the students. I received a year-end note from one student that read: “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me this year. You were a great professor. See you next fall!” Not quite like hitting the World Series winning home run ... but close. However, there is still work to do—students noted my need to improve time management in the classroom, and that I needed consistency in writing and grading exams and quizzes.

I made it through academic year one and was offered a contract to continue for another year. It was a combination of hard work, frustration, disappointment and fulfillment. I enjoy working with the incredible actuarial science students at Maryville. Additionally, Maryville University and the actuarial science program administrators have been supportive of some new ideas I’ve suggested. An example is a new elective course, Enterprise Risk Management (ERM). The course is being offered for the first time to seniors this fall





and covers ERM material contained in the Fundamentals of Actuarial Practice modules. Fewer than 25 students were eligible to register, and I'm pleased to report that 10 students are currently enrolled.

HOW A BUSINESS CAREER HELPS IN THE CLASSROOM

Actuarial science students are primarily driven to pass the preliminary exams in the credentialing process. Exam problems are well-defined and have a single correct answer. My primary goal is to prepare students to become "good" actuaries. The business world is full of problems that aren't well-defined, with

incomplete and flawed data. In business, the correct response is never a, b, c or d—it normally begins "it depends." Solving problems involves a holistic approach that scours the landscape for all information. Problem solving is greatly enhanced by working in groups, carefully listening to and considering all perspectives. My long business career allows me to help students with their business problem solving—a complementary contribution I can make to the program.

WHAT'S NEXT?

At some point, the "big" questions will be answered. Could I make a positive contribution to the Maryville actuarial

science program? And would I enjoy working with students? The answers seem to be trending toward "yes." I've become totally immersed in my new role.

Thank you, Maryville, for having faith in me. **A**

Abraham Gootzeit, FSA, M.A., MAAA, is assistant professor, Actuarial Science, in the College of Arts and Sciences at Maryville University. He can be reached at agootzeit@gmail.com.



LIVING
to 100

SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES
INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

2014 Living to 100 Symposium Monograph

Presentations from the 2014 Living to 100 Symposium are now in an online monograph at livingto100.soa.org. The symposium brought together thought leaders to discuss the latest theories, research and implications on longevity and quality of life. Topics discussed included:

- The evolution of retirement;
- Work flexibility for a graying workforce;
- Business implications of living longer;
- Lifestyle and longevity; and
- Mortality trends and projection methods of older age.

The Living to 100 Symposium featured actuaries, demographers, physicians, academics, gerontologists, economists, financial planners, researchers and other professionals. This monograph will help to continue the conversation about how to address living longer, the impact to social support systems and the needs of advanced-age populations.

Visit livingto100.soa.org to learn more.