

Stepping Stones – Transitions from University Employment to "Retirement"

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For faculty and staff contemplating retirement, making decisions about whether or when to retire can be quite challenging.

There are many factors to consider. Probably the most obvious one is related to personal finance – Can I afford it? There are also many quality of life considerations that come into play and merit contemplation:

If I am no longer an active, full-time faculty or staff member –

How will I spend my time? With whom shall I spend time? Will I be able to locate other career and community engagement pursuits that I find stimulating and meaningful?

For many, deliberating about “retirement” can evoke a powerful emotional response. One reason for that can be found by picking up a dictionary. Webster’s offers the following primary definitions for the word “retire:”

- to withdraw from action or danger: retreat
- to withdraw especially for privacy
- to fall back: recede
- to withdraw from one’s position or occupation

One does not have to go far to encounter other conceptions of retirement that might feed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. An older colleague of mine once suggested that the word “retire” is based on a reference to the “re-tiring” (changing the tires) of a car or bicycle. The implication: Just as we must replace an aged and worn tire, we must replace aged and worn workers. In this sense, the word “retire” has an “ageist” component to it; it invokes negative associations with regard to the experience of aging.

Fortunately, there are counter-narratives that challenge notions of retirement as some sort of retreat or diminishment of one’s potential to contribute to social, economic, cultural and political life.

A while ago, Jim Gambone, a Minnesota-based intergenerational studies specialist, suggested using “refirement” as a replacement word for “retirement.” In his book, *ReFirement: A Boomer’s Guide to Life After 50*, he provides a positive and optimistic vision of how to live a meaningful life as one enters their “third age.”

The phrase “encore career,” made popular by Marc Freedman in his book *Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life*, emphasizes the potential for continued personal growth and pursuit of other interests. An encore career is defined as “work in the second half of life that combines continued income, greater personal meaning, and social impact.”

Those contemplating “retirement” and other such life transitions could also find solace and inspiration from other cultures. For example, Te Ripowai Higgins, in the book “Ages Ahead,” describes how the Maori of New Zealand think about aging and retirement:

“As one ages, cultural responsibilities increase and the experience and wisdom of the older people are acknowledged and treasured. They are often in so much demand there is no thought of retirement.”

Fortunately, closer to home, opportunities abound for exploring and pursuing new life interests and engagement possibilities. Here are some such examples at Penn State and in its surrounding communities:

- The “Go Sixty” program: This is Penn State’s special program for students 60 years of age and older to take tuition-free classes.
- OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) at Penn State: OLLI is a volunteer-driven membership organization open to all members of the community – aged 50 years or better – who want to learn, explore, and make new friends in a welcoming environment. There are OLLI programs at [University Park](#) and [York](#) campuses.
- RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) of Centre County: [RSVP](#) connects active adult volunteers, 55 and better, with volunteer opportunities at 70 nonprofit agencies throughout Centre County. To find out ways to share one’s time, talent and life experience to strengthen the community, check their website or call 814-355-6816.
- The [Penn State Center for Healthy Aging](#) provides information on exhibits, lectures, research studies, and other activities with healthy aging themes. To sign onto the Center’s mailing list, call 814-865-1710.
- Penn State short course, *Intergenerational Programs and Practices*: This mini-course is part of a certificate training program offered by Penn State for older adults (55+) wishing to develop or expand intergenerational programs in their areas of interest. The course is offered on eight consecutive Tuesday afternoons during the spring semester. For more information, contact Matt at msk15@psu.edu or 814-863-7871.
- Environmental stewardship: The [Centre County Pennsylvania Senior Environmental Corps](#) (CCPaSEC) supports teams of older adults who gather and publish data on the quality of water in the streams of Centre County.
- [Certified Food & Wellness Volunteers](#): This Penn State Extension program provides volunteers with training to provide education to the public about foods, nutrition and food safety.
- Senior Centers: The six [senior centers in Centre County](#) offer a smorgasbord of social, education, exercise, wellness, nutrition, travel, and recreation activities.

Additionally, there are many Penn State retiree benefits and privileges, listed at <http://ohr.psu.edu/retiree>. When considering all of the above options for Penn State “retirement,” we see no sharp-edged “withdrawals” or “endings,” but rather, a world of opportunity and choice. It’s a process, or better yet, a series of “stepping stones.”