

# Surviving Early Life in Academic Biochemistry

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*As part of our Centennial Celebration, we recently asked members to contribute reminiscences of their early thoughts about becoming a scientist, their experience as postdocs, their first paper published, their first lecture at an ASBMB Meeting, the friendships and connections they formed with other ASBMB members, their impressions of the first ASBMB meeting they attended, and anything else they thought pertinent. Here is another contribution. We believe you will find it interesting, and we look forward to receiving and publishing more reminiscences. Please send to them to [editor@asbmb.org](mailto:editor@asbmb.org).*

**I** was asked to submit an article after I received the ASBMB William C. Rose Award last year. My early life and training are described briefly in *IUBMB Life* 57, 705-707 (2005), so I thought I would reflect on my early years on the faculty, in the hope that this advice is useful. In retrospect, I had not been sold on an academic career and could have gone into the pharmaceutical industry, but I probably made the best decision. I started at Vanderbilt when I was 26 and became a full professor when I was 34. I would not advise anyone to try to do exactly the way I did, but I have some general advice.

**First**, this is not an easy business and not for everyone. You will have to commit to a heavy workload. I came from a farm and had no problem with work ethic. You can take consolation that long hours are also required for success elsewhere.

**Second**, I tell my students that the real issue in your lab is not money. The scarce resources are time and people. If you have reasonably good ideas and can master time and people, money should not be a problem.

**Third**, you have to write and communicate well. I hope you have learned this by now. In retrospect I was fair but not great due to my youthful aversion to studying English and languages.



*Dr. Frederick Guengerich (right) receiving 2005 William Rose Award from Dr. Minor J. Coon.*

**Fourth**, the projects you pick to work on are very critical. I have always tried to do basic research on things that have real applications. You will have to go after the "big fish" and not settle for "incremental science." You have to attack difficult projects, but they do have to be workable.

**Fifth**, avoid distractions, which are sure to come your way. You have to set boundaries and learn to say no. Definitely stay out of department politics. Do not get any bright ideas about starting a company in your spare time. Time-consuming hobbies are not advised. As a corollary, a stable personal life helps.

**Sixth**, have high standards for people when you bring them into your lab. This may seem difficult when you start and feel desperate to get anyone in. If you expect high performance and

treat people as professionals, your lab will be better in the long run.

**Seventh**, look around and see whom you should use as mentors on the faculty. Some will be good models and also give you advice. Others are examples of what you should not do.

**Eighth**, be wary of collaborations at this stage. Some can be extremely valuable but others will be a waste of time. Your tenure decision will be focused mainly on what you have done or your role in any collaborative efforts.

**Ninth**, try to work in the lab as much as you can. You are highly skilled and, at your stage, should be more efficient than most of the people who enter your lab. I have tried to keep doing this, although the pressures have increased over the years.

**Tenth**, take care of your equipment. Replacing equipment is very expensive and getting items approved on your grants is hard.

**Eleventh**, start writing your grants early. You need time to prepare and re-evaluate everything. Also, if you want input from other faculty, get it early. You are facing serious competition, and just like pro football, everything depends on preparation and execution.

**Twelfth**, never forget the excitement of discovery and why you do this.

There are more points but these are a few that may help. It was definitely all worth it. 