



## On the Move

On June 1, after almost 20 years at UC Berkeley, I left the top-ranked chemistry department in the top-ranked public university in the world to start a new job at, of all places, our neighbor and congenial nemesis, Stanford University. A legitimate, and often asked, question is “why?” (or more bluntly, “what on earth were you thinking?!”). The immediate answer is for an opportunity to help build a forward-thinking institute that aspires to bring chemistry, engineering and medicine into coalescence toward the betterment of human health as part of the new Stanford ChEM-H institute spearheaded by one of my scientific heroes, Prof. Chaitan Khosla. Even at this early juncture, the future of our fledgling institute is bright, with senior recruits such as former president of Merck Research Laboratories, Prof. Peter Kim, providing vision and wisdom, and all-star new faculty hires Profs. Polly Fordyce, Stanley Qi and, soon, Lingyin Li defining our future at the crossroads of basic science, engineering and medicine. In moments of shared sadness with my cherished Berkeley colleagues, I find solace in reminding them to steer their talented students and postdocs toward the many new faculty positions that ChEM-H will seek to fill in the next decade.

A related motivation for migrating south is to join one of the best universities in the world that also houses medical, engineering and chemical sciences all within a stone's throw. The close proximity between basic and clinical sciences is an irresistible draw for chemical biologists like me who long to realize the medical impact of our ideas while also being absolutely dependent upon rigorously trained chemists to achieve our goals. The function of ChEM-H will surely emanate from Stanford's unique form. And now is the moment to close the gap between research at the chemistry/biology interface and clinical translation as new medicines including antibody–drug conjugates and antisense oligonucleotide therapeutics testify to chemical biology's impact on human health. At Stanford I am ‘going back to school’ and having great fun learning from my colleagues with clinical perspectives.

Those were the goals and justifications beforehand. But now, in the throes of transition, other benefits of moving jobs/institutions have come into sharp relief. If you spend 20 years at the same place doing, for the most part, the same job, you might understandably get comfortable. Your

expectations of colleagues and the institution are established, as are theirs of you. You know how things work and the difference between what you want to do and what can be done. And this framework modulates your ambitions, even if subconsciously. Moving to a new job opens your mind to possibilities beyond the confines of reality. You can relive the honeymoon phase where anything seems possible and everyone cheers you on, and this has great value for the creative endeavors of a scientist.

Personally, one gets a second chance at a first impression, an opportunity to bring up your game. Your senses are enhanced as you navigate a new ecosystem, but this time with a few decades of experience that allow you to recognize opportunities from a greater distance. (When I started my first job, I was a deer in headlights, in strict survival mode.) Your new colleagues look at you not with high hopes and best wishes for a bright future, as they might view a new junior colleague, but rather with the expectation that you will shift the institution in positive directions. So the pressure is on, and that is a good thing.

Beyond myself, meeting new people in unfamiliar fields in a physically different environment brings a concomitant infusion of fresh ideas. It is a rebooting of the mind, a defibrillating jolt to the system that, I hope, will shift our research in new directions. With floormates from the Schools of Medicine, Engineering and Humanities and Sciences who are part of the ChEM-H community my students and postdocs will enjoy ample opportunities arising from the serendipity of adjacency.

Finally, I have learned that when one is faced with tough career decisions, lessons can still be taken from Robert Frost's classic poem “The Road Not Taken” which many of us learned as children. It is not a poem about valuing new things or Star Trekian adventures into the unknown. Rather, it is a poem about how sometimes we make choices so as to mitigate the risk of regret. The number of exciting career opportunities that come our way is finite; most of us are lucky to have one or two. Take a pass on too many and the specter of regret looms ever larger. So I moved to Stanford, and that choice, as Frost said, “has made all the difference.”

**Carolyn R. Bertozzi**

Department of Chemistry, Stanford University

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**Author Information**

E-mail: [eic@centralscience.acs.org](mailto:eic@centralscience.acs.org).

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