A PASSION FOR PAYING IT FORWARD: Q&A WITH VICTOR ZALOOM

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By: Audrey Grayson

Victor Zaloom (Ph.D. IE ’70) is a man with interests as broad and deep as the industrial engineering (IE) field in which he works. A professor of industrial engineering at Lamar University, Zaloom has really done it all, working in research, industry, teaching and academic administration. But it is his passion for teaching, influencing and shaping the next-generation of industrial engineers that continues to drive him.

Read on to learn why Zaloom chose the industrial engineering field, how he found his passion for teaching and why he gives back to the industrial engineering department at the UH Cullen College of Engineering.

Q: Did you always know that you wanted to be an engineer?
A: I never had a plan to be an engineer early on. When I was a junior in high school I think I was only interested in playing baseball and other sports.

Q: Why did you pursue industrial engineering in college?
A: I grew up inside of my parents' grocery store in Miami, so I was always interested in business. Engineering, science and math came pretty naturally to me, and I enjoyed those subjects in school, so that led me to pursue an engineering degree at the University of Florida.

One of my intro to engineering courses went over all of the different engineering disciplines and careers. That's the first time I was introduced to industrial engineering - they sold it as a broad field, a combination of science and business. It was a perfect blend of the two things I was most interested in.

Q: Why did you decide to continue on to graduate school after earning your bachelor's in IE?
A: When I became a senior at the University of Florida I interviewed for several jobs and got job offers but none of them seemed interesting to me, so I decided rather than take a job I wasn't passionate about I'd stay on in school. After I finished my master's degree I got fewer job offers, but they were more interesting. I chose to take
a position at Lockheed Martin in the Dallas area.

**Q: What prompted you to make the transition from private industry to academia?**

**A:** While working at Lockheed I was asked to teach a night course at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth pretty much out of the blue. I had never taught anything before in my life, but I decided just to do it. In the early part of teaching that course I realized that this is what I want to do for the rest of my career rather than working in industry.

**Q: How did you end up at the University of Houston to pursue your doctoral degree in IE?**

**A:** Once I found my passion for teaching I knew I needed to get my doctoral degree to compete for professor positions. Then I seriously started looking at Ph.D. programs. I was drawn to the city of Houston and the industrial engineering department at UH, but I had a family and needed financial support to get my Ph.D. The UH Cullen College offered me a fellowship right away and I made the decision to leave my job at Lockheed to pursue my degree at UH.

**Q: Did you find that doors opened for you after earning your IE Ph.D. from UH?**

**A:** Without it I couldn't have had the career that I've had. I owe UH a lot for believing in me from the start. They looked at my background - I had good degrees, I was mature and had experience working in industry - and they offered me financial support to pursue my degree and didn't ask me to prove myself first. That meant a lot to me. UH was a very welcoming place for me.

**Q: Where did your career take you from there?**

**A:** After earning my Ph.D. in 1970 I joined the IE faculty at Auburn University and taught there until '78. That really got me a great start in my academic career.

I had decided early on in my career that I'd like to be a department chair. The role combines teaching as well as administration and management, which really appeals to me. I had an opportunity to do that at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina, a historically black school that had just started an industrial engineering department at the time. I was the department chair there from '78 to '81, and during that time I got the department accredited by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET).

Then I was offered a bit of a promotion at Lamar University - a department chair position as well as heading up their graduate program in engineering. I jumped at the opportunity and I've been at Lamar University since then. I have also served as the chairman of the industrial engineering department, associate dean of engineering, interim dean of the college of engineering, dean of the graduate school and, of course, professor of industrial engineering.

**Q: You are a long-time supporter of UH Engineering and have established the Dr. Victor A. Zaloom Scholarship Endowment for industrial engineering students. Why do you feel it is important to give back to your alma mater?**

**A:** My career is totally dependent on the University of Houston believing in me and helping me with financial support and with office space while I earned my doctoral degree. The faculty at the Cullen College were very friendly and treated me as an adult - not just as a student, but as a fellow scholar. That shaped me a great deal and helped solidify my goal of becoming a faculty member myself. It's so important to me to help ensure future IE students have the same opportunities that I did.

**Q: Where do you see the IE field going in the future?**

**A:** I think IE is going to be an important major for the information economy. Industrial engineers are very flexible
and I think that's a very important quality to have today. Fifty years ago you could have one career your whole life, but nowadays you need to change career paths maybe several times to be successful. With industrial engineering, the flexibility and broadness of the degree is very amenable to that. I think the kinds of people who are attracted to IE are the kind of people that our country needs to lead us into the future.

**Q: Do you have any career advice for current IE students?**

**A:** Find your passion, no matter what it is. You need to find out what type of work you want to do. Whether it's teaching and research, administration, working as an IE in a company or working for yourself as a consultant - find your passion and pursue it.

I often repeat Confucius' words to my students: "Choose a job you love and you'll never have to work a day in your life." It's so important to find your passion. I found mine very inadvertently. I was working for a company and got a call one day and was asked to teach a course. I had no idea if I wanted to be a teacher but I was open-minded and willing to make sacrifices, and that allowed me to find my passion. I would wish anybody to do that. As a professor I try to encourage and help my students to do the same.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." In that case, look at where you are and if you're not doing something you want to do, then look at your options and pursue them.

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