Looking Back at Getting Started

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Tropical forests are full of surprises. Home to so many rare species and unexpected interactions, your odds are high of seeing something special every time you venture into one. You never know what to expect. That endless sense of adventure, however, can feel overwhelming to a beginning student. Where does one even start?

I first experienced OTS in 1979 as a graduate research assistant for an NSF-funded project led by Julie Denslow and Tim Moermond at La Selva. The project's objectives were well-defined, so I could jump right in. But it was my advisors' project, not mine. I knew I needed to fledge, and the challenge of finding a "good" dissertation topic haunted me. The next year I took the OTS course -- there was only one version of it back then -- and experienced the inquiry-based approach to tropical ecology pioneered by Dan Janzen and quickly perfected by others (see Kyle Harms' essay). It was empowering. Students were encouraged to ask off-the-wall questions and pursue them with quick-and-dirty experiments that never worked (at least for me) and always generated new questions. We talked about them non-stop, learned from each other, and gradually came to see tropical forest complexity through a new lens, one of curiosity and empowerment.

Less than two years later, I'd started a long-term stay at La Selva to collect data for my dissertation on seasonality of fruiting plants and fruit-eating birds. OTS funded the work through a grant from the Noyes Foundation, which required that I submit a research proposal to OTS. That proposal launched my career. In retrospect, it was embarrassingly simplistic.

I'm now on the other side of the grant proposal process. Along with some wise and caring colleagues, I oversee the review of proposals submitted to the National Science Foundation. We decide how to invest federal dollars in ecological research.

It's clear to me that early-career scientists who are self-confident and excited about their study system are most likely to submit proposals… and to keep submitting them. Their proposals improve as they hone their skills and incorporate reviewers' comments. Quickly or eventually, they succeed.

What does this have to do with OTS? Many leading ecologists of my generation took an OTS course. Their experiences in tropical forests with peers and mentors ignited a passion for ecology that clearly persisted. And, the funding opportunities OTS made

available directly to them -- importantly, not through their major professor -- gave them confidence that they could succeed in the funding arena. It’s still a recipe for success.