Magid Abou-Gharbia has a message for pharmaceutical industry scientists wondering what is next for them in this age of severe R&D cuts: There is life after pharma. More important, he says, "It's a good life after pharma."

In 2008, after 26 years at Wyeth, where he was senior vice president of chemical and screening sciences, Abou-Gharbia took a leap of faith and accepted a position in academia. Now the head of the Moulder Center for Drug Discovery Research at Temple University, Abou-Gharbia is navigating a new world by applying lessons learned in his old one.

Abou-Gharbia, 60, is part of a growing roster of pharmaceutical scientists who have left industry for academia. Some became disillusioned by the way research was conducted within big pharma and were looking for a change; others were pushed out in the wave of layoffs and found stability within the walls of academia. Most have landed at a handful of university-run drug discovery institutes (C&EN, April 20, 2009, page 29), such as the one Abou-Gharbia has put together in Philadelphia.

For Abou-Gharbia, who had a long and prosperous career in industry, the idea of returning to academia had been percolating since graduate school. "Researchers learn a lot from the literature, and I felt an obligation to give back to the literature and educate future generations," he says.

His shift comes at an opportune time. Drug firms increasingly rely on external partners to help fill their new-product pipelines, and university scientists play a critical role in conducting early research that these days is too risky for big pharma itself to pursue.

Now that he has some distance from the drug industry, Abou-Gharbia says he sees the traps it had fallen into and how academic drug discovery efforts can help it climb out. Companies had "probably grown too big," and research was spread thinly across too many therapeutic areas, he explains. Then, as fewer new products emerged, spending cuts were made to maintain the bottom line at the expense of critical knowledge centers. Over time, industry gave up some of its most valuable assets: its people.

For example, many companies simply walked away from natural products research. "Once you've dismantled those programs, it's not easy to put them back," he laments.

Now at Temple, he has the freedom to explore any program, including natural products. Even better, he's been able to assemble a small team of experienced ex-pharma scientists to do it with. The Moulder Center's staff includes a former Merck & Co. scientist and two former Wyeth colleagues. One of them is Wayne Childers, Abou-Gharbia's first Ph.D. recruit back in 1987.

Abou-Gharbia and his team are hoping that the opportunities in academia are palatable, but starting a drug discovery institute from scratch is no small feat. After all, in the beginning, the Moulder Center was pretty much just Abou-Gharbia. Although the university had provided generous start-up funding, in the early days, the center was no more than the scientist at a desk surrounded by boxes. Abou-Gharbia and his wife joked he was the head of a virtual drug discovery center.

Over time, he started to apply for and win grants, add staff, and plant the first seeds of collaboration with scientists both inside and outside of Temple. So far, the Moulder Center is working on new approaches to Alzheimer's disease with Temple Medical School professor Domenico Praticò and on cholesterol-lowering compounds with Malvern, Pa.-based Shifa Biomedical.

Now, the university is upping its commitment to the drug discovery initiative. A substantial new investment from Temple has paid for a high-throughput-screening facility, a 20,000-compound library, and virtual drug-screening capabilities. Eventually, it will bring in four more faculty members complete with start-up packages.
Meanwhile, Abou-Gharbia is trying to apply some of the lessons he learned at Wyeth while forging collaborations with academia. One issue he faced was the high price of doing research in academia. Typically, the “overhead”—the amount of money a university tacks onto a contract to cover the indirect costs of using its facilities—adds significantly to the cost of a deal. At competitive institutions, that overhead can double or triple the price tag, Abou-Gharbia explains.

When setting up shop at Temple, Abou-Gharbia wanted to ensure that costs would not deter potential partners, so he convinced the university to agree to a 13% overhead on any contracts Moulder signs. “If anyone wants to collaborate with Moulder, I have good news for you: It’s not going to cost you very much,” he says.

Then there’s the cumbersome process of getting an agreement through the bureaucracy often inherent at universities. “Academics tend to be slow—if you want to sign an agreement, it can take forever,” he says with a chuckle. Temple’s technology transfer office has worked diligently to try to speed up the process, he quickly adds.

As the Moulder Center starts to gain traction, Abou-Gharbia seems genuinely excited about its prospects. He and Childers stood recently among gigantic boxes and crates containing equipment that soon will be put to work screening the newly acquired compound library. Although his Temple digs are surely much less expansive than the labs at Wyeth, Abou-Gharbia has a look of pride as he navigates the mini-construction site. "It’s a golden time in academia," he says.