Most people ending a 40-year, high-powered industry career of international dimensions are ready to cut back—maybe do a little consulting, work on their golf game.

But Marlan Downey, who retired in July as president and CEO of ARCO International Oil and Gas Co., had tried retirement once before when he completed a tenure as president of Shell Oil Co.'s international subsidiary.

"My wife tells people that I did go to the zoo a few times with the kids," the genial geologist says of his first retirement. But in pretty short order, Downey had formed an independent exploration company. Not too long after that, ARCO asked him to help shore up its international operation.

Originally, Downey intended to work at the company only three years, but after one year he was made president of ARCO International and stayed on for six more. While he was at the helm, the international company's finding cost decreased from approximately $4 a barrel to $1.60 a barrel, and the amount of oil found tripled from 50 million barrels a year to 150 million.

Downey says much of what he did to make the company more efficient had to do more with human relations than technology problems. "A good manager is kind of like a drop of oil," he says. "You've got to move to where the friction is and cure it. Oil works a lot better than a crow bar."

When the time came for retirement number two, Downey knew himself well enough to start casting around for a new venture. "It's not so much that I wanted a new challenge," he says with a grin, "but I'm kind of like the old bull in the pasture who keeps looking around to see if anybody can beat him."

Downey had been involved in teaching at the industry level throughout his career, and the idea of passing on his knowledge to the next generation appealed to him. He was contacted by a couple of universities, including the University of Nebraska, where he had earned a master's degree. But Lincoln is a long way from Dallas, which is home base for his family.

With a nothing-ventured, nothing-gained attitude, he applied for a position at the University of Oklahoma. Not only is Norman just a three-hour drive from Dallas, but he also approved of the effort under way at OU to bring energy education and research programs more in line with the multidisciplinary approach used by industry.

"I thought perhaps I could be a helpful agent of change," Downey says.

OU administrators were thrilled at the prospect of having someone of Downey's stature on board and created a new position tailor-made for his unique set of qualifications. Denny Bartell, an OU geology alumnus from Houston, agreed to provide support for an endowed professorship.

Downey was offered a position as geology professor and chief scientist for Sarkeys Energy Center. He accepted—on the condition that money earmarked for his salary be used instead to support research and scholarships.

The chief scientist role is perhaps the most challenging of his dual appointment. He is having to invent the
job as he goes along and envisions himself serving as a bridge between the Energy Center’s interdisciplinary programs and providing direction for collaborative research efforts.

Success in industry depends primarily on collaborative effort—not individual achievement, Downey explains. He realizes that team effort is not something that comes naturally to academia, where faculty members traditionally are rewarded for individual achievement.

“Working in teams may accomplish more, but the opportunities for credit are less clear,” he points out.

His professorial role would seem to be more clearly defined. His job is to teach students to use the scientific tools they have acquired at OU to find oil.

But being who he is and how much he has learned along the way, Downey peppers his lessons on the business of oil with practicalities—and with caution. He tells young people who have grown up thinking high tech is always better than low tech to use restraint in using all the “bells and whistles” offered by science and technology. He offers the same message when he speaks to state oil producers.

“All science is interesting, and all technology is wonderful,” he says. “Geology and geophysics are sciences, but petroleum exploration and production is a business. High-tech applications require close scrutiny to determine if and where they will make money for a company. Technologies that have a target of profitability are technologies that you want.”

A Nebraska native, Downey says he had never even heard of anyone being a geologist when he was growing up. He earned an undergraduate degree in chemistry at Peru State and did not turn to geology until graduate school, after returning from the Korean War. It was a good match. He tells his children that they should go to college to “find some field of endeavor they love so much that they would want to run to work—something they would do for a hobby.” Geology has been that way for him.

Downey regards the OU period of his life as a time of giving back. “Those of us who have been fortunate in life feel an obligation to give back to the community with time as well as money,” he says, adding that the University has given him the opportunity to support education and connect with the next generation of industry professionals.

One might expect a man with his credentials to be an overpowering presence, but the soft-spoken Downey is eminently approachable. He responds to questions thoughtfully, his answers sprinkled with examples and anecdotes. His manner is more that of a born teacher than of a man who spent the last 40 years searching for oil and running companies. But then, he also spent those years raising six children, who range in age from 11 to 39. Two of his three older children have followed his footsteps into the energy industry.

Downey has rented an apartment in Norman and spends three days a week at OU. He is committed to three years at his new job. After that, he may try retirement. Or maybe not.

—JUDITH WALL