SPECIAL EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION: ON BEING A PROFESSOR, PART II

Sandra E. Weissinger
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE

In the early days of brainstorming with Polymath’s Editor-in-Chief, Susan E. Hume, the idea to solicit papers for a special issue of the journal was exciting. We each had questions regarding how folks coped with the multiple pulls and pushes associated with work-life balance. Having these strategies articulated serves as an informal mentoring tool for those active in crafting their place as a scholar-professor in higher education. Seeing the need to continue discussions started in online public scholarship communities, such as The Feminist Wire’s forum on Black academic women’s health\(^1\) or in edited volumes, such as Presumed Incompetent (2012) or Beginning a Career in Academia (2014), we knew that our contribution would need to add in as many diverse speakers as possible – those with lived experiences on the tenure track in addition to the experiences of contingent faculty. We had no idea, however, of the great interest there would be in a call of this nature. To our surprise and delight, numerous scholars (from the United States and Canada) from a variety of disciplines met our call with insightful essays, articles, and book reviews. To this end, it was agreed upon, early in the review process, that our one-time special issue\(^2\) would have a second part.

An emergent theme of the first issue was the meaning professors made of their academic labor. Examining what writers learned about themselves and others in the classroom, on campus, and in solitude shaped the tone and impetus of the pieces. Close attention was paid to how their actions (or inactions) shape their careers and pedagogy. In short, authors of the first issue dissected the day to day process of being a professor. This theme certainly carries over into this issue, but is coupled here with an acknowledgement of the ways expectations of career trajectory, in addition to one’s full biography (from childhood on, not just upon entering the classroom), shapes each writer’s view of the academic landscape.

In this vein, a theme found in the works of Part II addresses the process of “hacking”\(^3\) the academy. One way this is accomplished is through theorizing next steps or hurdles for U.S. universities and colleges to overcome. Romero’s essay, On Being a Professor, opens the issue and draws from his lived experience of over thirty years as a professor and administrator. Romero provides insight into the issues academe will soon struggle through. Following this, Chambers discusses her journey to professorship. Working in a variety of university settings, her career has led her to the belief that instructors embrace a pedagogical approach that will increase the agency of the students who are products of specific socio-cultural environments. This pedagogical stance also provides mentoring advice for scholar-professors working with a diverse

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\(^1\) For a listing of all the pieces (or “peaces”) in this forum, please see http://thefeministwire.com/2012/11/take-care-notes-on-the-black-academic-womens-health-forum/

\(^2\) The first part of this two issue special, On Being a Professor, can be found here: https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/polymath/index

\(^3\) While the wording, “hacking,” is germane to the book review by Wend (featured in this issue), I have appropriated it to discuss the strategies – sometimes crafted from labor that is hard (emotionally and physically) and rewarding – used in the career trajectories noted by the authors featured in both issues. That is, sometimes strategies are not deliberate, but learned in the process of becoming a professor out of sheer will and strength to endure.
student body. The last essay, from Caraballo, discusses the need to juggle and blend multiple identities as one enters the gates of higher education institutions. In these pieces, we see humanism and Black feminist thought come alive. There is no one way to be a professor. Rather, we must examine how our biographies and lived experiences constantly shape the ways we craft survival strategies upon taking on the role and/or status of being a professor.

The articles of this issue also pick up on the lessons brought to light in the essays. Trinidad addresses how her standpoint, as a first generation scholar from a low-income immigrant family, shaped her journey towards becoming a tenure track professor and the development of her critical and emancipatory pedagogy. Similarly, Cooke addresses how the gaze and perceptions of colleagues powerfully shape one’s identity – leading one to confront microaggressions, tokenism, invisibility, and hyper-visibility. Here, the author speaks to how she has developed coping strategies during her journey as a professor. These strategies have empowered her to stay at the academic table. Bates and Boreland finish the section of articles by providing a case study which examines the role of informal mentoring (fitting in), the burden of service work (for women, especially those working in STEM fields) and stresses associated with work-life balance. All of these shapes whether one advances or stalls out at lower professional ranks. The combination of hacking strategies, born out of experience and biography, is both candid and empowering. When paired with the works of issue one, readers are challenged to view academic labor as multifaceted and the product of diverse models of resiliency.

This issue concludes with a selection of book reviews which address, broadly, the themes of both special journal issues. Kelly examines the edited volume Generation X Professors Speak - a collection of essays by eleven professors whose gaze is colored by a specific generational context. Romero reviews Presidencies Derailed, a study of several derailed or failed college presidencies. Wend finishes this issue with his review of Hacking the Academy, an edited collection which examines how technology can be of benefit to the academy – revitalizing how knowledge is shared by infusing social media, for example, into learning sessions.

In sharing the multiple ways academic laborers view and navigate their roles in the space, it is my hope that readers will appropriate pedagogical and work-life balance tools that assist them in their own construction of what it means to be a professor. Throughout the life of one’s career, the lessons of these written works provide concrete examples of what Audre Lorde so astutely called radical thinkers and activist to do in the 1980s. Regardless of the circumstance or interaction, we can build effective and long lasting survival tools if only we learn to metabolize and use every experience to our benefit (1984, p. 135). Specific to the work of professors, every experience (good or ill) can be used to build individual coping tactics and to provide mentoring advice for the generation of academic laborers to follow.

REFERENCES