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

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Society largely sees the work of professors as leisurely and rewarding1, even as the voices of those with lived experience in these roles address the lack of job security faced by many2, the overwhelming debt that haunts them3, and daily microaggressions and glass ceilings which one must negotiate4. This is not to say that being a professor is unrewarding, rather it is to document that this experience is layered and is not immune to the issues of inequality which frame social interactions outside of the university gates5.

This special issue, the first of two issues, brings together a diverse group reflecting on the reality of this career path. This interdisciplinary cadre is made up of those in the fields of Educational Research, Human Resource Development, Psychology and Counseling, Marketing, Rhetoric, Creative Writing, Literature, and even Biology. While clearly trained in a multitude of fields, these scholars agree that work–life balance is a struggle, that teaching well is overwhelming – especially when seeking to address the needs of those at the margins, and that our own resiliency is called into question, perhaps more often than we’d like to admit. Authors of four essays, three articles, and three book reviews illuminate role conflict and strain with candid reflections. Taken together, it is clear that while no career path is without stress, the daily negotiations academics face is under reported and in need of greater discussion.

This issue opens with a provocative and honest deconstruction of what makes a professor. More than struggling for educational attainment, the lived experiences of professors are colored by poverty6, health issues, heartbreak and humanist responses to those they are charged to educate. Essayist Robby Nadler pinpoints what teacher–scholars across the nation struggle with daily: the sacrifices involved in teaching well, even as we attempt to navigate an untenable economic system which casts our labor off as next to meaningless.

Nanette Norris examines her place of work and the challenges of attracting and retaining women at military schools. The transition between civilian versions of gender and military versions of conformity is immediately challenging to young women cadets. While conformity is called for in this space, gender differences within the classroom persist. Norris is reflective, questioning how her role as a professor can be used to foster a supportive, inclusive environment (via classroom management) in which all students learn humanitarianism and critical thinking – the struggle between military discipline and academic aims. In other words, much like Nadler, Norris' essay considers how professors “challenge, awaken, and maintain the living, individual mind of the student in spite of the pressures towards commonality and sameness.”

The essays and articles which follow shift from a focus on pedagogy to examining the connection of professors to various other aspects that impact their work. Addressing the task of making a place for one's self, Theri A. Pickens describes being a professor as a constant performance. Here, the performance extends past the

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1 See Jaschik’s (2013) article for Inside Higher Ed regarding the original study produced by CareerCast.
2 For example, see Anwar (2013) for a discussion of how Ph.D. candidates are seeking alternative employment options for fear of being unemployed. Or see, Cottom’s (2014) examination of the fates of Black academics who, disproportionately serve as adjuncts. Lastly, see both the article and comments following Marshall’s (2014) reflection of adjunct work.
3 Recently, consultant and author Karen Kelsky (2014) created an open and anonymous spreadsheet in which Ph.D. recipients noted the total amount of debt accumulated while attaining the degree. While the amount varies, it is of interest to look at how individuals plan to repay their debts. In a good number of cases, the answers are not clear or stable.
4 See Owens (2012) for examples of how microaggressions create human waste and poor health.
5 Kreuter (2014) concisely addresses the intersection of material resources (or lack of) and the emotional attachments professors have to their work. He argues that those of us who are blind to issues of stagnant pay (for example) are complicit in our own exploitation. That is, even as we love the work that we do, we are in fact doing work that deserves reasonable compensation.
6 Not the government established poverty line, but the inability to make ends meet because of debilitating student loans, low starting pay, and anti-moonlighting clauses. Even while employed at a university, the vast majority of teaching professionals have difficulty making ends meet.

classroom or work space and into the private worlds of academic laborers. This performance is dictated by access to significant relationships (we often uproot ourselves for jobs), time, transportation, work-life balance and community. Within the lonely space of being a professor, work-based relationships are only partially fulfilling. Writing, however, serves as a safe haven. Though it should not take the place of interpersonal community building, Pickens warns that because academic spaces push us towards isolation and relationships for the sake of achieving a task, writing serves as an action that allows us to access our humanity and build, at least, an intellectual community.

Martha Cummings' fictional work, at times, mirrors on-the-ground classroom interactions as it highlights some of the worst teaching practices one can imagine. These practices are brought on by job burnout. Despite the many sleepless nights teacher–scholars spend brainstorming how they might avoid what Cummings describes, burnout does happen. Striking a nerve, Cummings picks up on the apathy the public has for professors who tire of their jobs or lose their way. She states “there is no room for self-pity ...You signed up for this. You asked for it, went to graduate school, got a full-time job, a tenure track position. Tenure, for God's sake...And you only teach 30 weeks a year. No one will ever feel sorry for you.” But it is not self-pity that the main character of this piece is after. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that professors lose their way or grow out of their roles within universities. The empathetic and astute will recognize that Cummings is calling for a larger discussion of what happens to professors after burnout.

C. Amelia Davis and Mary Alice Varga begin a collection of articles for this issue. As the two newly named Ph.D.s question their authority, knowledge and drive to have successful careers in their respective fields, they deliver to us their unique road map for becoming professors. The authors document the transition between doctoral candidates and working professors using autoethnography. Their candid reflections provide readers with practical tips on what to expect. First, unrealistic expectations and doubt are part of the early years of this transition. Second, this is a job that requires constant learning, reflection, and sacrifice.

The tips provided by Davis and Varga are time intensive, however. Implementing them does shape, perhaps negatively, one's ability to maintain work–life balance. According to the truly interdisciplinary cadre of authors behind The Life of a Professor: Stress and Coping, balance is hard to achieve and pushes professors to consider leaving tenure track positions. This multi-state, multi-method study documents how stress (and possible burnout) is linked to the perceived levels of social and institutional support available to participants.

This issue closes with a selection of book reviews. The first, from Jaclyn Peterson, examines the book Experiences of Single African-American Women Professors: With this Ph.D., I Thee Wed by Electra S. Gilchrist. Whereas the essays and articles of this issue explore multiple types of career stresses, this edited book documents how work–life balance issues manifest in the lives of single African American women in the academy. Aldemaro Romero reviews Letters to a Young Scientist – a text which serves as a mix between mentorship and autobiography and provides advice on ethics, scientific integrity, and dealing with setbacks in one's career. Lastly, Christian Norman's review of This Assignment is So Gay: LGBTIQ Poets on the Art of Teaching, explores the lived experiences and impact of LGBTIQ educators, teaching at the secondary and college levels.

Taken together, this special issue counters the assumption that academic labor is leisurely and places an emphasis on the great diversity of experiences to be had in this career field. More than this, each piece serves to provide examples and action steps for those struggling to make sense of what it means to be a professor.

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7 This diverse collection of authors are trained in the fields of Curriculum and Instruction, Human Resource Development, Psychology and Counseling, Marketing, and Nursing.
REFERENCES


