

Sibbald, T. M., & Handford, V. (Eds.). (2017). *The academic gateway: Understanding the journey to tenure*. Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press. Pages: 270. ISBN: 9780776624372.

Reviewed by: Summer Cowley, University of Toronto

The Academic Gateway: Understanding the Journey to Tenure is a collection of personal narratives of Canadian tenure-track university professors in faculties of Education. Read as a whole, *The Academic Gateway* tells a story of the difficult path that new professors must walk as they seek permanent acceptance into academia: the tenure track process. The personal narratives in *The Academic Gateway* read like a story told in reverse, with the initial chapters focusing on the last steps of obtaining tenure, and the final chapters focusing on the first steps in the process. Despite some weaknesses in editorial choices, the organization of the book helps to build the sensation of walking slowly backward from a goal (obtaining tenure) to one's first tenure-track position, providing a valuable virtual tour of the "ten-year road to tenure" (p. 217). The experience of reading this book may give prospective academics (both doctoral students and professionals) an immersive sense of understanding the highs and lows they may experience as they seek tenure. For readers already on the tenure track, the narratives shared in this book will likely include very familiar questions, concerns, and realizations.

Themes and Goals

The editors' intention in publishing this book is to attempt to demystify the process of seeking tenure, and in this regard, they have been successful. *The Academic Gateway* provides the reader with multiple views into the process of seeking tenure and shares the many ways in which that process can be frustrating, confusing, lonely, painful, and exhausting. In each chapter telling the story of difficulties experienced along the tenure-track, the authors also include moments of accomplishment, pleasure, and hopefulness. Each personal narrative included in this book tells the story of an individual whose efforts may be relatable to the reader's own forays into academia.

The editors state that, since the authors are employed in faculties of Education, certain aspects of the stories will apply more directly to teachers or other education professionals but contend that the book as a whole is somewhat relatable to a broader audience. This, however, does not seem to be the case. Although it is true that connections can be made between the narratives of Education professors and those from other disciplines, this book speaks very directly to people who have worked as education professionals and does little to address professionals transitioning into academia from a broader range of disciplines. *The Academic Gateway* reads as though it was written by teachers in academia, for teachers in academia, rather than for academics in general.

The book succeeds in its goal of providing information that creates a deeper understanding of the process of seeking tenure; each chapter provides insight into the lived experience of seeking tenure that would not be accessible through training materials or research articles alone. The personal anecdotes and reflections of each author create a sense of being told a story in confidence, by a person who feels that they can trust you. The candor of the personal narratives gives the book great worth as a collection of novel insights into a process in which it "is not clear in advance how it will develop" (p. 1).

Organization and Style

In the introduction, the editors state that the book has been organized into four sections: Section I, Late Tenure-Track; Section II, Tenure Track Collaboration; Section III, Mid-Tenure-track; and Section IV, Ear-

ly Tenure-Track. The narrative format used in most of the chapters makes each chapter feel like a story, rather than a traditional and predictable academic text. The style and format of each piece of writing create an approachability in the book that may make it a pleasant and informative reading for teachers, students, and researchers of education. Rather than painting a picture of an elite “ivory tower”, this book depicts a brick and mortar edifice by describing the lives of the people who are helping to construct and maintain the building. The down-to-earth accounts of academia begin with stories from relative experts and end with stories from relative novices.

The book’s sections are well-organized in relation to each other, with the notable exception of Section II, “Tenure-Track Collaboration”. Although its chapters provide valuable insight into the tenure process for writing groups, Indigenous persons, and people in co-mentoring relationships, Section II feels distinctly out of place. Reading the book from beginning to end, this section halts the flow of the stories that are being told in the late, middle, and early tenure-track sections. The book’s aim of giving a “view of the process that begins with the end in mind” (p. 2) and working towards the beginning was broken by the inclusion of the chapters in this Section. If this book were to be re-organized with its current content, this section on collaboration would have been better placed at the end, directly before the short conclusion, “Tenure Track Advice”. Given that the editors point to the chapters in Section II as “a call to action to address a multitude of issues that are apparent within the single-author chapters” (p. 77) and describe the “Tenure Track Advice” chapter as reflective of chapter authors’ advice on specific issues they had noted, the two sections seem like they would connect well. The inclusion of Section II at the end of the book, however, may have felt like the beginning of a new story, separate from the stories being told in the personal narratives, because of the departure from the style of writing in the other sections. This may be a sign that the writings in this section would have been better included in a different book whose focus was on collaboration.

Aside from the positioning of Section II, *The Academic Gateway’s* chapters are arranged in a thought-provoking and emotionally evocative manner. It is difficult to read from the stories of those nearly at the end of the tenure track to those just starting out and not to feel a growing sense of unease and uncertainty about one’s own journey along the path to tenure. The slow and subtle buildup of anxiety provoked by reading “backward” in time through the tenure track process will be unsettlingly relatable for academics on their own tenure-track trek.

Impressions on Each Section

“Late Tenure Track”, Section I of *The Academic Gateway*, provides a somewhat comforting description of the experience leading up to final preparations for a tenure application. The authors in this section share their reflections on the emotional, mental, and physical efforts of the process of the tenure-track and of developing in the traditional “tripartite definition” (p. 6) of tenure as comprising research, teaching, and service. The authors in this section describe their journeys to tenure in faculties of Education using fairly traditional means: prioritize research and publication, do not let a love of teaching take over your work life, and perform service strategically. The assuredness and organization of thought in the chapters of this Section cause the book to begin with a sense of understanding of the tenure-track process, and some confidence in the goal of attaining tenure as reasonable. Section I contains an encouraging set of narratives, leaving the reader with the sense that seeking tenure is a sensible decision to make.

Section II, “Tenure-Track Collaboration”, does not fit well into the book’s status as a story told in reverse; this point has been addressed above in detail and will not be belabored here. Taken as a collection of chapters, separate from the larger scope of the book, the writings in this Section emphasize and demonstrate the value of collaborative writing and research practices. In this section, the authors exemplify positive collaborative practices through communicating mutual respect and positivity in their joint writing. The benefit of this section is, largely, that a shared research and writing practice is made to seem achievable and productive, as the chapters exude unity in voice and consistency in message. The value of the writing in this Section stands out, and one can understand the editors’ choice to include the chapters. However, the break in continuity between Section II and the other three sections casts a pall over the otherwise informative set of chapters in this section.

In Section III, “Mid-Tenure Track”, the book returns to the story of the tenure-track process in reverse. In this section, the norms surrounding research, teaching, and service are treated more gingerly than in Section I, although with developing certainty and ease about their significance to tenure decisions. The

uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the process of seeking tenure begins to rise in Section III, and the authors describe their work in terms of the transitions that they are making. The authors of this section share a sense of questioning surrounding their transitions from successful previous career paths into academia. Mental health, work-life balance, and self-doubt appear to chase the authors in years one to two of their tenure-track process. The struggles described paint a picture of the middle portion of the tenure track as tiring, uncertain, and difficult. Fortunately, for anyone planning to seek a tenured career in academia, each author describes the process as challenging but bearable, and worth the effort. The chapter closes with hope, delivered via an account of navigating positive and negative experiences to arrive at a point of moderate stability and growing feelings of accomplishment and confidence.

In Section IV, “Early Tenure Track”, the accounts of the authors seeking tenure will begin to sound very familiar to readers who have just begun their own search for tenure. The authors in this section are new to the tenure-track process; the editors state that the section authors were less than a year along in the process at the time of their first-draft submission. Having just gained a tenure-track position, the authors write about their feelings of wonder, anxiety, and a sense that they are starting over in their careers. At this early point in the tenure track process, it appears the authors have just begun to realize the effects of their decision to seek tenure and the difficulties that they may have unleashed upon themselves. This section closes the story in reverse at the beginning of the tenure-track process.

Overall Experience of Reading the Book

Reading *The Academic Gateway* from beginning to end creates a sense of growing uncertainty and unease regarding the process of seeking and gaining tenure. The anxiety that builds through each section of this book could be seen as a cautionary note: consider the act of seeking tenure in full, from end to beginning, and imagine how one’s own narrative of the experience might unfold. As readers currently walking along the tenure-track path may note, the power of hope and resilience can be very beneficial when traveling through challenging terrain. As each tenure-track reader or tenure-track hopeful moves along their path in academia, the narratives from this book suggest that the journey will require a strong sense of identity and determination. Despite the many different authors of this book’s chapters, *The Academic Gateway* provides a consistent overall message that the process of seeking tenure is challenging, stressful, and intrinsically rewarding. As each reader seeking to attain tenure travels their own path towards their goal, reflecting upon the narratives in this book may provide motivation or solace in knowing that, despite possible feelings of isolation, they are not alone.

Editor's Note: This book is the winner of the INDES award in the category of Adult Non-Fiction, Career.