Perspectives – The Road to Tenure

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As we reflect on the many months spent preparing for this Special Issue, we are reminded that it was actually several years back when we first pondered this possibility. It all began four and one-half years ago, when we decided to confide in one another as to our experiences as new hires. We sought deeper-meaning and a heightened understanding of the many confusing and conflicting messages received on how to successfully navigate the road to tenure. After engaging in our one-on-one dialogues for approximately one year, we realized the power and potential, as new faculty hires, when we connected with one another to share our stories. We continued our dialogues for the next three years – out of this evolved a powerful experience of peer support and mentorship. It was at this time that we extended an invitation to other novice faculty members, representative from across Faculties of Education in Canadian universities, to share their experiences and perspectives on "navigating the road to tenure." We anticipated a significant response, expecting that many new faculty would welcome a safe space within which to share tensions and insights gathered and gained along the tenure-track highway.

In retrospect, we naïvely and significantly underestimated the courage it would take for our Canadian colleagues to reflect upon and share stories of a learning journey fraught with twists and turns, at a time when documenting these stories might bump up against the comfort and expectations of those who would ultimately determine if and when tenure and promotion were granted. We anxiously awaited the draft submissions to arrive in the mail from interested authors. They were slow in coming. We pondered if this Special Issue would ever be realized!

Although initial interest was significant, numerous individuals identified conflicting emotions of motivation and hesitation to respond to our call. Specifically, we received telephone calls and emails, but very few proposals at the onset. Several novice faculty members self-identified as feeling alone and isolated as Assistant Professors. Of

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common concern was that submitting a paper for publication on this topic was a risky move and not the smartest thing to do at this point in a (tenure-bound) Assistant Professor's career. Several individuals noted that the politics within the Faculty or the university at large were such that making public the "dark side" of the tenure-track experience would not be received well by those in positions of power. Others, however, said that connecting with peers to share stories of the tenure-track experience would be therapeutic, healing, and affirming. The tenure-track pathway was described as lonely and circuitous, a maze of sorts, and that by connecting individual experiences to a larger narrative would, at the very least, combat some feelings of isolation.

Those who chose not to submit, in spite of their desire to do so, shared both a common concern and hesitation to be truthful at this particular and sensitive time in their tenure-bound process. Specifically, openness and honesty might ultimately stand in the way of attaining tenure and promotion. The most powerful response we received insinuated committing career suicide by challenging the existing hegemony that governed tenure and promotion. As our call invited prospective authors to provide an autoethnographic account of their navigation through the tenure-track university landscape, there would be no anonymity of authorship. We understood and appreciated the hesitancy and array of expressed concerns.

It became apparent that writing about the high points of navigating the tenure-track process would not be a problem for new faculty members who were considering submitting a manuscript for this Special Issue. Presenting a critical view on inequities of workload and power relations, and dissecting what is often referred to as the illusion of meritocracy was, however, another story. Academic freedom, an expression of views and perspectives without fear of reproach or reprimand, was not the perception or lived reality of many non-tenured faculty. The expressed belief was that the very academic freedom espoused throughout the hallowed halls of academia was, in fact, not a freedom at all for many who had not yet been granted tenure. We then acknowledged the courage it would take for individuals to respond to our invitation and to submit a story, free of censure, addressing the tenure-track pathway from a variety of perspectives.

In spite of the many challenges, we also received encouragement from several senior, tenured faculty members from various Canadian universities. Navigating the tenure-track pathway was cited as an important topic that deserved attention. We were also reminded that to

write about the tenure-track experience as an untenured faculty member took courage, as it is likely that some historical and conservative attitudes towards tenure and promotion would be challenged. We also received support from Dr. Ian Winchester, Editor of the *Journal of Educational Thought*, to continue with this project. We are grateful to Dr. Winchester for providing space in this Special Issue to address this topic.

After much discussion, we circulated a communiqué indicating an extension of the due date for submission of proposals. Several weeks passed and a number of papers to process through blind-peer review trickled in. Over time, we had received 30 submissions. The initial time frame provided to submit had been too tight; our Canadian colleagues required a more generous allotment of time and space to ponder the pros and cons of responding to our invitation. Several individuals indicated that they had consulted their Dean prior to responding. This was an enlightening process in that we soon realized that the academic freedom that tenure was designed to support was perceived or experienced as being diminished and/or at risk by those same individuals who were seeking tenure and contemplating responding to the call. In essence, many felt at risk to share stories that challenged the very academic and political positions, perspectives, and practices of colleagues who held power over them in the granting of tenure and promotion.

To all those who chose *not* to submit, in spite of an interest to do so, we extend a sincere thank you. We are grateful that you took the time to share your concerns with us as this contributed to a deepened sensitivity in our communication with and understanding of other colleagues. Your candor also called us to reflect on our own hesitancies, concerns, tensions, and respective learning journeys as novice academics. We encourage you to continue to reflect and to document your tenure-track experiences and to one day share your learning journey with others. In this way, we all actively participate in a network of conversations that can only serve to benefit other tenure-bound sojourners.

Final selection of papers was difficult. Throughout the blind peer-review process reviewers indicated that submissions were moving, enlightening, and often inspirational. We are grateful to *all* individuals who submitted manuscripts, regardless of whether or not your stories have been published in this journal. Although all were worthy of publication, we were limited in our selection by the realities of clock time and journal space. Subsequently, selected manuscripts contained within

reflect diversity of experience, culture, perspective, theoretical framework, gender, geographical location, and length of time in academia. It is beyond this diversity, however, that we as novice faculty in connecting to the larger narrative, experience oneness, a common ground of sorts that illuminates the challenges, trials, and tribulations encountered along the way to tenure.

The articles in this Special Issue are sequenced from the Atlantic Provinces to the West Coast. All call forth the need for transparency of procedure and process, for mentoring, and for thoughtful, purposeful, and intentional, supportive relationships to help guide novice faculty to tenure. All faculty members, tenured and untenured, have a role and responsibility to one another and to this process. Coming together as community in support of one another will have significant benefits and will contribute to a culture of care and collaboration, versus competition and control.

In spite of the rapidly shifting landscape that continues to impact and shape university culture(s), articles published within suggest that the tenure-track process and experience have not significantly changed over the years. Granted, some articles refer to novice faculty members benefitting from mentors who generously share their knowledge and time in support of achieving tenure and promotion. We too acknowledge some of the thoughtful, purposeful, and intentional initiatives within our own Faculty of Education, specifically designed to address the many challenges and tensions experienced by newer faculty on the way to tenure. Frequent reference is made, however, to the importance of seeking out other novice academics, and connecting with one another through dialogue, in an attempt to combat deep feelings of isolation, confusion, and tentativeness that typically accompany the tenure-track experience. Also significant is that few practices appear to be in place to ensure that all novice academics, within Faculties of Education, regardless of geographic location, benefit from consistency of expectation, support, practice, and process as we navigate the tenure-track pathway. Stories of support, nurturing, and mentoring are few and far between. It is our hope that these storied experiences will contribute to a deepened appreciation and understanding of the challenges in achieving tenure and promotion, and that more experienced and tenured academics will contemplate how and what they might do to extend support and guidance to newer faculty members. Only in this way can we hope to achieve the co-creation of an inclusive community that thrives, as teachers, researchers, and lifelong learners, a community

that welcomes and does not fear diversity, one that will ultimately and significantly enhance and enrich all community members who choose academia as a vocation and life path.

As for our own commitment, in the spirit of authentic relationship, and in support of vibrant and inclusive academic communities, we continue to remain present to one another as we reflect on and make deeper meaning of the good, the bad, and the ugly. We will continue to share our own experiences as we engage with newer, less experienced faculty members that we meet along the way. Bringing this Special Issue to fruition is one small step in this direction and testimony to our commitment to continue to participate in this critical discourse. Indeed, reviewing all submissions has been our greatest privilege. Let the discourse continue!

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