

## **Writing Between the Lines**

Jennifer K. Holtz, Amy L. Sedivy-Benton & Carrie J. Boden-McGill

### **Abstract**

Working toward promotion and tenure (P&T) is a large part of working as a faculty member at an institution of higher education. Through this process one provides evidence of contribution to the overall scholarly body of knowledge. However, this is affected by changes to cultural norms, administrative processes, and institutional expectations. Each of these items influences the P&T process and how individual faculty members must navigate this process. Based on the literature and described through perspectives from different universities, key strategies are identified to help others find success in an ever-changing environment. These include an awareness of the hidden curriculum, norms, beliefs, and perceptions.

*Keywords:* Hidden curriculum, promotion, tenure, evolving organizations

## **Writing Between the Lines**

Writing and publishing are integral parts of faculty life, particularly at research universities. Professors, much like apprentices in applied professions, experience progressive inculcation into the university community that spans their academic careers. A professor's standing is contingent upon reaching landmarks of success. In scholarship, common markers include transitioning from doctoral student to professor through establishing a research agenda, becoming known in the field as an expert, and achieving recognition on a national or international level. At first, it seems there is a clearly defined, though lengthy, path through the academic ranks, a sort of marathon (Vogelsmeier, Phillips, Popejoy, & Bloom, 2015).

A particular challenge for professors may come when departments and universities are in transition (Ellet, Demir, & Monsaas, 2015). Often, due to external pressures such as funding challenges and the university's strategic responses, the values, beliefs, and norms of the university evolve, and they often do so more rapidly than official policies and procedures. Research expectations might increase, as might expectations to procure external funding. This kind of implicit evolution creates conflict between the realities of professors' ordinary world and strategic ideals, as professors are asked to add new and often unfamiliar duties to the roles they were originally hired to perform (Goia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013). This rapid cultural change results in a type of hidden curriculum where the relative value of the kinds of work used as evidence during evaluation for annual review and P&T is unclear and transitory.

In this paper, we explore factors related to culture change in the literature, manifestations of those factors at universities and the resulting hidden curriculum within annual review and P&T. We offer strategies for how others may adapt to the evolving organizational environment.

### ***Literature Review***

The image of a placid academic sitting in a quiet office pondering deep thoughts might still be realistic in isolated situations, but increasingly the reality is one of multiple simultaneous, equally important responsibilities such as teaching online, dealing with the expectations of students for immediate responsiveness, both long-standing committee work (e.g., Institutional Review Board) and newer concerns (e.g., curriculum transition to e-learning and mobile formats), grant writing, and publication in an increasingly shrinking pool of prime academic journals. The contemporary reality of academic life is far removed from the traditional structure that current professors observed as students (Flores, del-Arco, & Silva, 2016). Yet, the structure of P&T remains essentially unchanged, especially regarding research and publication, despite the adoption by many universities of Boyer's more broadly conceived concept of Scholarship of Discovery and Integration (Herbert & Tienari, 2013; Hyland, 2011, 2012; Lee, 2014).

That this imbalance is stressful is clear (Hyland, 2012; Reddick, Richlen, Grasso, Reilly, & Spikes, 2012). Transitioning from dissertation to scholarship in academe is complicated by the evolving nature of contemporary universities (Flores et al., 2016). Established professors traditionally mentor junior colleagues, but when those professors are themselves learning to navigate the new nature of academia, such mentorship is of questionable value; what worked before might not work now. Formal mentoring and writing support programs appear successful (Badenhorst et al., 2013), as does at least one effort to introduce emerging scholars to life as an academic through doctoral coursework (Jalongo, Boyer, & Ebbeck, 2014). Such coursework would be valuable in easing the transition to professional responsibilities and expectations and could be expanded to address other aspects of the professoriate.

While publishers increasingly offer a variety of publishing options, the emphasis in traditional P&T structures on impact factors, acceptance rates, and a linear track cast a pall over the value of those options (Herbert & Tienari, 2013; Hyland, 2011, 2012; Lee, 2014). In an inherently interdisciplinary field such as adult education, it is typical for research to be disseminated through refereed books (Holtz, Springer, & Boden-McGill, 2014) and journals in collaborating fields (Downing & Holtz, 2012). It is critical for new academics to understand the challenges that exist for publishing in their fields when establishing a research track. Networking, too, is essential. Social media has greatly

expanded the opportunities for networking available to professors, which traditionally relied on conference attendance and robust populations of department colleagues. Instead, social media sites such as Twitter for Academics and Facebook for Academics (Scoble, n.d.) can widen a professor's network of possible collaborators at minimal expense.

Networking is also key to establishing coping strategies (Reddick et al., 2012). While one might believe that strategies that worked for the dissertation should transfer to academe, those skills may not be sufficient. Whereas the dissertation is largely a solitary endeavor—acknowledgement sections notwithstanding—collaboration in academia is not simply a trend; it is mandatory. Collaborative research is favored by granting agencies and, increasingly, P&T committees. Developing collaborations include establishing authorship status and position, because, conversely, traditional P&T structures still favor first-author and single-author publications (Day, Delangrange, Palmquist, Pemberton, & Walker, 2013; Herbert & Tienari, 2013; Hyland, 2011, 2012). Badenhorst et al. (2013) described a faculty writing group that succeeded largely because it successfully juggled changing workloads, accounted for shared authorship and, coincidentally, became a source for participants to “negotiate academic cultures” (p. 10012), which was not an initial intent. It further allowed for individualism, for those solitary souls who prefer to write alone but need support to fit a structured writing opportunity into their lives.

The literature described clearly supports that the changing nature of the professoriate raises challenges for both veteran and new faculty members. While each individual has concerns not necessarily shared by others, there are sufficient similarities to detect trends and propose navigational aids. The following author vignettes demonstrate the lessons to be shared through reflection on the commonalities.

### ***Promotion and Tenure in a Time of Organizational Change: Amy's Story***

I entered a university as a new faculty member, having come from a non-profit organization. My only exposure to the tenure process was as graduate assistant to my untenured advisor. When she went up for tenure, I found the largest three-ring binders available and spent hours at the copier and hole punch to assemble the binder properly, but I had little awareness of what was going on behind the scenes. In my first tenure-track position, I began to feel the immense pressure to start my own binder. Despite being a person who likes deadlines and checklist specifics, all I found was a broad P&T policy; the most transparent part of that process was the Provost's deadline for receipt of materials.

I scoured the literature and found several books, including one (Bakken & Simpson, 2011) that implied the process was somewhat standard, regardless of location. The

dean met with junior faculty, explaining what was required in teaching, scholarship, and service. It seemed straightforward until I completed my yearly faculty evaluation and discovered that what I was being evaluated on were not the things being asked of me for P&T and not what I had read in the literature.

I spent the next years networking with successfully tenured colleagues, exploring how I fit within my program, department, and university. I determined the expectations of a faculty member, the work I needed to do, and how to begin publishing. A new P&T committee was elected, and an ad hoc committee was charged to align annual reviews with P&T expectations. There would now be third-year reviews for junior faculty. Yet, the third year brought a new provost and complete restructuring of the university. Out of desperation, I forged relationships with peers who were up for third-year reviews, which sparked collaboration, support, and, ultimately, a successful review. Through the arrival of yet another Dean and more reorganization, I continued building upon the successes in my third-year review. A last-minute demand by the Provost that dossiers be externally reviewed was not written university policy but was conveyed by my chair, and I had those letters when I submitted my materials. At this point, the university had a new provost, a new dean, and an entirely new P&T committee; I had to cull all of what I believed to be right and submit.

If you are approaching P&T during organizational change, keep in mind the following recommendations.

1. Make sure you are aware of changes in the university and that expectations tend to shift. Being proactive rather than reactive in working through the process can work to your benefit, even if it means extra work; my external reviews were very much to my advantage.
2. Appearance matters. For example, I wanted to print evidence on both sides of the paper when compiling my evidence binder, but there is value in having that large five-inch binder full of my work.
3. Let your work speak for itself. Create evidence that can stand alone if you are not there to defend it to any discipline. Ensuring that my work was linear prevented readers from trying to make their own, possibly incorrect, connections. Create the connections for them.
4. Know your audience. Understand the changes in your organization: Who will read your dossier?
5. Create a cohort of peers who are going up for promotion and tenure, even across disciplines. Share information and views. Unless you are at a Research I university, the P&T process is not a competition.

### ***Five Lessons Learned through Interdisciplinarity: Carrie's Story***

In my career, I held academic appointments in three different disciplines, housed in four different colleges, and situated in three separate institutions that are vastly different in terms of mission, size, cost, location, and populations served. Despite these differences, the official processes and procedures for annual review and P&T were nearly identical; what was different for each was the writing between the lines, or hidden curriculum, and it needed to be mastered. In reflecting on the experiences, the same five skills could be leveraged in each context; it was honing these that allowed me to successfully navigate the annual review process and to earn P&T.

1. *Obey the Signs.* There are many instructions for annual review and P&T, including departmental governance documents, departmental procedural documents, faculty handbooks, university policy and procedure statements, trustee policies, and system policies. Because these resources are freely available, it is possible that no one will advise you to read them. Read them. There is no substitute for understanding the system. Your audience is a group of professors, accustomed to giving and grading assignments; if you are applying for tenure and the documentation requires eight articles with at least two in top-tier journals, make sure you meet this standard exactly. That it is essential for you to understand and follow directions might sound simple, but in most negative annual reviews and denied tenure or promotion cases I have seen, not obeying the signs (i.e., not meeting minimum standards as described in official documentation) was the major reason.
2. *Read the Writing on the Wall.* Work-related gossip is the equivalent of street graffiti. Knowing what is written on the wall tells you what you need to know about the environment. Focus on what you can learn about quantity and quality of publications expected. Have you heard that one publication a year is sufficient for now, but next year it will be two? Are there rumors about adding metrics in a way that has not been considered before? Are you hearing conflicting stories about the value of impact versus downloads? Did alt metrics seem unimportant last year but suddenly they are on nearly everyone's radar this year? Ask questions and seek answers to help you navigate which decisions and strategies are in your best interests.
3. *Solve the Word Jumble.* You seek advice about P&T from a trusted colleague. The colleague provides examples of why proceeding in a specific direction makes sense, and you follow the advice. Then you receive conflicting advice, 180 degrees in the opposite direction. Or, perhaps, you see someone who was

successful doing exactly what your trusted colleague told you not to do. The result is panic and cognitive dissonance. What used to be perfectly ordered in your mind is now disordered. The strategy that seemed clear and spelled out from steps A through Z is now just a bunch of letters. This is the career equivalent of the word jumble, and only you can solve it. You must decide whether to abandon strategy or select a new one, whether to pursue a social media presence, to chase a funding stream, to write a monograph, or engage in a community project. Select the solution that puts the letters back in the way that makes the most intuitive sense to you. Trust yourself.

4. *Unveil all that is Written in Invisible Ink.* Be prepared for this. There will be rules and requirements that are not included with the official documents but are nonetheless deal breakers if they are not followed. Here are some examples from my personal experience. “For the tenure dossier, \_\_\_\_\_ document must be placed in a red folder.” This “rule” was written in a memo that was not distributed with tenure and promotion materials. Without having gone through the process before, there was no way to know that one must ask for the memo. Another example, “The first notebook for the tenure portfolio must be printed on 28 lb. acid-free paper.” This rule was not mentioned anywhere in writing, but I did overhear a committee member telling another applicant to make sure to use “acceptable paper.” This prompted me to ask the question of a committee member: “What is acceptable paper?” The answers are available; they are just written in invisible ink. That is, they are hidden within the university’s organization in people who have the tacit knowledge of the processes. So, like applying heat to the paper of a message written in invisible ink, you need to seek out administrative assistants, staff, committee members, and faculty who have recently completed the process who can tell you the unwritten and abstruse rules.
5. *Write Your Story in Your Voice.* There are no documents more important than the narratives you write contextualizing your own academic work, such as cover letters for annual review and statements of contributions in P&T dossiers. Because these are not published, many scholars throw them together at the last minute or otherwise give them short shrift. Yet, only you can tell the story of your vitae in a way that justifies decisions, connects pieces that might not be apparent to a casual reader, and contextualizes what your work means and why it is important. Do not assume that even familiar readers (e.g., friendly colleagues) ascribe the same meaning to your work that you do. This is an opportunity for you to choose the metrics, make the argument, and respond to expectations in the department/college/university in a way that is right and genuine for you.



Write this in your own voice. Work ahead. Ask for feedback. Make sure it is widely known that you take the review process every bit as seriously as your work.

### ***Discussion***

Common to the situations described in the vignettes are emphases on both knowing the landscape (e.g., the cultural norms, administrative processes, institutional expectations, trends in one's field) and knowing how to best present oneself in that landscape.

Underlying all the advice is the need to network, but in a strategic way. Recall the tenet of saturation from qualitative research; faculty should continue asking questions until the answers are being repeated sufficiently often to indicate saturation. Subsequently, they must remember who provided the answers that reached saturation and consider those persons as resources to be cultivated. Who and what were their resources?

Faculty must self-advocate. When one of the authors (J.H.) could not find a saturated answer to an important question, she scheduled an appointment with the university provost and was honest about what she wanted to discuss. Not only was the question answered decisively, but incorrect information on the university website disappeared and was replaced by correct information, which was subsequently mailed to all administrative units. As in the vignettes, faculty must use their own voices to their own benefit and let their work speak for itself.

### ***Conclusion***

Evolving organizations present challenges to tradition. Higher education is experiencing rapid changes, and universities must be responsive to societal, government, and accreditation expectations: wider access to an increasingly diverse population; relevant and state-of-the-art programming; and increased quality with decreased funding. This environment, as discussed in the vignettes, has a dramatic impact on faculty members, who face in annual review and P&T processes a hidden curriculum where expectations may increase rapidly and misalign with other, more traditional aspects of academic work. Strategies for successful navigation of the changing landscape belong in the professional skillset of every academic, although opportunities to develop those skills are uncommon in doctoral programs and informal in the work environment. Professors must be proactive in identifying and meeting their learning needs.

## References

- Badenhorst, C. M., Penney, S., Pickett, S., Joy, R., Hesson, J., Young, G., McLeod, H., Vaandering, D., & Li, X. (2013). Writing relationships: Collaboration in a faculty writing group. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 5(1), 1001-10026.
- Bakken, J. P., & Simpson, C. D. (2011). *A survival guide for new faculty members: Outlining the keys to success for promotion and tenure*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
- Day, M., Delagrange, S. H., Palmquist, M., Pemberton, M. A., & Walker, J. R. (2013). What we really value: Redefining scholarly engagement in tenure and promotion protocols. *College Composition and Communication*, 65(1), Special Issue: The Profession, 185-208.
- Downing, K. F. & Holtz, J. K. (2012). Best practices for online paleontology instruction. *Journal of Paleontology Special Issue: Teaching Paleontology in the 21st Century*, 12, 157-169.
- Ellet, C., Demir, K., & Monsaas, J. (2015). Science and mathematics faculty responses to a policy-based initiative: Change processes, self-efficacy beliefs, and department culture. *Innovative Higher Education*, 40(2), 127-141.
- Flores, Ò., del-Arco, I., & Silva, P. (2016). The flipped classroom model at the university: Analysis based on professors' and students' assessment in the educational field. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 13(12), 1-12. doi:10.1186/s41239-016-0022-1
- Goia, D. A., Patvardhan, S. D., Hamilton, A. L., & Corley, K. G. (2013). Organizational identity formation and change. *Academy of Management Annals*, 7(1), 123-193.
- Herbert, A., & Tienari, J. (2013). Transplanting tenure and the (re)construction of academic freedoms. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(2), 157-173.
- Holtz, J. K., Springer, S. B., & Boden-McGill, C. J., Eds. (2014). *Building sustainable futures for adult learners*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Hyland, K. (2011). Writing in the university: education, knowledge and reputation. *Language Teaching*, 46(1), 53-70. doi:10.1017/S0261444811000036
- Hyland, K. (2012). Welcome to the machine: Thoughts on writing for scholarly publication. *Journal of Second Language Teaching and Research*, 1(1), 58-68.
- Jalongo, M. R., Boyer, W., & Ebbeck, M. (2014). Writing for scholarly publication as "tacit knowledge": A qualitative focus group study of doctoral students in education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42, 241-250.
- Lee, I. (2014). Publish or perish: The myth and reality of academic publishing. *Language Teaching*, 47(2), 250-261.
- Reddick, R. J., Richlen, A. B., Grasso, J. R., Reilly, E. D., & Spikes, D. D. (2012). Academic fathers pursuing tenure: A qualitative study of work-family conflict, coping



strategies, and departmental culture. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 13(1), 1-15.

Scoble, J. (n.d.). The Online Academic. Retrieved 4/13/2017 from <https://onlineacademic.wordpress.com/social-media-for-academics/twitter-for-academics/>

Vogelsmeier, A., Phillips, L., Popejoy, L., & Bloom, T. (2015). Achieving tenure: Planning for a marathon, not a sprint. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 37(9), 1139-1141.

**Dr. Carrie Boden-McGill** is a Professor and former Chair of the Department of Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies at Texas State University. Dr. Boden-McGill has received numerous teaching awards, and her research is primarily focused in the areas of teaching and learning strategies, mentoring, and transformative learning. She is the author of more than 50 peer-reviewed conference presentations, 30 book chapters and articles, and 10 edited books.

**Dr. Jennifer K. Holtz** is Director of the School of Counseling, Human Performance, and Rehabilitation at University of Arkansas at Little Rock and is Associate Professor of Adult and Professional Learning. Her Ph.D. is in Adult, Continuing and Occupational Education, with emphasis in Medical Education, from Kansas State University. Dr. Holtz's research and publications focus on facilitation of adult experiential learning in online science and research teaching and learning.

**Dr. Amy Sedivy-Benton** is an Associate Professor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Dr. Sedivy-Benton's work primarily focuses on teacher quality and policies surrounding teachers and teacher education. Her research publications focus on policy and teacher and student preparation as well as equitable access. She often offers her methodological expertise on articles. She has authored conference presentations, book chapters and articles.