

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 7
Number 1 *Forum Theme 1: Arts and Sciences, Transcending Boundaries & Forum Theme 2: A Third Way beyond the Old College Teacher-Scholar Model*

Article 14

3-2012

A Review by Karen Mitchell and Bettina Fabos of *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*, by Anna Neumann

Karen Mitchell
University of Northern Iowa

Bettina Fabos
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you](#)

Copyright ©2011-2012 Karen Mitchell and Bettina Fabos

Recommended Citation

Mitchell, Karen and Fabos, Bettina (2012) "A Review by Karen Mitchell and Bettina Fabos of *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*, by Anna Neumann," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 7: No. 1, Article 14. Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol7/iss1/14>

This Reviews and Responses is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity* by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.



A Review by Karen Mitchell and Bettina Fabos of *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*, by Anna Neumann

Part of the journal section “Reviews and Responses”

Anna Neumann, *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Karen Mitchell and Bettina Fabos

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s plan to solve budget problems by dramatically cutting public education funding has once again sparked heated debate over the figurative and literal “value” of education. As other state governments consider similar proposals, educators feel increased pressure to justify how they go about the important job of teaching. Never before has research on academics been more important, especially in higher education where so little is publicly known about what professors do in their day to day profession. This is true of all ranks of professors within academia, but perhaps most critically of professors with tenure. In *Professing to Learn: Creating Tenured Lives and Careers in the American Research University* Anna Neumann presents the results of her interviews of 78 participants from five universities in the years just following their tenure and details the many demands that are layered onto a professor’s plate as one gets into the middle ranks, “without any recognition that you already have a lot of them” (p. 31). With anti-intellectualism on the rise in mainstream public discourse, the purpose of tenure (to guarantee academic freedom) is rarely defined or defended, although [The Daily Show with Jon Stewart aired on February 28, 2011](#) did an excellent job of critiquing the misconceptions circulated by media pundits critical of public educators. Neumann’s main arguments, that scholarly learning should be viewed as a prized resource and that there is a pivotal point immediately post-tenure, where professors experience changes in their work that can bear on their scholarly learning, are certainly ones worth examination. Before we go into additional details, we ought to explain why we are writing a joint review, and from what positions we are able to comment on Neumann’s scholarly work. Karen Mitchell writes as a Communication Studies professor in her twentieth year at the University of Northern Iowa where she received tenure in 1996 and was promoted to full professor in 2007. Bettina Fabos is a recently tenured professor at the University of Northern Iowa teaching in the field of Visual Communication. Our combined voices offer a perspective that faculty from universities similar to UNI might take as they read Dr. Neumann’s study and apply it to their academic journeys.

For both Karen and Bettina, reading Anna Neumann’s *Professing to Learn* confirmed their experiences that post-tenured life is not a comfortable sanctuary of academia; rather, one works just as hard post-tenure as pre-tenure, and although the work is different, in many ways it is more demanding. Karen and Bettina’s days are filled with committee meetings that involve a huge range of areas: curriculum development, departmental job searches, interdisciplinary connections; guest lecture series; student outcome assessments; scholarship awards, students’

individual plans of study; graduate faculty; publicity; academic standards, faculty union, and advisory boards on and off campus. As a full professor, Karen is often tapped to chair many of these committees, and although it is true that faculty do not have to be on every committee they are invited to join, they often have an investment in their workplace and in the general quality of the university. As a newly tenured faculty member, Bettina has the understanding that she will work here for the next 20 years; she has a powerful commitment to the institution that hired her and granted her tenure. Karen has already invested most of her career at UNI and will likely retire from this institution.

In chapter one, Neumann makes a salient point that the public knows very little about the professorate's day-to-day academic life: "Policy makers and the general public seldom hear about professors' scholarly learning except with regard to major—and rare—knowledge breakthroughs" (p. 36). Indeed, university academics are presently being attacked in many states for being lazy, elitist, and over-privileged; for having no connection to the community; for having "paid vacations" (what we typically refer to as sabbaticals or professional development leaves); for being overpaid; for studying irrelevant topics; and for politically indoctrinating students with liberal politics (rarely conservative). In this vein, Neumann addresses two myths that circulate about post-tenure life. First, tenured professors become less accountable and connected to students; they relax and stagnate. Second, by being "free and unfettered" to become full intellectuals, tenured professors pursue their research interests in depth without the burden of being untenured; however, few take advantage of this opportunity and most ultimately stagnate.

In focusing on the newly tenured professor, Neumann attempts to help the reader understand the conditions in academic life that can ultimately lead to stagnation: time for committee work that detracts from time for scholarship; time for a newly tenured professor to "learn" the inside political workings of the university; time needed to expand their disciplinary knowledge, keep up with graduate students, rethink their theories and positions, and apply their theories to communities and different contexts. Neumann makes the case that professors often move—as was Bettina's case—to different areas of expertise. As a professor of visual communication, the dimensions of Bettina's scholarship and the range of the new skills she had to acquire exploded with the internet and the emerging field of digital studies. Apart from participating in the creation of a new field, she had to learn new visualization techniques—multimedia applications and online dissemination skills. None of these things were on her career path when she began her job as an assistant professor.

Additionally, part of expanding one's scholarly learning, as Neumann points out, involves acquiring more effective teaching methods. Karen spent her first ten post-tenure years studying various interactive performance techniques with artists from around the globe. Her decision to change her approach to teaching involved the following: writing grants to support travel and training, restructuring classes to incorporate new methods, and making adjustments for students who resisted being physically and emotionally involved in learning rather than relying on intellectual engagement alone.

Once Neumann delineates the surprising difficulties of post-tenure life, she spends the majority of the rest of the book illustrating how professors develop strategies to maintain their passion for learning. It is scholarly learning and experiences that Neumann calls, "moments of passionate thought" that she is most interested in exploring. According to Neumann, participants describe these moments "as pockets of deep insight or creation, and of intense 'fulfillment,' 'excitement,' 'exhilaration,' and 'gratification,' instances of beauty frozen in time and space" (p. 62).

Neumann found that while professors experience such moments, they are often fleeting and always rare. Many are simply false starts, and never is there a guarantee of success. In an attempt to find renewed passion, tenured professors turn to public scholarship, concentrate on their teaching, create learning communities to support their

scholarship, focus on more limited areas of scholarship, and choose a different path altogether by becoming administrators. Interdisciplinary connections to other colleagues and outreach teaching help this process, and Neumann offers various examples in each area. Ultimately, Neumann concludes that we can “improve professors’ scholarly learning—and create conditions to foster it—only if we know what it is from within the experiences of those positioned to enact it,” p. 39).

At the University of Northern Iowa (UNI)—where research, teaching and service are deemed equal—Bettina and Karen strongly felt that the situation of newly tenured professors is far more demanding than the professors Neumann chose to interview. UNI associate professors are required to handle a 3-3 load, maintain a solid research agenda, and do an immense amount of service. Conditions that might foster passionate learning (team-teaching, collaborative research, released time for learning) are given low priority by policy makers in deference to more cost-efficient practices such as increased teaching loads, on-line classes, and grant development. Passion is reserved for whatever is left once we have depleted our energy and personal resources. The one place where faculty may find opportunities for passionate learning is by working with graduate students, but this, too is demanding. Mentoring, reading comprehensive exams, helping prepare students for conference presentations, and seeing that students meet proposal, research paper and thesis requirements is time intensive, and those of us on the graduate faculty are given few, if any, rewards to work with these students (no course release, no travel monies, no research assistance).

One disappointing aspect of Neumann’s book is that she fails to include an in-depth analysis of the political pressures placed on U.S. universities to change workforce structures and make public institutions more economically efficient. Neumann needs to include, more than mention, increasing instructional demands because of their connection to the political economy of our university systems. Practices such as the subtle shifts away from tenured faculty and towards more adjunct instructors, the increasingly bloated ranks of administrators, and the pressure for four-year institutions to duplicate educational aspects unique to community colleges, should be brought into the discussion—especially given the extent to which such actions lead to increased work load for faculty, especially newly tenured faculty.

In the end, those activities that motivate passionate thought are what guarantee academic excellence. Until administrators and policy makers understand this vital link, attempts to “save our schools” will remain futile.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

