

## **Sibbald, T. M., & Handford, V. (Eds.). (2020). Beyond the Academic Gateway: Looking Back on the Tenure-Track Journey**

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**Sibbald, T. M., & Handford, V. (Eds.). (2020).**  
*Beyond the Academic Gateway:  
Looking Back on the Tenure-Track Journey.*  
**University of Ottawa Press. Pages: 320.**  
**ISBN: 9780776628905.**

Reviewed by: Summer Cowley, University of Toronto

*Beyond the Academic Gateway: Looking Back on the Tenure-Track Journey* is a follow-up to Sibbald and Hanford's 2017 edited volume: *The Academic Gateway: Understanding the Journey to Tenure*. I reviewed that original book for CJEAP in 2018 and described its multi-narrative portrayal of academics' attempts to gain tenure as anxiety-inducing (Cowley, 2018). *Beyond the Academic Gateway*, as a sequel, stands as a follow-up to the original book and shares updates from the original authors on their successful or ongoing work towards gaining tenure.

### **Structure and Organization**

The editors have organized the book into three sections: the individual and the institutional; systemic and institutional; and the personal and individual. Within these sections, the book is divided into 20 parts: an introduction, literature review on tenure, conclusion, and 17 chapters from separate authors, each analysing their own experience in the process of applying for or obtaining tenure. Each chapter within each section is a reflective essay or reflective analysis by its author(s) that works through the complexities, difficulties, and moments of success or happiness that each experienced in the period of time around their tenure decision. Each section begins with a short description from the editors of each chapter and an explanation of the common theme that binds them together. These introductory passages help readers who only want to read chapters that frame the path towards tenure in a particular way.

### **Analytical Framework**

The authors of each chapter use two shared frameworks – the Kübler-Ross model of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) – to guide their analyses. Some of the chapters (e.g., “Of Joys and Sorrows”) make good use of the models, whereas others largely ignore or briefly gloss over both. Each chapter is deeply personal but potentially relatable if the reader is inclined towards engaging with an emotional self-analysis of life as an academic. Some (but not all) of the sense of personal narrative has been lost in the decision to push the works in this edited collection towards a more traditionally academic style. With that said, this book is not attempting to provide a set of objectives or removed analyses of academic life. Readers who seek a discussion of practical strategies to apply to careers in academia (and beyond) would be better served by one of the many how-to-style guidebooks on the topic, including *The professor is in: The essential guide to turning your Ph.D. into a job* (Kelsky, 2015), and *Leaving academia: A practical guide* (Catherine, 2020).

## Style and Tone

The authors and editors decided to lean the book's style away from the personal narratives of the first book and towards something more academic. A literature review has been included in the first section, and an analytical framework has been used to guide the discussion of the tenure track journey in each chapter. The personal tone of the narratives of the first book stood out as a strength in that work and helped to bind the book together as a whole; while each chapter reflected on a different set of experiences, the first book read as an anthology of connected storylines. In this follow-up, that thread is not as apparent. Each chapter, while it stands more firmly as a separate essay or article on the subject of attempting to gain tenure, makes the chapters detached from each other; the connectedness of the narratives is diminished by the choice to push *Beyond the Academic Gateway* towards more traditionally academic prose. However, this decision and subsequent stylistic changes perhaps reflect the authors' transitions into a more concrete space within academia. Whereas many of the authors were moving into academia from the outside in the first book, the authors in this book are more firmly entrenched within it. The subsequent sense of separation and change in personal voice in each chapter is perhaps analogous to the changes that the authors have undergone in their own work lives since they first submitted chapters to the first book.

## Who should read this book?

Since each of the chapters in this book presents a different view of a particular academic's quest for tenure, each chapter will be of interest for various reasons. As I have found the primary strength of this book to be how it shares personal and individual perspectives of academics, I have divided the chapters into groups based on the types of experiences they show.

These chapters are focused on stress, tension, and mental health:

Chapter 2	Of Joys and Sorrows
Chapter 12	Potholes and possibilities
Chapter 13	Finding energy from 'productive anguish'
Chapter 15	It's not me, it's the process
Chapter 16	Jill revisited
Chapter 18	In the trenches

Read these chapters to understand about growing comfort:

Chapter 4	Transitioning to the academic tenure-track at mid-career
Chapter 5	Tenured life
Chapter 7	For academy's sake
Chapter 9	Establishing balance to define a new normal
Chapter 10	The mid-career Indigenous scholar
Chapter 11	An incredible journey
Chapter 18	Who am I?

Read these chapters to read about community:

Chapter 3	Starting from scratch after tenure to run a new lab in France
Chapter 6	Women reflect on remaining an academic
Chapter 8	Indigenous scholarship
Chapter 14	Relationships, association, and authority

## Major Takeaways

Readers who would like an update on the authors in the first book will enjoy hearing more about their paths towards tenure. In this volume, the authors describe transitions in and through academia as exhausting, difficult to navigate during times of stress, and as offering varying levels of reward. While some of the authors describe a sense of accomplishment and relief upon gaining tenure, it is not clear that they are enjoying the situation in which they now find themselves. The feeling of struggle described in some of the chapters raises several questions about happiness at work in academia: Is enjoyment an appropriate reward for effort in an academic career? Are the thin rations of happiness and success amidst

ongoing rejection and setbacks adequate for current and would-be professors? Would the authors be happier doing something else? As I read this book (and the first), I also began to wonder about several broader questions about academia: Given the difficulties described, what can academics and would-be academics do to make their work more enjoyable? If academics find the tenure track so stressful, why do they persist? What is the consensus among academics with regards to the stress, difficulty, or enjoyment of their careers?

With that said, this is probably not the right book to read to become motivated to pursue a tenure-track academic career. While some of the chapters share the small joys the authors have experienced while seeking and gaining tenure, the book as a whole paints a picture of the tenure track as all-encompassing, constricting, and exhausting. Those finding the trek towards tenure to be difficult may feel a sense of camaraderie when reading about the authors' difficulties. However, it is important to recognize the impermanence of the situations and emotional states that any one individual passes through and the fact that these authors' experiences, in particular, do not necessarily represent the experiences of all those along the path to tenure.

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