

Hello, and welcome. I am your host, Neil Ward, and I'm grateful that you are taking time out of your day to learn more about design educators' paths to tenure. I truly appreciate it.

On this episode of Tell It To Neil, we're chatting with Associate Professor of Graphics and Imaging Technologies, Chauncey Rion Huffman from Pittsburgh State University in Pittsburgh, Kansas. Let's listen in.

Neil: Hi Rion, how are you?

Rion: I'm good, how are you doing, Neil?

Neil: Doing well, doing well. Thank you for taking time to be on Tell It To Neil.

Rion: I'm happy to be here. I appreciate your inviting me.

Neil: Of course. So, let's get right into it. How did you get into the world of Design?

Rion: It was kind of an odd path. Well, I had originally in High School I was really interested in Architecture, actually, and I loved using AutoCAD, but we didn't, in High School we didn't even have a Design program at all; we didn't have a Graphics program and you know, looking back now I guess CAD was as close as we had and that's why I gravitated towards it, was drawing on the computer in some way, shape or form. And so when I went to college I thought that I would go that route, I thought that I would go into like, Engineering or Architecture and I kind of quickly decided against that because I despised the mechanical side of drafting!

Neil: Yes!

Rion: And it was just not fun for me, it didn't come easy to me; drawing like floor plans and things like that came very easy to me but the mechanical side didn't and so I kind of looked around a little bit. I went through some different areas and I finally landed on Graphics just because I had a quick friend

that I made in another class, in fact my very, very first college class was Psychology, eight a.m. on Monday mornings...

Neil: Oooff!

Rion: And...yeah, I know. Luckily, I had a really good teacher for that so it wasn't all that bad and I made quick friends with a guy and he knew another guy that was in Graphics and I got to talking to him. I had never even heard of it before and he started talking about the type of stuff they do and I thought, hey, that fits because I would still be drawing on a computer, which is something I love to do; I would have a creative outlet and so I took kind of the Intro class and it hooked me and that's kinda what caught me in there. Then I got my Undergrad and the rest was kind of history.

Neil: So, after you graduated with your Undergrad degree, what happened then?

Rion: Well, it's a bit of a roller-coaster...

Neil: Which is great!

Rion: Yeah, right. Best laid plans type thing. So, when I graduated, I had all these high hopes. The area I'm from, I'm from the corner of South East Kansas, like the very deep corner of South East Kansas and the closest metropolitan area to us is Kansas City and so, many of our current students and even back then when I was going through the program, they go to Kansas City typically for their jobs so I kinda had the same plans and kinda what happened though was my wife and I, we got married the day I graduated and...

Neil: That's quite a graduation present!

Rion: I know, right? It was a fun time, stressful time, and we kinda had plans that we would find jobs around this area and stay here in the Pittsburgh area for like six months to a year or so and save up our money to move to the Kansas City area. Within that six months to a year, it kinda lengthened out a little bit and couldn't really find a great graphics job. I actually sold cars for a while and motorcycles and what ended up happening was by the time we were ready to move to make that move to Kansas City,

probably about a month before we were gonna like really get things going and actually do the move, we found out Kristen was pregnant, my wife was pregnant, and that changed everything because now, you know, we can't afford day-care in a big city; all of the money that we had saved was gonna need to go towards the baby. We didn't have like for instance my Mom could watch our newborn if we would stay down here and it would be free, so that changed everything and I ended up getting a job as a Designer at a newspaper here in town and at first it was great; there was a ton of work, I was always busy, the days went by really quick, I was getting to do what I was trained to do, what my degree was in. It wasn't a ton of creativity but that changed quickly. They started letting me do some kinda like web and motion graphics, some online type stuff and it was more interesting and fun...

(05:33)

...But slowly that job, just like a lot of sadly, newspaper jobs, started to come on some hard times, they had some lay-offs. Luckily I was never laid off but I kinda got to the point where my job changed so much that I wasn't really doing graphics any more and I wasn't terribly happy with that. I was doing more journalism-type stuff and so I started kinda looking at some other options. We were tied into the community at that point. Moving wasn't at the top of our list so I decided to open my own Photography business and I started kinda researching that, looking into that and I did that for a while and it went really well but I didn't feel like I wanted to do that for the rest of my life and my wife's father, my father-in-law, had been a teacher in High School and then he moved to Community College. He was originally a vet so he taught like anatomy and physiology and things like that and he just kinda started talking to me about teaching, not really to try and convince me to be a teacher but just, you know, just chit-chat about how his day went, that type of thing, and my wife kind of put the bug in my ear that maybe I should think about teaching.

It slowly kind of evolved into this thing that I thought yeah, I think I can probably do that, so I got my Masters Degree while I was still working at the paper and still had my photography business and I taught, you know, an Adjunct class; I was lucky enough for them to let me teach a single class as an Adjunct and that kind of blossomed into two classes and then three and then it got to the point where they wanted me for a fourth and they said, now we can't have you be Adjunct and have you teach four classes but they didn't have a full-time position open either and so...

Neil: Now, where was this?

Rion: This was all at Pittsburgh State University, my Alma Mater, that's where I got my Undergrad Degree and my Masters Degree. I applied all over the country; I applied, you know, as far away as California; I believe I applied to Pennsylvania, all over the place and I didn't even get a call-back. And largely, looking back, that was because my degree was not an MFA, so my degree is...was actually in Teaching, my Masters was, so almost all the places I applied required an MFA and so I called some of those places beforehand knowing that that was a potential sticking-point and trying to kind of, you know, build my case for all of the other things that I had done and it was...it was a big sticking-point and to this day I could have a conversation for hours on why I think that that's a garbage sticking-point. Still is a bad sticking-point and I won't go down that path, but...

Neil: Well, you can, you can give us a quick synopsis of it, I think that would be helpful.

Rion: OK, so the quick synopsis of it is Higher Learning today I feel like, especially when we start thinking about HLC, Higher Learning Commission, the way that any Commission tries to standardize, these are the requirements that you potentially have to have, they're really overlooking a lot of potentially great opportunities from people that know things in a different way and can teach things in a different way, so for a great example, we have a person right now that would like to teach Adjunct with us and her Masters was in Communication but Photo-Journalism and she's trying to teach a Photography course. She has twenty-five years of experience; she's nationally renowned; she's known, she's published books on Photography. She can't get a job with us because she doesn't have the right degree.

Neil: Not even an Adjunct position?

Rion: Can't even get an Adjunct position because of HLC requirements.

Neil: Whoa.....

(10:00)

Rion: So, when things like that come up you're just kinda like, who are we really helping with these HLC requirements? So the same thing is true, if you're willing to tell me, if you're looking to hire a Graphic Design teacher or a Photography teacher and you're telling them the requirement is an MFA; beyond that, you know, I don't care. They're all going to have different requirements. They might have that you need three years of experience in the field or no experience in the field or ten years of experience in the field, whatever that might be. But if you're trying to say that a person is automatically qualified to teach that only because they have an MFA and even maybe three years of experience over the person that has a degree in Education, that knows how to properly deliver curriculum and knows how to build a lesson from the ground up, and effectively teach these students and connect to them on a basis, that someone with just an MFA might not necessarily know how to, because they don't have the actual hard-core education and curriculum experience. They have to be weighed evenly in that case, so that person with that Education background, even though that degree is in Education, not Art necessarily, they might have a fantastic background in Art and in the creative services that can compensate for what they would have learned during that degree. So in no way, shape or form do I believe that one person is more qualified than another simply because of a certain degree. I think that a lot of other things come into play there and while I know tons of people, yourself included: you, RJ, tons of people that I admire, respect, I'm happy to call friends that they do have an MFA and they're awesome teachers, they don't necessarily need all that extra education background. There are plenty of people that I know that have no business teaching that have an MFA because they literally don't know how to deliver the content; they don't know how to connect to students, they don't know how to properly assess if their lessons have any value or not and they will assign things that don't necessarily serve a proper purpose to meet learning objectives. So, I think that it's very short-sighted to automatically discount someone just because of their degree and I've seen it play out time and time again, here at my University and at other Universities, and so I really think we kinda need to open our play-book a little bit there and start thinking about things in a different way.

Neil: Absolutely, and I definitely felt your passion on that topic as you were talking about that!

Rion: Yeah, sorry, I come off abrasive sometimes when I get fired up!

Neil: No, and I think that not only happens in academia but I think that also happens in the industry as well.

Rion: Absolutely.

Neil: But the difference is, in the industry I would think that the people that are hiring there are looking at the whole package rather than just a degree.

Rion: Yes.

Neil: I don't know, that's a blanket comment.

Rion: I one hundred per cent agree with that and I think that's where my passion comes from because when I was calling some of these Universities that I applied for, they just literally blanketly turned me down because of the no MFA. And now that I'm in Higher Ed and I've been in Higher Ed for a while, I understand that mentality, because they literally just couldn't hire me, you know? I mean, they literally...I literally was not qualified according to their specifications which didn't necessarily come from the Department, didn't necessarily come from the University: it came from an entity higher than them that thinks that they know what they're doing but doesn't, and that's the problem? That's the problem when people that aren't involved in the actual day-to-day operations make decisions for those that are in the day-to-day operations and the public at large: they get it wrong a lot and we know that, you know, and so I feel like HLC has it wrong and have it wrong in a lot of ways.

Neil: There's that passion again!

Rion: Yeah, exactly!

Neil: And if anyone would like to debate, you can direct of your comments to...

Rion: Send them right to me!

Neil: So, let's talk about your time in academia. So, after...actually let's back up a little further than that. So, as you're going through your Masters program, did you have a thesis that you had to complete or was it a project in lieu of thesis?

(15:00)

Rion: Yeah, so we had...we had the options with a thesis track and we had coursework track and if you went the coursework track you did...I don't remember for sure, but I want to say you took six or nine more hours of coursework, so you would have kind of a collection of projects to go towards that. Now, when I went through I chose the coursework track. In hindsight I wish I would have chosen the thesis track. I think at the beginning when I made that choice that I didn't believe in my research abilities and I wasn't interested in research and literally after the very first Masters level class that I took, I wanted to switch and they wouldn't allow me to.

Neil: Oh man, and you were so early in the curriculum too!

Rion: Exactly, yeah, I know and so yeah, my first class was in research and I loved it; I didn't anticipate that at all and again, I had a great teacher for it and that's something that made me really love it but yeah, when I went through, I did not have a thesis; I did a lot of projects and I had, you know, a Comp exam when, in order to get through the program at the end. Since then, I've done research but looking back, I really wish I would've done a thesis. I'll have that chance maybe though. I am currently in an Education Specialist degree right now, I'm seeking my Education Specialist through Pittsburgh State; I will have a chance for a thesis through that and there's a chance that I might go on and get my Doctorate. That chance kind of dwindles a little bit with each passing year that I don't grab that bull by the horns and honestly, not so sure that I want or need that Doctorate anyway. I know I don't need it for my current position; my Masters is a terminal degree right now but that Doctorate is appealing to me not because I want to be called Dr, but because I want to do the research and I want to learn what goes into getting, you know, to that point, because right now I do research, I just feel like I'm missing quite a bit of the puzzle that I really need to make it more robust. I feel like I might learn that if I went through the Doctorate program; I sure hope I would!

Neil: Interesting!

Rion: Yeah.

Neil: See, that I think is definitely a trait of a true educator; it's like you're always seeking to learn new methods, new processes, new ways of thinking, new ways of working etcetera, etcetera, so I wish you the best of luck with that!

Rion: Thanks! We'll see how it works out!

Neil: So then, after you graduated with your Masters, what was the job search like for you? Because you mentioned that you had kinda thrown some résumés out there and were turned down for a lot of jobs but what was that process like for you? A little more in-depth.

Rion: Yeah, so it was...I don't want to say disheartening. It definitely was a little disheartening applying a bunch of places and not really hearing anything back, you know, and when I did make contact people, basically hearing the MFA issue. and so at first when that was happening, I felt like I had made the wrong decision in my degree. My degree, my Masters was a Master of...a Master of Science in Career and Technical Education with an emphasis on College Teaching. So, my degree was meant to make me understand how to teach in a college classroom, which I felt like was vital knowledge, and I still feel like it is, but in hindsight, especially directly after graduation, I thought, with all these places saying no, you need an MFA, I thought well, why didn't I realize that when I started this process? And you know what happens is, my degree, or I'm sorry, my University doesn't offer an MFA and so when I called the University, when I was first thinking of teaching, I call and I'm just kinda looking for guidance, right? And I say hey, I'm interested in teaching in College; I'm interested specifically in teaching Graphics, mostly Photography, Graphic Design, Printing, that type of thing and without them having an MFA program, they sent me to the program that I got my Masters in and I talked to an advisor that hey, this is the program that you need for education to be able to teach in college, that type of thing, and so I was short-sighted: looking back I basically did not do enough in-depth research before I started my program and so when I graduated and I couldn't find a job, I felt like an idiot, like I just...

(20:25)

Neil: Oh no!

Rion: Yeah, you know, I felt like I didn't do my due diligence and that it was one hundred per cent on me, you know, it's not on my advisor that I talked to because my advisor was a teacher, a college teacher; he wasn't a Graphics teacher, so it wasn't his job, you know, to say: you need an MFA, not this program, and at no time did I feel like they were just feeding me a line to get me to take...to get me to enroll in their program; I just felt like I didn't do my due diligence well enough. And so I graduate, I kinda feel like that but in the back of my mind the whole time I'm thinking: well, I know my degree will work for the University, my Alma Mater, it'll work for Pittsburgh State University because I know people that taught me in the Graphics program that had my degree. And so in the back of my mind, I keep thinking, honestly, that's the ideal situation anyway because I love my University so much that I really wanted to make a difference there and when it comes right down to it, and this is something I skipped earlier, it wasn't just my wife and my father-in-law that convinced me to teach: it was also this feeling that when I went back and I thought about a couple of the teachers, a couple of teachers that I had, that were just not up to par, you know, that would come to class and have you follow maybe like a lynda.com type thing, you know, like hey, go on lynda.com and do this tutorial and turn in what results from it. And that kind of absentee teacher mentality, and I apologize to anyone out there that uses lynda.com; it's a good resource to use as a teaching tool but it cannot take the place of a lesson, it cannot take the place of proper instruction. And I think back to those teachers and I'm just kinda like, I can do better than that. I can...I can help our students, you know? I can help our students actually learn the content and not just rely on existing tutorials that are already out there. Yeah, those are...that's great, I do incorporate those and I can help, you know, students learn stuff through that, but I feel like in those classes where I had that type of teacher, I didn't get what I was paying for, you know, and back then I was paying a third of the tuition that students are paying now, so it's even more incumbent up on me to make sure that I am really giving the students the best value, you know, giving them, literally giving them their money's worth. So that was another reason why I really wanted to teach at Pittsburgh State University and it just so happened that fate kind of shined on me and a position became open. We had someone retire and my Chairman at the time, you know, remember I was teaching three Adjunct classes at that point, and my Chairman came to me and said, hey, it's not open yet but this is going to be opening next month, we're going to put out a call, so get your stuff ready, you know, and luckily, you know, I was well received by the current Faculty here; they knew me already obviously, I was basically a member of full-time Faculty without actually being one!

Neil: Yep!

Rion: And so things went well and the interview process, even though I knew the people well, was still nerve-racking, you know, I think that's something that people entering the realm of Higher Education might not be ready for; I know I wasn't. The interview process was unlike any other interview I had ever went for in my life.

Neil: So, talk a little bit about that!

Rion: OK. So, when you turn all of your information in, which is a substantial amount of information. Again, most private sector jobs, you know, they're going to ask you for a résumé. In the Graphics field they're gonna ask you for a portfolio or a digital representation of what you've created, things like that. In Higher Ed, typically number one, you have this laundry list of requirements that you have, these qualifications that you have to meet. If you meet those, then you need to turn in instead of a résumé, you're turning in a curriculum vitae and that takes a little more time to construct that and make that the way you really feel like you want it to be, and obviously, typically for a Graphics teaching position, they're going to want to see a portfolio...

(25:11)

...many times, they're going to want to see a portfolio of not only your work, but if you have student examples as well. And so when I was preparing for this interview, I not only got that information together but I was also told by one of my mentors that hey, it's a good idea if you have a portfolio that not only exhibits your Graphics work but also your teaching style and your teaching work, more than just say a curriculum vitae would. So, I put together three ring binder that had things like my teaching philosophy, portfolio samples back here, some samples of student work and samples of, you know, what my grading rubrics, student evaluations, those types of things, because I wanted them to not only see, again this goes back to kind of my philosophy, but I didn't want them to just see my creative work and think oh, hey, he's talented, that's great, but to me that's only a portion of the equation, so sure, someone might be talented in the design field or in photography or whatever it is that you do, but that does not mean in any way, shape or form that they know how to deliver content. And I think something that has stuck with me for forever and is such a weird analogy or connection to make but I love baseball, I'm a huge baseball fan, and I live the Baltimore Orioles and Jim Palmer is arguably their best,

the best pitcher they've ever had, but it stuck with me that he never became a pitching coach and the Orioles have always had pitching woes, since he left basically, they've been a dumpster fire for pitching! And a lot of people, you know, speculated, hey, why doesn't Jim Palmer become a pitcher...a pitching coach? He was the best pitcher we ever had at the time when people were talking about this, he was, you know, prime of his life, he could still get out there and do a great job coaching, and he became an announcer for the Orioles and he even said one night, he got that question, you know, are you ever, would you ever be interested in coaching and he said, just because I knew how to pitch doesn't mean I know how to teach other people to pitch and that's stuck with me. Not only was he one of the best pitchers we ever had, but he was one of the best pitchers in Major League Baseball history, and here's a man, seemingly at the top of his game that says look: I was good at it but that doesn't mean I know how to teach other people to do it. That stuck with me when I started thinking about teaching, you know, that I could be the best photographer in the world: that doesn't mean that I know how to teach other people to do it, you know? And so I want, when I display my case to try and get that job, I don't want them to be making a decision just looking at my work, my images; I want them to see who I am as a teacher and how I can connect to students and what I bring to the table, so I put that together and then out of that binder, I made six copies of this binder so each individual person would be able to look through it. I was contacted for a phone interview first. The phone interview was very nerve-wracking because you can't see, you know, the people, kinda like you and I, we can see each other right now, so if I give an answer, I can see your reaction, you know, and it's always easier to know if, does the person expect me to keep going? Do they expect me to stop? Was that answer well received or not? So that was a little nerve-racking. Once the phone interview concluded and I think that was about a forty-five minute to an hour phone interview, then I got an email that I was among the finalists that they'd like to bring in for a sit-down in person interview. The sit-down in person interview had...was a day-long. They kind of outlined what would be going on. I first met with the Chairman of the Department and that was about an hour long interview, then I met with the Hiring Committee of the Faculty, so that was five or six members of the Faculty on the Hiring Committee. Then I met with all of the Faculty and staff;

Neil: Always a treat!

Rion: Yes, right! And so they've all got questions and they've got different questions and you know, the Faculty that weren't on the Hiring Committee might have the same questions as the Hiring Committee so you're answering them again because they didn't hear that answer and then I met with the Dean

and the Dean was, he's a great guy, he's retired now, that was super nerve-racking because I had never met him and I'll never forget when he asked me for salary considerations...

(30:19)

Neil: That's a tough one!

Rion: I know! It was very tough. Very tough because we live in a relatively rural area and if you go and look at something like Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is another thing I have a problem with, but you go look at like Bureau of Labor Statistics or any of the places, Career Builder, any of those places that try to give you an estimate of what such and such profession makes, you know that that is coming in with some people that are going to be making ten times what other people make and it's going to average out, and so it's always kind of difficult to really pinpoint and have a good feeling for what should I be asking for to not sell myself short and the best thing I had to go off of, I looked up what the average person in my field made and I looked...I remember seeing advertisements for other Professors at this University for openings and sometimes they would actually post what the annual salary would start at, which was odd, you know?

Neil: That is very rare, by the way.

Rion: Yes, yes, and looking back now I think that was only in our...some of our local publications where they published that. They didn't publish in the national listings. So anyway, I told them, you know, what I was hoping to get and the number I put out there was quite a bit more than I was making like at the Morning Sun, I'm sorry, the newspaper and everything else, and he kinda scoffed and at first I was just kinda like, does that scoff mean that I'm asking for way too much, you know?

Neil: Oh no! Nerve-racking again!

Rion: Exactly, right. He scoffed and then he kind of smiled and he was like, I'd pay you much more than that. And I was like, oh, you would? So...

Neil: Fantastic news!

Rion: Yeah. Thank you very much! But it still kinda made me feel stupid, you know, because what he quoted to me was almost fifteen thousand dollars more than what I was asking and so I was just like wow, how did I miss that mark that bad, you know? But you know, obviously it all worked out but that was definitely, that whole process was pretty nerve-racking, trying to make sure that you're prepared as well as you possibly can be. I felt like I answered interview questions pretty well. The one that I remember specifically was, what experience do you have with grant writing and what would you do as far as trying to write grant spring money in the Department and I was very honest and I just said hey, I don't have any experience of grant writing. I would look into it but I'm not sure if that's something I would be good at or not but I can try. I just kinda remember some smiles in the room, the guy that asked me that was a Senior Faculty member and he said, great answer. You don't know, don't make something up! I was just like, well thanks, because there's nothing I could make up to answer that question appropriately, so...

Neil: And that is some amazing advice!

Rion: Exactly. I was trying to make sure, you know, that I did BS my way through any answers that if I said I could do something, I could actually deliver on it, and so you know, in hindsight, I'm glad that I didn't try and BS and be like, oh yeah, you know, I've thought about doing that and this...No, I haven't done it, haven't really thought about it but I would be willing to look into it!

Neil: And definitely when you're on a Campus interview for a Faculty position, have a good breakfast in the morning because it is going to be a long day!

Rion: Good call! Yeah, that's the one thing I forgot. They took me to lunch, you know, with the Faculty so that's another thing that you might not think is very nerve-racking but is, because you're trying to think about what to order for lunch that's appropriate and you don't want something that's messy and you want to be able to talk but make sure you don't have food in your mouth when you're talking, make sure you're, you know, you're not inappropriate or anything like that so the whole time, you're just kinda wound up a little bit. Something that should be relaxing: none of it is!

Neil: But, thankfully, you go the position.

(34:48)

Rion: Yeah. Persevered. There were I think four finalists for the position and my...the Chairman called me, I'll never forget, I was driving...I was driving home and he called me, you know, I took the call on Bluetooth and I had to pull over because I was just, I was so happy, I mean, it was kinda this amalgamation of everything that, you know, I was working at a job I was not happy with, I had been turned down by so many places because of the MFA, I was at the point where I knew that my degree fit this job, but if I didn't get it, what's Plan B? You know, I mean, like where else does my Masters degree get me a job? Do I have to go back and spend more money now to get an MFA and have I wasted my money on my current Masters? And so when he called me and told me that, I started crying; I mean I had to stop the car, I was so, just, emotional, I couldn't believe it and just felt like it was meant to be and so taking that into my job has made me exceptionally passionate about my job, because I don't take any day for granted because I know that I'm still in that current situation, to be quite honest Neil. I mean if I were to get laid off tomorrow, what would I do? I mean, like I would literally have to go back and get an MFA probably or teach something different, like I would have to teach teachers; I'd have to go into like a Career and Tech Ed program or something like that where I taught Curriculum Development or something like that, which I could do, but I wouldn't be as happy doing, you know?

Neil: Yeah. Or, you could move up into Administration and do that type of work!

Rion: Yeah! Yeah. This is true, yeah. I don't have much of an appetite for Administration. I don't foresee myself going that route. Mostly because I like to be in a classroom and I don't like to deal with the headaches of the budget and personnel decisions and all of that type of stuff. It's not for me, and that's another reason why I keep shying away from that Doctorate, you know, the Doctorate is a heavy financial and time commitment and if I don't have aspirations of going into Administration, it probably is not going to pay for itself, so it makes it that much harder, you know, to want to go that route!

Neil: Definitely! So, now that you've been teaching at Pittsburgh State, how long have you been there now for, in a Tenure Track role?

Rion: OK, the Tenure Track role began August 2013. So this is the start of my fifth year.

Neil: So it sounds like you have a tenure packet to put together this year?

Rion: Actually, I already did this previous year.

Neil: Oh!

Rion: And I was...yeah, so you can go up for, it's always confusing, it's very strange. You can go up for tenure during your fourth year and you will be awarded it your fifth year if you get it. You can do Tenure and Promotion together. Or, you can choose to wait and go up for it during your fifth year to be awarded it your sixth year, so I chose to put my packet together during my fourth year and submit it during my fourth year and it went through the process and I got Tenure and Promotion for my fifth year.

Neil: Congratulations!

Rion: Thank you very much. So, I knew about it probably in April of last year. No. Maybe March actually, it had gone through all the appropriate channels and I knew that it was basically going to happen but you know it's not official until the beginning of your fifth year, that's when it becomes official.

Neil: So, that is a unique time-line for Tenure and Promotion.

Rion: Yeah, yeah!

Neil: Other universities typically, again, another blanket statement, but typically it is the start of your fifth year that you start putting together your packet for Tenure and Promotion and then you are awarded that or you earn it for your sixth year. That's typically, that is what I've learned from doing this podcast, that's the timeline.

Rion: Yeah, and that, when I was going through my Masters, they talked a lot about Tenure and Promotion in my classes and that's the way they kind of made it sound there also, that that was typical, so it was, even when I was hired and they had kind of like Professional Development and they would

talk about Promotion and Tenure, they kind of made it sound like that was what would happen also. They would always say, you go up for Tenure and Promotion in your fifth year; that's kind of the general statement they would make, but then when push came to shove, you actually get awarded Promotion and Tenure in your fifth year, so it was a very strange process because you're constantly asking you know, your colleagues and other people it's like wait: I'm putting this stuff together in my fourth year or my fifth year? And without fail, all of them would just kind of sit there and look off into the distance like, which one is it? I don't remember. And then the Provost's Office sent me an email last year that said, hey, you're on the list for Promotion and Tenure: you need to start putting your packet together and turn it in my September fourteenth, whatever it was, so I knew...I knew last year that that would be the case so I had all summer polish on it, fit and finish on it and turned it in. And so yeah, it is...it is a little bit of a weird process that we go through I suppose, compared to other people.

(40:58)

Neil: But you made it through and that is the important part!

Rion: Yeah, yeah, exactly, the weight off my chest, off my shoulders, yeah.

Neil: So, correct me if I'm wrong but you've done research and you've presented on the topic of Creative Commons and their usage of images, so how did that factor into your Tenure Packet? Or your Tenure Narrative?

Rion: Yeah. That's an awesome question because with Creative Commons and Open Educational Resources it's this really, really huge, exploding field right now in education that is something I've been deeply interested in and I have done research. I've published work about Creative Commons; I'm, currently I'm in the first cohort to go through a Creative Commons Certificate course to try and be a Certified Instructor for Creative Commons and four years ago, even three years ago, all of that stuff would've been considered in my Narrative but it wouldn't have counted towards much. Being published in Creative Commons wouldn't have counted towards much because it's completely open. When you publish...when you publish something for OER, it has to be entirely open access and in the academic community, that's frowned upon, because there's this idea that's misplaced that it's not peer reviewed, it's not up to snuff.

Neil: Oh, I love that phrase! Peer reviewed!

Rion: Yes, right? Yeah, all of us in academics love that phrase. We hear it all the time and by golly, if you're not peer reviewed, you're basically garbage, and that's the way a lot of people look at OER. Well, it's free so there's no standards, right? I mean something that's free can't be good. There's no way it can be. Those two words don't go together. Free and high quality. So, it's tough to kind of get around that, but luckily I have a group of colleagues at PSU that we are all heavily invested in OER and our Provost is as well and so we formed what's called the OER Steering Committee for the University and we developed a White Paper and put it forward to get anything OER open access considered for Tenure and Promotion and it was voted upon and ratified into our contract or KNEA contract which is the Kansas version of the Teachers' Union and so it was ratified into our contract and so luckily that contract came out I think they run three years or maybe four years at a time, they have to be renewed every three or four years, and luckily that new contract was ratified just in time for me to go for Promotion and Tenure.

Neil: Woow!

Rion: And...yeah, exactly, right? And I would be lying if I said that it didn't have something to do with me, quite honestly, because I was on that Steering Committee and the Chairman of that Steering Committee who is in Administration, she saw how much time and effort I was putting into that type of stuff and we talked all the time about how I can put it in my Narrative for Tenure and Promotion but there's no guarantee that it's going to hold any weight and I could not at that point, I could not actively put it under my Scholarship tab, so you know, when you're breaking down your Tenure and Promotion Narrative, you know, whoever happens to be listening to this, if they're not well-versed in Higher Ed, your Tenure and Promotion Narrative has to go into these areas of Teaching and then Scholarship or Creative Endeavour and Service and before we got that White Paper out there and got it ratified, I couldn't have put all of my publishing in OER, I couldn't have put that under my Scholarship tab. I would have had to have tried to find an area under Teaching to put that into and it would've kind of gotten lost in the sea of all the other stuff, but we got that ratified, I put it into my Scholarship tab and it shows up as a publication and it carries equal weight now, that OER publication carries equal weight as if I were to be traditionally published in air quotes, I have put.

(45:40)

Neil: Right.

Rion: Because it's really kind of this really sad thing, in my opinion so far anyway in Higher Ed in general, the way people look at Open Access and OER; it carries no less weight than something that is traditionally published because the stuff that we do in OER is peer reviewed, it's got to be held to the same high standard. The biggest difference I would contend is there's not a publisher back there, backing it up. Who cares? I mean, I gotta be very honest about that. The idea that publishers are the end-all is well mis-founded. Publishers, in the end, the people that are making the content that most people consume are going to be people like you and I, right? People that are in the fields, people that know what we're talking about, we can get that information out there. Publishers don't know what they're talking about. Publishers know how to turn a profit off of your knowledge, so publishers can bring this knowledge together from many different people and put that into a book and they can profit off of it, or you and I could potentially collaborate on something, we could make a book, make it Open Access. What's the difference between if you and I were to do the same thing for a publisher? The only difference is, if you and I did it for a publisher, the publisher would own the rights to it: we wouldn't own the rights to it. The publisher would get paid more than what we would get paid. If you and I did it OER, we can set it out there and make it freely available for everyone and share our knowledge. I am of the firm opinion that education should not have a price-tag on it. Everyone should be freely available, knowledge should not come with a price, we should be able to share what we know with other people and not charge them for it. Now, that flies right in the face of how I earn my pay-check. And honestly, I don't mind. I mean, I just really don't that's my viewpoint that when you're paying me to teach your son or your daughter or your nephew or your sister, you're not paying me because...trying to put this into the right terms...you're not paying me because I have some proprietary right over the knowledge that I have; you're paying me to be a facilitator; you're paying me to take your student and show them, hey, these are the things that matter in our field, this is how you implement them. I'm not telling you anything you couldn't have learned from lynda.com or you know, go on YouTube and search for these things. What I'm telling you is, this is how you implement them, these are some of the best practices, this is what my experience tells me works, this is what I have read, to take that burden off of them of

making them consume all the knowledge I've consumed in my lifetime, let me impart that upon you, so that's kind of where I fall with OER in general, Open Access, all of that stuff.

Neil: Well, if you are able to, if you would like to pass that White Paper along, I'm sure our readers would be really interested in how you built that case to make OER a Scholarship case.

Rion: Yeah, that's something I'll have to...I'll check with my Administrator that's the head of that Committee to see, because I don't personally have it: she has it and so I'd be happy to because that's becoming more of a pressing issue in Higher Ed, is trying to get that type of stuff accepted for Tenure and Promotion.

Neil: Absolutely, especially as we begin to, or as we are self-publishing, whether it be on Amazon or Blurb...

Rion: Pressbooks, all that stuff, yeah, absolutely.

Neil: So, definitely that would be a great nugget!

Rion: A helpful thing. Yeah. I'll write a note now, Neil, so I don't forget that.

(50:03)

Neil: So, we're about at the end of our interview here. Are there any parting thoughts or upcoming projects that you'd like to talk about?

Rion: As far as like up-coming projects or parting thoughts either way, you know, knowing there's going to be a diverse audience potentially that you know, listens to this and I hope that they get all sorts of good information from it. I would just...I would say it's really important to be passionate about what you do and that's true of any job, obviously, but I feel like it's really important in education because if we bring passion to the classroom it directly impacts those students and if we bring a lack of passion to the classroom it also directly impacts those students, so I'm constantly looking to put variations on the things that I try and offer to my students and I can tell you, I don't know if you've ever had this happen

in your life: I've had this happen a few times where you just kinda have this big light-bulb moment, right, where you just come to this total realization about something. You know, I remember when I was a kid and I played baseball all the time I remember coming to this realization of how to properly hit a ball and all of a sudden I was good at hitting. I kind of came to this realization this past summer about teaching in general, it's almost like I went through kind of a little bit of a revolution in the way that I started thinking about teaching and you know, for these past three or four years, you know, I deliver content, I assess their retention of that content, I try and push them and promote them to do better and this summer I started reading a couple of different books about education and listening to some different people speak about it, watching some YouTube videos here and there and I always have issues in my classes, you know, it's kinda like maybe you have a student that doesn't put forward a hundred per cent effort and you know that if they did, they would be awesome; or they have really bad problems with attending class, or maybe they have something going on outside of class: there's all these things that happen during the course of a semester and if you really care about what you're doing, they bother you. You know, if I feel like I'm not delivering my message, if I feel like I'm not properly instructing one hundred per cent of my students, I'm failing, and it can be really hard when you carry that weight on your shoulders, for sure, so I started examining, trying to figure out: where am I falling short? In my delivery methods, I'm always looking for new ways to deliver the content; I don't just want to lecture, stand in front of you know, a group of twenty kids and lecture for an hour and a half and hey, here, go take a test, go take a quiz. And I came to this kind of realization that it's not always necessarily so much about my hard skills or even their hard skills. A lot of it relies actually on our soft skills as a class unit and I started thinking about that in terms of, OK, if a student isn't retaining this knowledge, is it because of how I've presented it? Is it because of something I'm doing or is it because of something they're doing? And I started to shift this focus in my mind that I used to really take one hundred percent of the blame in my mind, you know, that even if that student, there's something that they're just not trying hard enough, I need to find a way to make them try hard enough: that's my responsibility as a teacher. And I shifted this focus and started thinking, well, maybe I should put more emphasis on instead of teaching, hey, this is how you...these are the guidelines for properly creating a logo; this is how you choose a serif font versus a sans-serif font. When to do that, why to do that. This is how you take a head shot in portrait photography. Instead of focusing so much on these are the hard skills you need, I need to focus also on soft skills and I've been caught up in this idea for a long time now of, should I or should I not give points for attendance? I've read books, I've talked to people that suggest giving points for attendance is counter-productive to learning goals because

basically if you give them like ten per cent of their grade is for attendance, then you're basically telling them that, I don't really care if you learn anything or not, but showing up to class is ten per cent of your grade.

(54:47)

Now, there's an argument both ways for that and I think that the prevalent argument is, well we have to teach them to be accountable. I one hundred per cent agree, therefore I've kept attendance kind of as part of my grade, but what I thought to myself was, is attendance really the problem? I don't think it is. I think it's all a combination of soft skills and so what I've started doing this semester is I replaced, I don't give them ten per cent of their grade for attendance any more; I give them ten per cent of their grade for soft skills and I grade them on eight different soft skills. One of them is attendance and of course I won't be able to remember all these off the top of my head, but one of them is attendance, then there's things like time management, professionalism, responsibility, effort, critical thinking and what I'm doing is, it's taking a chunk out of me, but I'm already seeing the goals come out of this, the fruit come from this labor. What I do is, I write notes in a daily basis in my classes and I notice things like what students show up on time, what students make eye contact when I'm talking to them, what students stay engaged with the content, what students ask questions when they need to; which ones don't, whether because they don't know that they have a question or they're introverted and they don't want to ask a question in class, maybe they're coming to me afterwards; which ones manage their time well, so if I give class time, if I give time in class to work on an assignment and I don't make it, I don't take attendance for that day, what students show up, what students don't, and if they don't show up, I don't count that against them if they still get a high quality assignment turned in on time. So, at that point, I'm not saying, look, it's paramount for you to be here in front of me in the classroom, because it's not of paramount importance. What's of paramount importance is that you understand what I'm teaching you and you know how to apply it and so if those students don't come to the work day but they still turn in a high-quality assignment on time: perfect. If they don't come to the work day and they don't get their assignment turned in on time, or they turn in a poor-quality assignment, then they're going to lose points in time management, effort, critical thinking because they didn't think through that well enough to think hey, I do need to go to class to work on this. So, I grade those soft skills every single week for each one of my students in each one of my classes and I give them feedback on each one of those areas of criteria, so each student I've got four classes and they average about fifteen students apiece I

would say, and each one of those students gets graded on eight areas in a rubric, so for each student I'm writing out eight, you know, eight areas of feedback for them and I say, sometimes it's very simple, you know, attendance: you're either here or you're not here, that one's easy but you know, time management, I might say something like, you did a great job time managers this week: you came to the work day and you made proper use of your time, or you had poor management of your time this week because you did not come to the work day and you turned in your assignment late and those types of things, and so what I've already seen, and this is obviously, this is just the third week of the semester, I've seen two students in particular that had really big problems with one of them had a big problem with attendance, would always come to class late or not come at all and wouldn't send me a message. This student regularly beats me to class now; she's there before I get there. If she is even going to be late, she sends me an email and lets me know; she never did that before. I have another student that was, is highly motivated and ambitious but kinda has some people skill problems of taking other people's time or taking other people...taking advantage of other people kind of, so this student is the type that would like walk into my office and it would be during office hours but this student would walk into my office, even if it wasn't during office hours and just assume that I will drop everything to help them, OK, which I have that mentality that I'll do that for any of my students, but this student showed no recognition of that, you know, if I did drop everything or if there was another student in the room, that student would still come in here and just kind of hover and wait for that student to leave and not give them any respect or privacy; they've had a total reversal. Now they come and they'll knock on my door and say, oh, excuse me, do you have the time to talk to me about this, you know, thank you for doing this, thank you for doing that and so I had a student the other day that came by my office and said, thank you for grading my soft skills; I didn't realize that I really need to work on this and this and this, and so I've already seen it pay big dividends and I'm seeing a concerted effort by almost all of my students in all of my classes to pay sharp attention, to be on time and to have open communication with me, and I just can't tell you what a night and day difference it's made; it's literally hell on me as a teacher, I graded soft skills this past weekend for seven hours, so it's a lot of work but it's worth it in the end, you know, if I keep getting this level of commitment to come out of them.

(1:00:34)

Neil: Absolutely!

Rion: That's my big thing I'm working on right now! That's taking up my time.

Neil: And very positive too, which is great to hear.

Rion: I feel like it is. The other thing that I'm doing and I would implore anyone out there to do is I'm really, really big on getting students involved in competitions, especially because I teach mostly Photography now; I teach three Photo classes. It's really big to get those students their work out there and so right before this interview today, Neil, I had a student in here that I was helping pick out some pictures she's going to submit those to a national art gallery and it coincides with a conference and so I'm trying to get students, we have, we're lucky enough to have a little pot of money out there that we can pay for some students to attend national competitions and so I'm hoping these students get accepted to this gallery and there's a conference tied to it that I can get them to go to for free if they get accepted.

Neil: Oooh, that's perfect.

Rion: Yeah, so that's another thing I'm working on now is trying to get those students motivated to get out there and you know, get their work recognized and be able to get some professional development experiences out of it also.

Neil: That's amazing. Well, keep us up to date as to how that goes!

Rion: Yeah, yeah, I definitely will.

Neil: Well, it's been great having you on Tell It To Neil; thank you very much for spending time with us today.

Rion: Thank you again, Neil, I always enjoy talking to you and I really appreciate you inviting me.