

Navigating life and academic jobs: 14 pieces of advice from design educators about the path to tenure and promotion

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My journey into design education was a circuitous path that started halfway into my twenties, spanned four states, and demolished a few relationships. Early on in my educational journey I tried a number of majors including computer science, healthcare, and law before landing on a fabulous new major called graphic design. Forgive the brevity, but this was the early 2000's after all.

I earned a BFA in graphic design, worked for a few years in the industry along with being an adjunct for a semester. I enjoyed teaching so much that I headed back to school to earn an MFA in graphic design. After graduating, I entered the academic job market.

Starting with a one year contract at Illinois State University, a semester teaching digital media at Heartland Community College in that same year, and landing at Drake University where I recently earned tenure and promotion.

Along this journey there were so many life altering decisions to make and situations to confront that I thought, I can't be the only one who has gone through this. At conferences I would ask colleagues how they got into design and how they got to where they are now. The more I did this the more I realized the academic design community does not have – but really needs – a resource to go to for learning how to navigate life and academic jobs on the way to tenure and promotion.

Each conversation I had with colleagues peaked my curiosity more about others paths in design and left me feeling energized. The stories were sooo good to not share and since I love to chit chat it seemed natural to start a podcast with this content. And with that *Tell It To Neil* was born – available on all major podcast platforms and at <https://www.tellitoneil.com/interviews>.

The two main questions I ask guests are *How did you get into design?* and *How did you get to where you are now?* Over two seasons and twenty episodes I want to share what I have learned that may be of interest if you are just entering the academic job market from grad school or the industry, or working your way towards promotion and tenure.

- **Be nice to everyone.** This means faculty, staff, students and anyone else you come into contact with to do your job. I've heard this a lot from guests and it is sage advice. Get to know your colleagues through coffee meetings or office hour chit chat. They are your champions and you never know who will need to speak on your behalf especially those who are reviewing your dossier for tenure and promotion. Besides it takes less energy to smile and be kind.
- **Figure out who you are and where you want to be and go for it.** Be honest with yourself. One guest would not consider a job in northern states due to winter and another guest weighed the cost of living and quality of life in relation to location and salary. Why land a tenure-track job if you're in a place or situation that makes you miserable?
- **Each institution has a Carnegie classification.** This classification (R1, R2, Teaching, etc.) determines if scholarship or teaching or service is most important in terms of a tenure and promotion dossier. It also reveals where MFA and PhD candidates in design are being trained. Look this up before you apply.

- **You can work at contract jobs and visiting positions for a while and still land a tenure-track job.** This is especially applicable if you are trying to support a spouses education or career. Do know that you still need to carry on with scholarship and a research agenda to land that tenure track job.
- **Tenure and Promotion are not exclusive.** Many guests shocked me by saying that they are two separate processes at their institution. Definitely ask this during your interview and what the process entails. Do know that there are institution out there that have done away with tenure & promotion. Spoiler alert, it is not a bad thing!
- **Look to the Boyer Model of Scholarship when writing your tenure narrative.** This is a super handy set of guidelines to write about scholarship that was developed by Ernest L. Boyer. If there are no solid guidelines for scholarship in your department get his book *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*.
- **Be strategic with scholarship.** Think about how your research and creative activity can tie into teaching and service for a solid tenure and promotion dossier. You can also think about incorporating your MFA work into the classroom, or not.
- **Valid scholarship can be achieved by publishing work in non-traditional ways.** Many guests have published books independently, created content for online open educational resources and created podcasts for scholarship. Downloads, purchases, citations, and views can be metrics to prove the validity of this work.
- **Writing a book is a lot more involved than it seems.** An abstract of your idea, competitor audit, page length, table of contents, and a draft chapter are just some of the things to consider when proposing a book to a publisher. Apply for the annual Design Incubation Fellowship to work with experienced authors to develop your proposal and book content.
- **Follow your passions and be flexible.** Each guest has an interesting backstory on how they got into design and how it has influenced their life outside of academia. They wouldn't change a thing. By trusting themselves and going with the flow, their life and career worked out well.
- **Life can be a struggle.** Many guests have worked as adjuncts at multiple institutions or at side hustles to make ends meet. Some have prioritized their family over their career. Its not easy, but never lose sight of landing that tenure-track job.
- **Find design organizations that focus on design educators.** They are a great way to network, enter award competitions, build writing skills, engage with a wide academic audience, and bring conferences to your institution. Check out Design Incubation, UCDA, SECAC, and AIGA DEC among others.
- **Thinking about moving to another institution?** If you're not happy or at the limit of what you can do at your current institution, do it. BUT and this is a huge but, be very clear with coworkers on why you are leaving and *possibly* asking for them to be a reference. Most will support you if you are honest and/or it will better your career or personal life.
- **Network like your life depends on it.** Because it does. Chat with as many colleagues as possible at conferences and workshops about your passions and scholarship. These are the connections that will alert/recommend you to open positions, publishing opportunities, and collaborations.

Keep in mind this information is from institutions and colleagues across the United States. **ALWAYS** check with your department head, Dean, or faculty handbook at your institution for the specific tenure and promotion guidelines.