



Academic Cultures: Professional Preparation and the Teaching Life

Murphy, Sean P. Ed., New York: Modern Language Association of America, (2008)

Reviewed by Kevin M. Johnston, Director, Michigan State University Teaching

Assistant Programs

Doctoral studies understandably color most graduate students' thinking about what constitutes professional success. Future faculty are trained, socialized, and conditioned to desire (and expect!) positions that their PhD-granting committees deem appropriate, namely, tenure-track assistant professorships. Yet, only 9% of U.S. institutions of higher education fall under the Carnegie Classification research category. Should we be surprised that issues arise when most new PhD's seeking tenure-track positions can't get them right out of graduate school? Or at all?

In *Academic Cultures: Professional Preparation and the Teaching Life*, Sean P. Murphy has compiled wide-ranging "informal" stories of English and foreign language scholars who found themselves working unexpectedly in environments (Murphy's "Cultures") little resembling those that produced them. Murphy has collected narratives of those "insiders;" those whom others outside these experiences have usually described, rated, and judged. The work contains three sections: Academic Career Options, Reflections on Careers at Teaching-Intensive Colleges, and Preparing Future Faculty Members. Contributors' experiences stand as alternatives to what Murphy has identified as the "master narrative" of the professoriate, the one that shapes most intellectuals' views of themselves. The resulting accounts, part description/part boosterism, describe hardships with adjusting to unanticipated jobs, but also extol the value in discovering what teaching in unfamiliar "cultures" can mean. Most authors recommend that mentors better prepare their charges for the wider variety of higher education life. Others go on to propose unique developmental programs, often paralleling early Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) models.

Doug Scott Berman's experiences teaching in Taiwan led him to believe that "post-doctoral teaching fellowships" could provide better training and experience for language teachers seeking to become more effective faculty (p. 70). Chierico, Fernandez Salek, Norris, and Shen's experiences with language education at Chicago State University led them to believe that given the realities of teaching at CSU their graduate education inaccurately shaped their expectations for undergraduate student success (p. 96). Facing serious issues when hiring adjuncts (often PhDs with little teaching experience) to teach at Guilford Technical Community College, Jo Anne Buck and MacGregor Frank fostered professional development links with the English Department at nearby UNC-Greensboro. The resulting Faculty-in-Training Program (FIT), now in its tenth year, has evolved to become a successful professional development program preparing UNC-G TAs for teaching in community colleges. Buck and Frank's recommendations to other institutions seeking similar partnerships serve as one of *Academic Cultures'* highlights (p. 180).

Like FIT, and given the realities of the modern academic marketplace, much of *Academic Cultures* simply makes good sense. At least in ways that those involved in "alternative" professional trajectories might recognize. Yet, the book falls short of an impassioned call for seminal change. This work might move some to reconsider what it means to bring on and then prepare well the next generation of faculty. But until today's mentors and PIs recognize that preparing their students for their futures might not mean recasting oneself, there will remain a disconnect between what most PhD programs do, and what many, if not most, PhD students take on in their first, second, or permanent positions.

Although compiled with English and foreign language PhD's in mind, *Academic Cultures'* message – that PhD's and those who educate them need to consider alternative futures – may apply to anyone primarily seeking tenure-track positions in Carnegie Classified Research institutions. Of the many thoughtful questions Murphy's collection begs, perhaps those focused on changing notions of professional success and failure most aptly focus readers' attention on the possibilities of “alternative-track” futures, rather than on the “humility cultivating” settling many PhD job seekers apparently face. Of course, to change something so fundamental, so culturally-bound as one's structurally-conditioned ideas of what constitutes success, nothing short of an entire rethinking of the future of Academia might need to take place, perhaps, as Murphy opines, in ways Boyer envisioned in the early-nineties.

Above all, *Academic Cultures* offers readers stories of academics' (sometimes painful, almost always unexpected) transitions to place, of mien, and to unanticipated professional roles and responsibilities. The book also asks us to consider these changes within the scope of altering one's notions of oneself. Many readers will see themselves within some of the informal stories Murphy's collected. Others, terrified at the possibility of having to think of themselves as anything but assistant professors (or of their protégés, accordingly), won't. Perhaps we've considered short-sightedly that graduate education and post-doctoral success “naturally” means what comprehensive doctoral-granting institutions “claimed” it should. For Sean Murphy and his colleagues, we've under appreciated the impact we can have working in one of the other 93% of higher education institutions. PhD's can and do find professional fulfillment in unexpected environs.