“Professor Lee: Just Kidding, It’s Just Me.”

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Abstract

My project is a reflection on my future work life. I have conducted qualitative research through interviewing two of my professors and a graduate assistant in the English department to get a personal account of their work lives. I have also incorporated research papers and online articles. Upon the completion of my research, I have come to the realization that our nation has been steadily moving towards a corporate university. We are losing academic freedom and tenure-track professors at a devastatingly quick rate. What does it mean for the future of our society as the government takes away funds from the public universities across the nation?

What do you want to be when you grow up?
At some point in your childhood, someone probably asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up. You probably answered without hesitation, "I want to be..."

The American Dream is the ideology that every United States citizen has an equal opportunity to achieve success through hard work and perseverance.

**Anywhere but here**

I lived in Pleasanton, California, a wealthy suburban town, for two years. During those two years, I attended Foothill High school. It was a blue-ribbon high school with excellent funding and a challenging academic curriculum.

In my senior year, I took AP Literature with Cruella De Vil: Others called her Mrs. Bradley.

"Who wants to present first?" asked Mrs. Bradley. But no one dared raise their hand. I anxiously looked around for a few more seconds until I finally raised my hand.

"Okay. Christine? You’re first," she smiled. She had been calling me “Christine” for about a month, but I was too eager to present my mind map to correct her. I had been working hard on my mind map for the last two weeks and I was proud of it.

"Hello, today I will be doing a presentation on..."

"What?" Mrs. Bradley boomed.

"I'm..."

"I must be deaf. I can’t hear you," she yelled again. She repeatedly mocked me with the same remarks for the remainder of my presentation. I felt like I was shouting by the end of my presentation. When class was over, she yanked my arm towards her and pressed her face so close to mine that I could smell the lipstick she was wearing.

"I understand if it’s okay to speak to your kind like that, but this is America. A-M-E-R-I-C-A. Learn how to speak," she hissed. When she finally let go of my arm, I apologized. She rolled her eyes and said, “Get out of my class.”

I received a 5 for my AP Literature exam, but it didn’t matter to her. She gave me an “F” for my mind map and a C- for the class, overall. She was trying to convey a message to me and “my kind.” We didn’t belong in AP Literature.

**Present-day work life: Working with Philosophy professors**
I started working as a fiscal assistant for the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawaii at Manoa this past June. Most of the professors were either on sabbatical leave or taking their summer vacations. Jen, my supervisor, explained that most professors work nine months out of the year, and had three months of vacation in which they are not required to be present on campus.

On the first day of work, I went inside the office of every professor to write down the serial number of the printer and the cartridge it used. The department had been running low on ink for about a year and I had to create an inventory so we could order ink. The building was virtually empty, but I knocked on every door out of courtesy. There were mountains of unorganized papers surrounding the desks and it took me a while to actually find the printers. I couldn’t help but question how the professors stayed organized for their classes.

When I finally got to the last door in the B-wing, I noticed a sliver of light. I gently knocked on the door and nearly fell backwards as the door swung open. The brightly-lit room revealed a mountain of papers piled up on a desk and a dangerously tall stack of exams on another.

“Hi! What can I do for ya?” asked a cheeky, bearded face. His snow-white hair looked like wildfire.

“Um... I just want to take down your cartridge number. I’m sorry if I interrupted your work,” I said.

“Oh! I’m so glad you’re doing that! I’ve been out of ink for a while…” he said.

“Here, let me help you look for it.”

Dr. Bryan was the first professor I met from the department. His cheerful demeanor and inextinguishable optimism made him easy to approach. Eventually, I met every faculty member in the department, excluding those on leave.

When I’m not running errands for Jen, I work in the main office, answering phone calls and emails. According to Jill Lepore’s article “Away from my Desk,” the main office follows the “Metropolitan factory-style” office of the 1930s because it existed as a gendered space: “nearly all typists, receptionists, stenographers, file clerks and switchboard operators were women” (Lepore). The fiscal officers before Jen had all been women, and although she was a fiscal officer, she played the role of a secretary.
as she made coffee for the professors every morning and answered phone calls for
them during the day. As friendly as she was, she had absolutely no training to be a
fiscal officer but no one in the department seemed to pay mind to it. The department
was falling apart, as was clearly indicated by the fact that Jen didn’t even know how to
order ink.

**The Research Assistant in**

There was a colloquium every Friday in the month of October. It was my job to
make flyers and make announcements the University’s system wide calendar to
advertise each upcoming colloquium. On Halloween, some of the graduates got
together to present a collaborative research project they had been working on. The
colloquium ended up being a full house and I was dying with curiosity to know what they
had been presenting on. Instead, I sat at my desk, doing mundane, thoughtless work
such as answering phone calls and organizing travel requests.

When I could hear the tension rise and people begin to move, carrying colorful
cupcakes as they left the lounge, I began to tear down the flyers that led them to that
very room. I carefully peeled the invisible tape off the glass doors, watching the
colorfully purple flyers become limp. I made sure to avoid everyone, trying not to disturb
the celebratory moods of the presenters as they left. I finally got to the B-wing and was
startled by a "hello." I wasn’t in the mood to start up a conversation with anyone, but I
turned around with the most facetious smile anyway, because it was part of my job to be
polite. It was Nio, but it didn’t look like him. I could hardly recognize him and only so,
because of his wild-cat hair. He was wearing a tie, a shirt neatly tucked underneath a
belt, and had no visible facial hair. I had to stop myself before I dropped all the flyers I
had just taken down.

"Hi! How’d your presentation go?" I asked.

"It was kind of depressing, I guess... I didn't get as much response I wanted to
today" he said with a defeated look.

I didn't let go of his gaze and replied, "Don't worry; I'm sure you did fine."

"Thanks," he smiled at me with a little more enthusiasm. We looked at each other
knowing what we both wanted; that "professor" before our last name, the prestige of
that doctorate we both yearned for. I liked Nio. We were alike in many ways: He was shy and soft-spoken, but he was hard-working and knew what he wanted to do with his life. I also admired him: He was free-spirited, but one could only know that by his wild hair; he never boasted. I could see him teaching a class of a hundred and fifty eager minds. I could see him moving them with the combination of his fiery passion and heartfelt compassion. I could see him becoming everything I only hoped to be; that professor who moved mountains.

It must've been a handful of seconds before a professor interrupted us. Dr. Tang ignored my hello and walked Nio away from our conversation as he put a friendly arm around him: "Nio, you and I can talk about your presentation. You gotta let them know, 'Look, I'm on the road to my dissertation.' You gotta show them you want that PhD..." I drowned their conversation within the walls of the empty hallways and continued to rip the flyers off the walls. Someday, I'll be in Nio's position. I promised myself. Education has given me the gift of moving beyond the position of a secretary and the potential to become the person I’ve always wanted to be: a dignified scholar.

**Postsecondary Education**

According to the “Occupational Outlook Handbook,” postsecondary teachers instruct “academic and vocational subjects beyond the high school level. They also conduct research and publish scholarly papers and books” (“Postsecondary Teachers”). Professors fall underneath the category of a postsecondary teacher, but often work in large university settings, conducting research as they teach. They are usually “organized into departments based on the subject matter of their specialty” (“Postsecondary Teachers”). Postsecondary teachers who teach in small private colleges and some community colleges, however, do not spend as much time on their research as university professors.

In order to become hired at a university as a professor, one must have a PhD or a doctoral degree in the field they want to teach. Some postsecondary schools “may hire those who have a master’s degree or those who are doctoral degree candidates for some specialties” (“Postsecondary Teachers”). These candidates usually specialize in a sub-field such as Philosophy. While some institutions may require prospective
Professors to have teaching experience, many institutions do not. However, some universities offer jobs for students who are enrolled in their graduate programs. In these programs, graduate students can either work as a research assistant, a graduate teaching assistant, or teaching assistant.

Once a person is hired at a university or college institution, he or she becomes part of the department’s faculty or an adjunct professor. Adjunct professors are part-time professors who spend most of their time teaching their students. They are hired on a contract and are often not given permanent positions even though “just like regular faculty members, adjunct professors must fulfill basic educational requirements before they can teach” (“What Is an Adjunct Professor?”).

**Professor Ryan, a Creative Writing Professor**

I had a chance to interview Professor Shawna Ryan, an assistant professor here at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She is currently part of the Graduate Program Committee and the Creative Writing Committee and teaches several different creative writing courses as well as courses in Asian American Literature. Prior to coming to the University of Hawaii at Manoa, she has successfully published her novel with The Penguin Press, *Water Ghosts*.

She also taught in a student retention program in San Francisco, where contrary to the popular Model Minority stereotype, a number of Asian American student were not staying in school. She explained that the difference between Asian Americans in Hawaii and Asian Americans in San Francisco was that Asian Americans in Hawaii went back generations whereas in San Francisco, there is still a large population of new immigrants.

I also wanted to know a little bit about how she prepares for her lectures on a day-to-day basis:

Teaching is like playing hockey: If you play hockey, you’re probably only on the ice for 10 minutes in the game. They have three 20-minute periods and people are rotating in and out. Let’s say you’re only on the ice for ten minutes in one week. But it’s not like your job is just ten minutes a week. You have to train and practice, so you spend the whole week getting
Professor Ryan is teaching two classes this semester. She is an assistant professor and is working to become tenured. She switches between different roles as a professor from different committees to advising her graduate students, making the final revisions of her next novel and preparing for the six-hour class week.

When she facilitates classroom discussions, she leaves them open-ended for her students to create their own interpretations: “I prefer not to lecture because I don’t want to just tell you ‘this is what it is’ and say ‘okay, this is the only way to read the text.’ I want to leave it open for you guys to discover it on your own.” Rather than lecturing the entire class period, she thinks of creative activities she can incorporate in her classroom discussions to engage her students more actively.

Her innovations in teaching can relate back to her experiences teaching new immigrants, where the students were still in a “schooling tradition,” where students listened to classroom lectures but never engaged. By using literary theory, she prepares for such activities that lead to powerful and interesting classroom discussions: “I think, ‘Okay. What do we want to get out of this class today? What’s the ultimate point?’ and then I think ‘Okay, how can we find our way there in the way that’s interesting?’ and then ‘What’s going to be the path to get to the discussion?’”

Finally, in terms of teaching, Professor Ryan said, “I have fun in the classroom. I generally think that just because you’re learning something difficult, it doesn’t have to be boring and I hope I try to make it interesting most of the time.” She believes in the shared learning experience of the students as well as the instructor. Through being a part of her English 372 class as well as gaining her personal perspective and insight into her work life as a creative writing professor here at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, I learned that one of the most important parts of being an effective instructor in English is to be able to create a classroom environment in which one teaches their students to use and develop their own voices. It is challenging in a sense that when interpreting the text there isn’t a right answer, but layers and layers of interpretations. The success of the students depends not only on the lectures of the professors, but how
they allow their students’ voices to shine. Like Professor Ryan, the professors here in the English department do an excellent job in facilitating such classroom discussions. If it wasn’t for the professors here in the English department, I would have never actualized my dreams and had any sense of motivation to pursue it.

**Job Opportunities for Minority Groups in Postsecondary Education**

I decided to take Asian American literature this semester out of curiosity. The only Asian American author I was familiar with was Amy Tan. But the preconceived notions of Asian American literature changed after reading novels like Nami Mun’s *Miles from Nowhere*. It was after finishing the novel that Professor Ryan, our Asian American literature professor asked the profound question: “Does Asian American literature exist as a genre?"

Our society is slowly changing to include minority groups within the education system by creating new literary theories such as cultural studies and gender and sexuality. Asian American authors are slowly reacting against the Model Minority stereotype and burying the social stigma that a work of literature *must be* Asian American literature because the author is Asian American. The racial symmetry between the author and his or her work of fiction poses a problem in the aspect that it holds close the stereotypes of the minority groups here in the United States that are become less prominent in our society today.

The class also made me pay close attention to the relationship between the ethnic background of the faculty and graduate students of the English department and what they teach. I looked at different charts and graphs on the Humanities Indicators website, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/) in order to distinguish the spectrum of ethnic representation in the work life of postsecondary educators, including the minority and majority groups. What I found was a study published in 2013:
These statistics represent the racial and ethnic distribution of doctoral degree recipients nationwide in 2010. It was taken by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. As you can see, Asian Americans are still underrepresented in postsecondary education. Am I bound to my ethnicity in terms of my future work life opportunities?

**An Interview with Michael Pak**

With the question of identity still in my mind, I went to interview Michael Pak, a PhD student here at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. With the jet program, Michael traveled to Nagahama, Japan, and taught English at a public middle school for two years. He is currently on his way to receiving a PhD and hopes to graduate in two years. He is also part of the mentoring program, a program created by Dr. Henry and unique to the English Department at UH Manoa for graduate assistants to work with a
professor in an English 100 level course: “The mentors would come to all the classes 
and would have individual conferences with every single student depending on the 
teacher’s building of the situation. It was about five meetings outside of class.” The 
mentoring program also teaches students how to research both in the library and online, 
coaches them on creating e-portfolios of their writing, and allows a gateway to become 
an active member of the UH Manoa community.

Mike became interested in composition and rhetoric after joining the mentoring 
program. He said it was because it dealt with his actual day-to-day work life. He 
explained that it was a different position than that of a teaching assistant because it 
dealt with more interpersonal relationships with the English 100 students: “Not only are 
you helping them with English 100 and writing, but you’re also serving as this mentor in 
terms of college life, which is pretty interesting.” The mentoring program sparked my 
interest because of this idea of developing interpersonal relationships with the students. 
It is unique to the University of Hawaii at Manoa:

Part of the reason why is because English 100 is a required class. So you 
get to work with students who aren’t English students per se. Basically, 
they’re any kine students. Of course you’re working with them with their 
course work for English 100, so that’s writing, research, and reading but 
there’s also a handful of students who you end up just working with in 
terms of just life issues or just getting them to focus on maybe not stuff 
related to that one class per se but maybe a bigger issue like time 
management or just making sure you have fun in college but still are 
getting your things done, like life kind of skills. Because you do not grade 
assignments, you have a different kind of relationship with the students. 

When I asked what the most difficult part of getting into the program was, he said, “The 
hardest part was producing the writing for your application. You’re asked to fill out a 
statement of purpose or a statement of objectives where you really have to have a 
strong idea of who you are. In a realistic sense, peoples’ interests are always changing.” 
Mike was a math major before he switched into English literature during his 
undergraduate years and his interests in English are diverse: “My interests are all over
the place. I had to selectively pick some of these interests into a version of myself that looks like I can get into the program.”

I wanted to know more about his agency in the department as a Korean American and how it affected his work life based on my 2010 findings from humanitiesindicators.org. His response was, “To be honest, I don’t think about it as much.” Because the English department at UH Manoa is diverse, it allows space for more agency and representation of different ethnic groups in comparison to other universities throughout the nation. We had an interesting discussion on the racial representations of minority groups in the faculty of postsecondary education:

“Ultimately, people still have to present themselves as products in a sense until you’re tenured. You need to show that you can provide a certain service to a university or department.” (Pak)

Mike’s current interests are African American literature, cultural studies in music, and composition and pedagogy. It was intriguing to learn about the diversity of his interests in English literature. The diversity of culture and the mentoring program here at UH Manoa allows students to truly explore the vastness of English as a discourse of study. This reminded me of Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*. Erving Goffman says that a person is defined by the information he gives in his performance and the context in which he or she performs. In his work, *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, he calls this certain context “a social establishment” (152). After interviewing Michael Pak, I learned that the performance of a PhD student is through his or her statement of objectives in the application process. Michael uses selectivity in his interests to prove to the university that he can provide a certain service to the department.

**An Interview with Dr. Henry**

Dr. Jim Henry is a tenured associate professor here at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He has published academic research on pedagogical writing, such as technical writing, professional writing, and first-year composition. Dr. Henry has also created the Mentoring Program in the English department of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. His
current projects are on posthumanism, technical communication, professional writing and performance and place-based theory ("Jim").

By interviewing Dr. Henry, I learned a lot about the uniqueness of the career of an English professor: “What you will find is that if you are in the teaching of writing, by nature, you tend to engage with theories coming from the sciences more than perhaps our colleagues who are very strongly grounded in the humanities.” His research often uses quantitative measures in addition to qualitative measures.

In 2010, Dr. Henry published his article, “(Re) Appraising the Performance of Technical Communicators from a Posthumanist Perspective.” He rejects the (anti-) humanist form of much workplace performance appraisal to recreate the performance appraisal for technical writers to the entire organization. In his article, he states that “because enhancing ‘real work’ is theoretically the rationale driving performance appraisals, it is particularly ironic that this process and this instrument really only serve to interrupt the endeavors of workers and thus to impede the success of the organization” (16). His research has been incorporated into the university as he has lobbied for teaching as a significant factor in performance appraisal. In his interview, he stated that although it is in its beginning stages, “innovative and progressive teaching will be valued in personnel review”. We can already see the beginnings of his works in the English department through his mentoring program

What I found to be most profound is that although it is nationally true that professors identify more with their research rather than their teaching abilities, Dr. Henry was able to somehow find a way to merge the two together through scientific theory, composition, and rhetoric. This has opened the doors to a new possible interest in my own studies.

I was also able to look at the work life of a professor more closely after interviewing Dr. Henry:

I have this conversation with people often. They’ll say ‘You’re only teaching two courses this semester? That’s all?’ and when I start filling them in on well “here’s what goes into those courses… and by the way, that's not all we do. Here's what we do in terms of service to the
Lee

Professor

university. I’m serving on various committees in the department, as well.”
(Henry, Interview)

Although Dr. Henry teaches only two courses during the semester, he works with various undergraduate and graduate students throughout the day and serves on several different committees in the university to make the learning environment for his students a better place. He even spends a majority of his weekends and holidays working on his research or grading papers.

Dr. Henry finds that the most rewarding part of his job is seeing his students succeed: “It’s rewarding when you get to the end of the semester and I get a sense from what students tell me and what I see in their writing, when I see a student’s writing and I can compare where she is now with where she was when she started and I see improvement, that’s very rewarding” (Henry, Interview).

Tenure

Attaining tenure is significant in a professor’s academic career because it secures his or her job in a university. A tenured professor can only get fired if there is a justifiable reason. Professors who are hired as regular faculty in a university start off as assistant professors. Assistant professors are considered the entry-level ranks of the tenure track. They are put on “tenure clock” or probationary period, which is the amount of years assistant professors can remain on the entry-level rank for the tenure track before permanently being terminated (“Guidelines”). The probationary period is about five to seven years with the exception of exclusions, which excuse the assistant professors from a certain amount of time depending on the university’s policies.

“The tenure track ranks are assistant professor, associate professor and full professor” (“Postsecondary Teachers”). Once an assistant professor is promoted, he or she moves up the tenure track rank and becomes an associate professor, achieving tenure. The candidate for tenure gathers his or her research for the other faculty members in the department to review. The faculty members will then decide whether or not the candidate will be tenured.

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “Tenure, briefly stated, is an arrangement whereby faculty members, after successful completion
of a period of probationary service, can be dismissed only for adequate causes or other possible circumstances and only after a hearing before a faculty committee (“Tenure”). In other words, “tenure is granted through a review of the candidate’s research” (“Postsecondary Teachers”).

Dr. Henry said, “It’s the reward system. The old adage is, if you have great research, you can be a lousy teacher and still get tenured. If you don’t have great research, but you’re a great teacher, you won’t get tenured.” (Henry, Interview)

**Dropping Tenure Rates and Starving Adjunct Professors**

The 2012-2013’s *Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession* illustrates the trends of the national totals in instructional staff employment status from 1975-2011. According to this graph, the rise of adjuncts has paralleled the decline of full-time tenured professors:

![Graph showing trends in instructional staff employment status from 1975 to 2011](image)

Today, the prevalence of part-time faculty is at its highest, while full-time faculty positions are at their lowest rate in the last 25 years" (Cosman). Adjunct professors are desirable to any college community because they're often considered the generic brand of a tenure-track professor with an additional 20% off. They get paid per course, making somewhere between $2,000.00 and $5,000.00 for each course taught (Cosman). In addition to hiring more part-time workers, universities sharply raised the tuition due to "the start of the economic downturn" (Marcus and Hacker). As the adjunct professors are struggling just to survive, the "University" sits inside of an air-conditioned office with a fresh pot of coffee. The articles I've read so far on recent events regarding adjunct professors referred to the people that hired them as the "university." In other words, the adjunct professors hadn't even seen the face of their employer before. Postsecondary Education Administrators are the "university" in the articles I've read. (Marcus) They facilitate meetings with students, analyze data about students, prepare transcripts and diplomas and I think that is about it. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, administrators get paid around $86,000.00 a year by, from what I've read, doing absolutely nothing. But if the administrator stays long enough, he or she will have the opportunity to become promoted to the university dean. Currently, university deans make six-figures, and with the expense of our brilliant professors, "employment of postsecondary education administrators is projected to grow 15 percent from 2012 to 2022" (“Postsecondary Education”).

**A grim future**

While the bureaucratic swine sit at the very zenith of the hierarchical structure of postsecondary education, the adjunct professors run around like rats in a maze, trying to find something that's not there. Whether or not there is a financial peril within the public universities of our nations doesn't change the fact that our universities are run by the means of financial stability, rather than those of academic freedom.

Many people these days believe that tenured professors should be done away with because they are unqualified as teachers. Administrators claim that hiring tenure-track professors deplete the universities of money and that adjunct professors are just as qualified as professors in the university, but cost less. I hope that the public does not
buy into these lies. If we collectively decide to get rid of the tenured professors, there will no longer be innovations for society because there will no longer be academic freedom. Public universities throughout the nation are turning into corporations rather than schools of higher learning.

I was unaware of this devastating trend because the University of Hawaii at Manoa is somewhat unaffected. Dr. Henry’s pedagogical research and the mentoring program still thrive to make innovations to our education system by incorporating the significance of teaching as a part of the university’s appraisals. Although I have slim if not absolutely nonexistent chance of becoming a tenured professor, I am still working towards my goal. I get laughed at when I tell people my dream of becoming a professor and a lot of people say that I am working towards a “dead-end job,” but for me, it is much more than having a “successful” career or obtaining wealth. I’m someone who still believes in the American Dream and who still believes in higher education. I’ll take my chances with our English department’s mentoring program and hope that the research that this university produces will eventually save the tenure-track. If not, I suppose I’ll find myself on the streets with a picket-sign that reads, “save our professors.”

**Works Cited**


Pak, Michael. Personal Interview. 4 December 2014.


