

An Unconventional Approach: A Profile of Dr. Lee Skallerup Bessette

For many in the academy, gaining tenure is similar to the Golden Ticket in Roald Dahl's book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Gaining the tenure ticket means admission into a rarefied world.

But experiences have taught Dr. Lee Skallerup Bessette, an instructional technology specialist, that there is more than one way to make it in the academy. Skallerup Bessette works in the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington VA. Her story is one of taking an unconventional approach to her education and career, embracing change and putting others first.

Having earned her doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Alberta, Skallerup Bessette, who grew up in what was a suburb of Montreal, followed her future husband to Southern California, where she began teaching at Cal State San Bernardino, a mostly Hispanic-serving school. From there she was hired for a tenure-track position at Florida A&M University, a historically black school.

When her now-husband got a tenure-track position in political science at a Kentucky school serving the poorest ZIP codes in the country, Skallerup Bessette gave up her tenure-track position to follow him. She taught First-Year Composition off the tenure track and eventually joined the University of Kentucky in faculty development. She also started her own business, "which didn't work out."

The entrepreneurial experience did teach her how to blog and use Twitter. Her blog went from a "blogger blog" to the University of Venus to blogging for *Inside Higher Education* and later to *ProfHacker*. Her Twitter account is @readywriting.

Although her husband had earned tenure in Kentucky, he decided he would rather use his skills in a different format. So he got a job in Washington, D.C., working for a nonprofit. "He's doing a lot of the things he liked to do when he was a faculty member, but with actual money," says Skallerup Bessette. She joined the University of Mary Washington.

Empowering Faculty to Change

At UMW, Skallerup Bessette helps faculty incorporate technology into teaching in "creative and responsible ways" that are "accessible and ethical."

"When I work with faculty," she says, "I want them to feel empowered."

"I want them to feel confident and empowered and have them bring that ethos into the classroom."

Without that confidence, their apprehension will shine through in the pedagogy, and students will notice.



Dr. Lee Skallerup Bessette

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"We don't start with technology but with pedagogical priorities," she says. "What do you [as a faculty member] want to accomplish?"

Putting the pedagogy first is a way of being sensitive to the "vulnerability" that faculty exhibit when they're out of their comfort zone. "If they're coming through the door to us, they're taking a step in being vulnerable," says Skallerup Bessette.

Broadening Her Influence

Having been on the tenure track, Skallerup Bessette has a clear understanding of the needs of faculty and the impact she had on her students. "I did impact a lot of students," she says, of her teaching. "But that influence was always going to be limited."

As the faculty member doing "experimental pedagogy in a larger ocean," she sees her current role in faculty development as a way "to create the environment that I always wanted as a teacher."

In her current role, Skallerup Bessette sees that she can impact a lot more students by impacting their professors. "It becomes a much more lasting impact, including even on the structure of the university," she says.

While there is a "tension" that exists between her role as "staff" and her interactions with tenured faculty, Skallerup Bessette admits there's a challenge in "navigating complex systems" in higher education. "I have

the academic bona fides but I'm still 'staff,'"

she says, noting that things would be more challenging if she were administration. "It's interesting negotiating about how we fit into the institution."

A Constant Negotiation

In her spare time, this mother of two coaches swimming at the local YMCA. A former competitive swimmer who competed in middle-to-long-distance freestyle and backstroke, Skallerup Bessette now coaches children ages 8 to 11.

"It's incredible what the body remembers," she says of her few forays in the water to teach her young swimmers specific skills. When her children are older, she hopes to get back in the competitive waters.

When asked her secret to work/life balance, Skallerup Bessette replied, "It's a constant negotiation."

"One of the changes our family is struggling with is that summers used to be unstructured time," she says. But with her 12-month contract and her husband's full-time, year-round job that kicks into high gear in the summer, the annual vacation is under discussion.

Skallerup Bessette still tweets when she has something to say. She has over 9,000 followers who have read upwards of 89,000 of her tweets. "I still use it," she says. "It's one of my primary means of connecting with educators and technology."

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Her dissertation on the translations of poet Anne Hébert was released as a book, *A Journey in Translation: Anne Hébert's Poetry in English* (University of Ottawa Press) in summer 2016. Her research addressed "how authors got reframed and reshaped into different cultural situations"—for example, "using the same translation but how they're emphasized or presented." She explored how teaching French Canadian history and literature differs in Quebec, Alberta, the United States and Paris.

Skallerup Bessette feels a kindred spirit for Hébert's journey, "having moved around so much and translated myself into different jobs." Perhaps that peripatetic lifestyle is the reason why she also enjoys postcolonial science fiction and is willing to venture where few others in the academy have gone. ■

—MLS
