PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION

NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 06 | Issue 02 Winter 2025

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Sidhu. 2025. "Personal Circumstances": Why I Left Academia. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 6.2: 45–58.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/| ISSN: 2766-1768.

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Abstract

This piece details the author’s reasons for leaving her tenured position eight years previously. It argues that the rigid and hierarchical system of tenure no longer serves its purpose of preserving freedom of speech. Using her own experience, the author argues that the tenure system shuts out members of marginalized groups by entrenching labor practices and working conditions that are unfriendly to them.

New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession 6.2: 45–58.
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My turning point in deciding to leave academia occurred, ironically, as part of a promotion-seeking process. I remember that morning in the fall of 2016 with great clarity, as one of the few Oprah-style "aha moments" in my life. I was in my mid-forties, with three children, ages six, eight, and nine. I had achieved tenure eight years previously at my large, regional university in eastern North Carolina. I had won numerous teaching and research awards and had just published a book on the gender politics of obscene comedy with the highly regarded Middle Ages Series at the University of Pennsylvania Press (Sidhu 2016).

My university had been a great place to start my career, but it was not a "Research One" institution, a designation for U.S. universities that have "very high research spending and doctorate production" (Carnegie Classification 2025). My priority as an academic was research, and yet support for the humanities at my institution was limited and becoming more limited by the day. It seemed the natural next step to apply for a job at a more research-oriented institution, and that is what I had done, filling out job applications for available positions in the fall of 2016.

The morning of my "aha" moment, I dropped my kids off at school then sat down in my home office to check the job website. The time had come when applicants would be notified as to whether they had advanced to the interview stage. Did I, I wondered, need to purchase a plane ticket to the next MLA? Scramble to arrange childcare for my four-days absence? No, I did not. Of the several applications I had made, not a single hiring committee wanted to proceed to the next step of an interview. My search for that year was over.

To my surprise, the first emotion to wash over me at the failure of my job hunt was not disappointment, or anger or sadness; it was relief – a warm, blissful flood of relief. As the French philosopher Blaise Pascal has famously remarked, "Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point [The heart has reasons that the reason knows nothing about]" (Pascal 2011). At that moment, I realized that my heart was aware of some important truths that my reason, focused on a conventional trajectory of career success, had not perceived.

In applying for jobs at Research One institutions, I had been following the track appropriate to someone who placed a high value on career advancement as a research academic. I'd always thought of myself as this type of person, assuming I would want to balance motherhood with career success, placing equal emphasis on each. Turned out, I was wrong. That fall morning in 2016, I realized that as much as I loved the life of the mind, as much as I excelled as a scholar, what I really wanted was to focus on my kids, giving them the best of my time and energy. I didn't want to struggle, juggling the intense, workaholic atmosphere of the "Research One" job with the needs of my family. I wanted my kids to be my first priority.

That revelation regarding my changed values was the impetus for a much broader reevaluation of my life that took place over the next several months.

Liberated from my misconceptions, I began to look at my current job with fresh eyes. I admitted to myself that living in rural eastern North Carolina was exacting a high price from my family and that my job was not giving any of us enough back to make the sacrifice worthwhile. Many different elements factored into my assessment: the state of public education in rural North Carolina; my very low salary at ECU; the fact that my husband's and my families were Canadian and lived more than 700 miles distant, and, most importantly, my children's status as racially-mixed people growing up in a society still marked by racial discrimination.

If making a lateral move (getting a job at a teaching-centered university like ECU but in a more suitable location with better pay) had been a reasonable possibility, I might have considered staying in academia. But I had watched several of my colleagues search, year after year, for just that type of job, wasting time, energy, and money on MLA interviews and campus visits only to come up empty-handed. In the perennially dismal academic job market, such positions were almost as rare as research-intensive ones. Regretfully, I concluded that the career upon which I had embarked with so much passion and enthusiasm in graduate school was no longer serving me or my family. It was time to cut my losses and leave.

When the editors of this journal approached me to write a piece about leaving academia, I had to consider whether I had anything to offer beyond the particularities of my own life choices. Not everyone's story yields insights applicable to the whole. I wondered whether my departure from academia revealed anything other than the fact that I didn't want to remain in my job and was lucky enough to have a high-earning spouse who made quitting possible. Ultimately, I decided that my story was worth sharing to the extent that it could spark discussion about how academia serves those who are currently in it, and about whom its structures and systems shut out and whom they benefit. These reflections are relevant to many areas of the profession, including general concerns like the profession's ability to cultivate an intellectually open and dynamic atmosphere, as well as its ability to serve the needs of marginalized groups like women, people from working class backgrounds, the LGBTQ community, and members of racial and ethnic minorities.

When I look back on my journey from ambitious Ph.D. student to disillusioned associate professor leaving academia, the most important question that emerges for me is whether tenure, long such a revered part of academic life, is actually the best employment paradigm to enable a free, just, and inclusive university. Analyzing the how's and why's of my decision to leave the profession reveals that the working conditions that drove me out are almost all rooted in the rigid and hierarchical nature of the tenure system.

As is well known, tenure was created at a time when middle-class white men were the primary workers in academia. It was not designed to serve those occupying the margins of social power arrangements. In its hierarchical structure, and the rigidity of its paths to promotion, the tenure system makes it very difficult

to create the working conditions so often friendly to the members of marginalized groups: flexibility in working hours, the ability to choose where one lives, and a dynamic system of promotion that allows those with unconventional career paths to advance. When I entered academia as a single, white female from an upper middle-class background, I had little reason to doubt that tenure was an excellent institution, protecting free thought and guaranteeing a secure income for life. Having left the profession as a mother of three and a member of a racially mixed family, I now see how the tenure system also shuts out and disempowers those who do not fit easily into its framework.

When I began to evaluate my academic job in the winter of 2016, the lack of flexibility with respect to working hours was at the top of my list of academic career negatives. Like many women, I would have preferred working part time hours while my children were young (Pew Research Center 2013, 11; Glynn 2018, 6; Goldin 2021, 1–17). Years before, when I had asked my department chair about a part-time option, I was told that perhaps, with a great deal of effort, we could swing it for a year or two, but that was it. Tenure lines, my chair told me, are predetermined by the university and given to departments. It was, therefore, impossible to take the lines apart or reduce them. The only way to work part-time for any period longer than one to two years would be to resign my tenured position and become an adjunct lecturer, a change that would have reduced my pay by more than 50% and eliminated any possibility of promotion.

Of course, academia is not alone in offering few options for work-life balance. Many professions have come under criticism in recent years for a lack of flexible work schedules, reduced hours, and family leave. In academia, however, those issues are rendered even more severe by an inflexible tenure system that makes it impossible to arrange anything more than a short-term leave or temporary reduction in working hours without launching oneself off a professional cliff. While official part time work is so rare as to be nonexistent for tenured faculty, professionals in other fields can work reduced hours for years at a time. One survey of physicians, for instance, found that more than 30% of female physicians with children worked reduced hours (Frank et al. 2019). In a survey of those holding psychology doctorates, 21% of women reported working fewer than 35 hours a week (Conroy et al. 2019). Even in the law, a profession infamously hostile to reduced working hours, a 2008 survey found that 12.8% of women lawyers at large firms worked part time (NALP 2008).

In terms of reduced pay and career advancement, numerous studies have illustrated that most professions exact a "mommy penalty," as women reduce their hours or step back from additional duties when their children are young (Kennedy 2024; Skinner et al. 2023; Murray et al. 2023). However, the strict boundaries of the tenure system in academia render those penalties much starker. Women who step off the tenure track or resign tenure to care for children over a period of

several years can rarely regain or acquire tenure. Instead they must accept vastly reduced levels of pay and seniority as adjunct lecturers.

There are few detailed studies documenting the career paths of professionals outside of academia who either stop working or work reduced hours while raising children. Anecdotally, however, I have observed friends in other professions negotiating reduced work hours without the severe cuts to salary and seniority that I faced as an associate professor of English. One friend who is a medical doctor has worked part-time for many years while raising her children and is still paid at a rate comparable to full-time physicians. Moreover, she retains the ability to increase her hours to full-time in the future and can still access opportunities for advancement. Friends in the fields of psychology and business have reduced their work hours to care for children without huge pay penalties, then reentered their professions full time and achieved success in their careers, albeit often in unconventional ways, often forgoing large firms and working either in their own businesses or in "boutique" establishments that offer greater flexibility to working parents.

However, even if I had not wanted to reduce my working hours, my salary as a full-time tenured faculty member still presented a stumbling block to my ability to remain in Eastern North Carolina. Among professionals, salaries for humanities academics are already low compared to the amount of time and effort required to qualify for the position. My salary at ECU was shockingly low, even by these standards. In spite of being a tenured professor with 15 years on the job, a monograph and many teaching and research awards, I was, in 2016, a victim not only of salary compression, but of inversion. This meant that the English Department paid recently hired assistant professors more than it paid me. A few years before, an English Department survey had shown that I and another female professor were the two lowest-paid among the tenured and tenure-track faculty and yet no raises were forthcoming. My hopes for improvement had risen when, prompted by numerous complaints about women's salaries, the university conducted a study on pay equity. However, the study concluded that there was no gender discrimination (East Carolina University 2016, 13–14). Without institutional change and without another job offer to act as a bargaining chip in salary negotiations, I was stuck with my low salary.

My case was certainly extreme, even in the context of the humanities, but it gestures at a more widespread problem for female academics. Throughout our society, women do the majority of household tasks and childcare. This gender imbalance has long been identified as a drag on professional women with jobs demanding long hours. For many of those women, however, high levels of financial compensation can mitigate at least some of this burden, enabling them to hire household help or support a stay-at-home spouse. This is generally not the case for female academics in the humanities, who face long working hours without the high

salaries of lawyers, physicians, or businesswomen.

The problem of low salaries generally and the terrible working conditions of adjuncts can also be traced back, at least in part, to the tenure system. By dividing academic workers into two categories— one (the tenured) empowered and protected within the university structure and the other (adjuncts) not— the tenure system has created a classic case of "divide and conquer," preventing academics from the kind of collective action that has resulted in good salaries and benefits for K-12 teachers in many parts of the country.[1] Moreover, it has created an atmosphere of intense competition as Ph.D. holders struggle to get the ever-more-rare tenured or tenure-track job as more and more tenure lines are cancelled.

While my salary was a huge problem, the greatest stumbling block of all, and the one that finally convinced me that leaving the profession would be the best thing for me and my family, was yet another rigidity inherent in the tenure system—the inability of tenured and tenure-track academics to choose where they live. Staying in my tenured job at ECU meant my family would have to stay in rural eastern North Carolina. My kids would grow up in a small Southern town of 80,000 people. My husband and I loved eastern North Carolina. We still love it and miss all our friends there. But for our kids, growing up in a rural area where their parents were strangers presented a variety of complex and multifaceted problems, involving issues of education, family relationships and, most importantly, race.

I had arrived in eastern North Carolina in 2002 as a single, white woman. I was far from family and friends in my native Toronto but at that point in my life, it mattered little. With enough disposable income to travel home regularly and a racial identity that fit securely into the categories of my new home, I was happy. Fourteen years later, in the late fall of 2016, I faced a very different situation as the spouse of a man of Punjabi Sikh heritage and parent of three mixed-race children.

In an area with few South Asians, much less members of their own religious and cultural group, my husband and kids did not fit in. Just a few months before, Donald Trump had descended the golden escalator and gone on to win the Presidency in a campaign that awakened long-simmering feelings of racism among America's white majority. Driving as a family of color through rural areas on our biannual trips from North Carolina to Toronto became scary. More than once, taking rest breaks in small towns, we were harassed by white men in vehicles who cruised by, staring at us. One man parked his vehicle next to ours in an empty parking lot, emerged, and slammed his car door significantly as he glared at us.

Even at my kids' school in North Carolina (an ethnically and racially diverse institution due to the many foreign nationals and immigrants employed at the

[1] While some tenured and tenure-track professors at public universities can unionize, faculty at private universities continue to be hamstrung by NLRB v Yeshiva University, 444 U.S. 672 (1980), which ruled that full time, tenured and tenure-track faculty members at private universities could not unionize by defining them as managers rather than employees.

university and the local hospital), race was an ongoing issue. Girls in my daughter's first-grade class made a club where "only girls with blue eyes are allowed." A graduating senior was given a slap on the wrist after engaging in the "prank" (a hate crime in my native Canada) of hanging President Obama in effigy in a classroom with a sign reading "Back to Kenya" posted on it.

In an atmosphere of increasing racial conflict, my husband and I both felt it was important for our children to grow up with a sense of pride in their identity and to be close to grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Watching our kids move towards the rocky teenage years in eastern North Carolina, far from the stabilizing effects of family, my husband and I feared that they would grow up unmoored and isolated, without a clear sense of identity to fall back on.

Being close to family meant moving. Like me, my husband grew up in Toronto. Our extended family on both sides were all located in southern Ontario and Western New York. If we wanted our kids to grow up close to family, we were left with a rather restricted range of locations in southern Ontario, Western New York, northern Pennsylvania or northeastern Ohio. Deciding to prioritize extended family necessarily meant quitting academia since the chances of securing an academic job of any kind in these locations was, as I have noted above, highly unlikely.

Remaining in small-town North Carolina also presented problems with respect to my children's education. My husband and I did not feel that public school was a good option for our three racially mixed kids. At the elementary school for which my neighborhood was zoned, only 20% of elementary students were reading at grade level. At the middle school, more than 60% of students tested below grade standards for reading and math. The school our kids had attended since kindergarten was a private one. The fees were reasonable, relatively speaking, but even the cheapest of private schools is costly when three children are attending. Adding up costs on a spreadsheet, I was shocked to realize that the fees, rising each year as my children advanced through the grades, would soon outstrip my take-home pay. It turned out that if our family moved to a high-quality public school district, we would be better off financially, even if I earned no income at all.

It's been more than eight years since I taught my last class, handed in my office keys, and left Greenville, North Carolina for good. I miss my old university and my students, colleagues, and friends. I miss the rural beauty of eastern North Carolina with its cotton and tobacco fields and its glorious beaches. I'll always treasure the years I spent there, but I'm glad we left when we did. My husband and I decided we would make our home near his sister's family in Rochester, New York. And, because my husband is a physician, instead of a scholar of English literature, he easily found work.

My husband and I didn't expect to enter a racial paradise by moving north and, indeed, the challenges have continued. The public schools in the greater

Rochester area are actually more segregated than those in North Carolina, and they continue to be dogged by episodes of racial discrimination, which school officials often handle poorly. My kids continue to face challenges as racially mixed people, existing in a segregated society as "neither fish nor fowl."

Because we live in Rochester, however, my children don't face these difficulties alone. They live a five-minute drive from two of their cousins, who also attend the same public school district. They make regular trips to Toronto to see their Canadian grandparents and cousins. They have grown up with a sense of belonging and identity that they could not have gotten living 700 miles away. At ages 15, 17, and 18, they are thriving and have the psychological and emotional resiliency to deal with whatever challenges come along.

Having experienced how important it can be for members of marginalized groups to live close to their families and communities, I wonder to what extent the rigidity of the tenure system is responsible for the challenges the humanities face in recruiting a diverse professoriate. While the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to members of ethnic or racial minorities in the humanities has increased in the past twenty years, there have not been proportional advancements either in doctoral degrees awarded or in tenured and tenure-track positions. A recent study by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (AAAS) found that 37.5% of bachelor's degrees in the humanities were awarded to people belonging to ethnic and racial minorities (AAAS 2024a). However, the proportion of humanities doctoral degrees awarded to this same group was much smaller, standing at 20.5% (AAAS 2024b). Even in states that have attempted to improve diversity at their public colleges, the number of women and people of color with tenure remains low. In spite of decades of diversity initiatives in New York state, 76.8% of tenured faculty at the state's higher education institutions in 2019 were white and 58.8% of tenured faculty were male (Silberstein 2021).

In a 2023 analysis written for the Urban Institute, a research organization dedicated to advancing equity, Sarah Parsons (2023) notes the disparity between undergraduate interest and doctorate completion in the social sciences and the humanities and flags it as an important question for research, noting that "[t]o diversify the faculty pool, we must understand what drives the drop-off between those who earn bachelor's degrees and those who earn doctoral degrees." In an article for the Brookings Institute, Dick Startz (2023) notes a similar disparity and argues that, "We need to stop blaming the [undergraduate] pipeline, as it's evident that representation in the pipeline is not the primary bottleneck in doctoral degree completion, but it's attracting racially diverse individuals into doctoral programs."

The barriers standing in the way of increased diversity in academia are complex and varied. Certainly, the lack of financial support, precarious job market, and lack of mentors are discouraging to academic hopefuls from underrepresented minorities. However, I also wonder to what extent location rigidity is an issue

for students from these groups. Entering the Ph.D. and the academic job market as a white woman, I only came to put a high premium on location later, as the mother and spouse of people of color. How many people of color, already aware of the importance of family and community to their well-being, simply opt out of pursuing a Ph.D. or entering the academic job market due to the tight restrictions an academic career places on one's choice of location? There hasn't been much research on this subject, but some more general research on the problems in recruiting people from underrepresented minorities suggests its potential importance. For instance, a recent survey of doctoral students in STEM fields from underrepresented minorities by the Council of Graduate Schools found that 79% of respondents rated "non-financial family support" as very important to their success, while 58% rated the vague but suggestive "personal circumstances" as very important (Sowell et al 2015, 40).

In its 1940 statement on tenure, the American Association of University Professors asserted that tenure is a means to two ends: "(1) freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities, and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability" (AAUP 1970). That argument was compelling 65 years ago when the majority of college faculty were tenured or tenure-track. But in 2025, when almost 70% of college faculty are neither tenured nor eligible for tenure (Colby 2025), it's worth asking whether tenure's "raison d'être" even exists anymore. Instead of providing the strong speech and salary protections of yesteryear, the primary function of tenure in 2025 is to shut out all but the precious few who can conform to its rigid work paradigms. Protection of speech freedoms doesn't mean much if most academics never get it.

Although it might appear as "pie in the sky" fantasizing, I think it's worth imagining what a different kind of academia would look like—a more flexible system that allows people to take time off, to move in and out of positions, and to compete based on their performance and qualifications beyond the very narrow window of the post-Ph.D. assistant professor job market. Understandably, there are fields, like medicine, where the acquisition of a certain set of highly specific and complex skills forbids such movement in and out of the profession. But this is not the case for the humanities. Arguably, our field's focus on human endeavors makes it beneficial to have faculty from varied backgrounds and who have spent time outside the academy and have mixed more with people from other walks of life.

In terms of my own life choices, I never wanted to leave academia completely. I would have been happy to accept a somewhat reduced rate of pay and a somewhat reduced status to work fewer hours and live where I wanted. I think I could have offered a positive contribution as a teacher, researcher, dissertation committee member and reader for publications. However, I was forced to close the door on

the profession because I wasn't willing to work for free or to accept pay rates that were starkly out of keeping with my qualifications.

It wasn't easy to leave academia and give up the status, the structure, the community, and even the pay (as ridiculously low as it was for a tenured faculty member). But I have no regrets. As I have noted above, my primary motivation for leaving was to have more time and energy for my children. Certainly, that has paid off. I've had an amazing eight years devoting myself to them. I've done some other things along the way, some of them predictable (like continuing to write), some of them a complete surprise (like leading a local political movement and running for elected office). What has surprised me is how exhilarating it has been to live as an intellectual outside of academia. When I decided to leave the professoriate, I thought my intellectual growth would be put on hold while my kids grew up, but that is not at all what happened. In fact, I've grown far more as a thinker and a writer outside of academia than I did during the last ten years I spent inside of it.

It's a common (if unspoken) assumption that if humanities academia were to accommodate mothers and caregivers, and to accommodate the needs of people from marginalized communities, its standards would have to be lowered. In fact, I think the standard of work and intellectual production in academia would be significantly raised by a more fluid and accommodating system. As an intellectual field, humanities research benefits from those with varied life experiences, because those experiences are the spark for new and original analyses. A system that shuts such people out, or that cuts them off from its highest levels, while favoring those who march lockstep from undergraduate studies, to PhD, to tenure track and up the ladder, creates a professoriate that is more insular, and that has more trouble seeing the world from the perspective of those who don't share their background or socioeconomic status.

The failings of the tenure system not only affect the quality of research within humanities academia but also lower its standing in the broader society. A profession that is top heavy with an older, whiter, and more male professoriate, a profession wherein young people (with all the dynamism and new ideas they typically bring) are cut off from positions of leadership, a profession in which intense competition for a small number of decent jobs discourages risk-taking and innovation, is a profession in danger of becoming sclerotic and out of touch. It's common among academics to blame the right for attacks on the humanities, and not without cause. But it's wrong to blame every criticism of academia on the right. Even from a liberal or left perspective, there are many ways in which academics don't serve the broader community, which is younger, more diverse, and more ideologically varied than the current cohort of humanities faculty.

All that I've learned and experienced over the last eight years would no doubt make me a much better scholar, teacher and university leader. As my children move from adolescence to young adulthood, I would be happy to return to work as

an academic. Unfortunately, the constraints of the profession mean I’m unlikely ever to practice as a university scholar again.

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