University as Secret Society: Becoming Faculty Through Discretion

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Abstract

Becoming a professor is complicated by a lack of clear guidelines for promotion to permanent status and, paradoxically, a surplus of mechanisms for institutional transparency. Drawing on Lilith Mahmud’s anthropologies of discretion applied to secret societies like the Italian Freemasons, this paper compares becoming a professor to an initiate’s journey toward becoming a member of a secret society. Membership in both requires a balance between knowing who to know and knowing the codes of what goes said and unsaid. These ways of knowing may manifest in mentor/mentee relations, in informal networks and communities of practice, or in acts of compliance and resistance to the neoliberal university.

Keywords Anthropology of discretion · Higher education · Job security and tenure · Junior scholars · Neoliberal universities · Secret societies

Universities in the United States 1 run on secrecy and transparency. The academic job is laden with blind reviews, anonymous evaluations, nameless committees, and other forms of secret ballot votes. Researchers are asked to not reveal their names in the publishing process, and they are not to know who evaluates their manuscripts. They are encouraged to have letters of recommendation sent directly to the institutions they seek positions from without getting to read what they contain. At the same time, new perspectives on the governance of higher education have opened financial contributions, accreditation data, rankings, performance-based contracts, learning outcomes, and research impacts to stakeholders to improve decision-making practices, accountability, education, and research services (Jongbloed et al. 2018). While the secrecy that goes on behind the scenes of academic publishing, hiring, and job retention is done in the name of fairness, it collides with calls for transparency, a force that drives the economic efficiency of the neoliberal university (DiLeo 2015). 2

Given these entanglements, how do junior scholars—doctoral candidates, postdocs, adjunct lecturers, and assistant professors—navigate the social and institutional world of becoming permanent faculty? In this paper, we argue that finding and keeping an academic position in higher education depends on a person’s ability to perform their belonging, specifically by

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1 Though much of the arguments raised in this paper could apply in other national contexts (e.g., of how secrecy or transparency performs: in Australian universities, see Diezmann 2018; in Brazilian universities, see Aparecida de Lima 2012; in South African universities, see Pithouse-Morgan et al. 2016; in South Korean universities, see Ki-Young and Kuen 2007; or in the UK and other European universities, see Butler et al. 2017; Robinson et al. 2017), it is the US university system under focus in this paper.

2 In our usage, calls for transparency within the neoliberal university do not presage “social death” from the ravages of late capitalism (Giroux 2014, p. 13), for individuals or institutions, but represent one of many “actually existing” practices of the neoliberalization (Brenner and Theodore 2002, p. 349) of social spaces that result in both “destruction” and “creation” (p. 364). We understand the neoliberal university then as a space of market-friendly, self-actualizing management strategies where social actors contest and subvert these tactics (Sadlier 2019) to varying degrees of success and failure.
balancing needs for transparency and secrecy through appropriate discretion. These balancing acts are not unlike those performed by initiates in secret societies. The comparison to secret societies is not as strange as it might seem. For one, ethnographic research has shown that the day-to-day operations of modern-day secret societies are made distinct not by harboring actual secrets but rather by their members’ performance of belonging through a shared practice of discretion—a way of navigating what one can and cannot say—and to whom one should or should not say them (Mahmud 2012a, b). The “secret” of modern-day secret societies is therefore not so much about any particular content as it is about a “lived experience” (Mahmud 2012a, p. 435).

Nonetheless, such discretion-mediated knowledge systems are at odds with the expectation of transparency common in today’s liberal democratic societies, a tension that secret societies such as the iconic Freemasons have had to contend with as they have come under scrutiny by recent governments and the general public. This conflict presents itself in interesting ways within universities. Unlike modern-day secret societies, for whom the expectation of transparency comes from external pressures, universities have internalized policy imperatives of transparency while continuing their traditional practices of concealment.

Observing the handling of discretion in a secret society may give us insight into the complex and contradictory communicative practices required to balance transparency and secrecy needs for career attainment in academia. Being a professor is a social performance; we become scholars among others. Social connections with mentors (Blake 2018), professors (Lindholm 2004), and advisors (O’Meara et al. 2013) facilitate a junior or non-tenure-track scholar’s becoming tenured or tenure-track. The performativity of secrecy has been noted by Pollock (1999) to identify who is included and included, allowing “sites of social knowledge production to emerge and thrive” (p. 187). Blakely (2012) observes that secrecy is not a mere absence of information, but rather a practice of power negotiated by people who can access it. We therefore explore the ways in which tenure-track (henceforth TT) and non-tenure-track (henceforth NTT) faculty perform their presences on campuses—discreetly—as they attempt to progress toward more permanent positions in the academic employment hierarchy.

Discretion as a Literacy Practice

To address becoming faculty through discretion, we rely on Lilith Mahmud’s (2012a, b) pathbreaking work on twenty-first-century Italian Freemasons for analytical insight into how practices of “concealment and revelation” define membership in institutions marked by secrecy (p. 426). Freemasonry, like universities, originated in the period of the Enlightenment and its ideals of rationality. At the time, Masonic chapters were “secret” in the sense that they were spaces where its members “could come together to read and discuss the radical political ideas of the time, such as democracy and republicanism” (p. 428). Concurrently, Freemasons developed a strong sense of in-group culture, “embodying in each other the principle of brotherhood, of universal fraternity” (p. 428). This latter quality was the one that marked them most distinctively to outside observers and remains the enduring image of secret societies today. As with Masonic practices of old, twenty-first century Freemasons take secrecy oaths and conceal membership from non-Masons. What is interesting, however, is that their so-called secrecy is really a form of communication—a system of concealment and disclosure—that amounts to a complex literacy practice.

Navigating discretion is a literacy practice for the initiates. According to Mahmud (2012a), Italian Freemasons refer to this handling of social texts as discrezione or discretion, the fluent performance of which marks one a legitimate Freemason before the wider membership. As Mahmud (2012a) observes of her ethnographic informants, who were practicing Freemasons, discretion meant participating in a set of practices that concealed important knowledge from view, while also making it possible that same knowledge could be shared with select members. Ultimately, Mahmud (2012a) notes that while the notion of secrecy focuses on the act of concealment, discretion comprises revealing and concealing practices “of knowing how much to say, to whom, and when” that “performatively establish a subject’s positionality within a specific community of practice” (p. 429).

Importantly, discretion consists of a person’s ability to wield signs and symbols noteworthy and legible only to those in the know. Mahmud (2012a) describes her own experience of becoming schooled in this literacy as she pursued her research:

Discretion became for me a kind of coded visibility in which certain symbols and signs, intelligible only to those who have been trained to recognize them, were in plain sight, hidden not by an act of concealment but by the beholder’s own illiteracy. I therefore had to undergo a “process of enskilling” to train myself, with the help of my informants, in the art of discretion, learning to recognize visual symbols and spoken innuendos, winks, metaphors, and codes. The intimacy I could

3 Social networks often function through informal lunches with senior faculty, shared Google Docs of tenured professors’ promotion packets, or invitations to established writing groups (Foote and Solem 2009). Crimmins (2016) found “pre-existing friendships and profession-based peer networks were the strongest determinants for academic recruitment” (p. 4).

4 Leaning on Butler’s (2004) framework for persistence and survival within structures of power, we offer descriptive assessment and evaluative critique of the status quo—in particular, the predominant practices that define TT and NTT professional identities. Rather than suggesting persistence and survival take on forms of political quietism in academic spaces (Schmidt 2000), we offer new ways to consider personal and collective freedom and spaces of subversion and transgression within the university system—without ceasing to be in it.
develop with my informants, the trust I could earn, and therefore, the access I could be granted to the ritual spaces of Masonic lodges depended very much on my own ability to be discreet. (p. 431)

As Mahmud’s experiences show, becoming skilled in discretion allows a person to be simultaneously secretive and revelatory in their performance of Masonic membership. It is key to a novice’s ability to gain access to Masonic spaces of belonging. This will be significant for our analysis of how NTT faculty and TT faculty navigate job and promotional prospects in the university.

**Transparency and Discretion Within the Neoliberal University**

It may seem an overstatement to suggest a person skillful enough to complete a doctorate stumbles through the steps of becoming a professor. In the scholarly world, however, the academic capital of a successful doctoral student may not coolly transition into becoming a professor. Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2016) suggest that becoming a professor progresses haphazardly, without guarantees and with “marginalisation and exclusion” (pg. 225). Spoken and unspoken rules may include or exclude, not only on the merit of publications but of being a “good institutional fit” that tenure and promotion committee members feel toward faculty (Sternberg 2014). These criteria can confuse a junior scholar, especially first-generation faculty and people of color, who, as McCrory Calarco’s (2020) work has shown, are less likely to have had the opportunity to master the “hidden curriculums” of academia—those things you are expected to know but aren’t overtly taught. Moreira (2011) specifically considers the rights that given bodies possess to inhabit academic spaces and take on academic roles, asking if the working class, people of color, or other marginalized groups can become academics without hiding behind acceptability.³

In response, the practice of transparency is presented to us in the neoliberal era as the solution that works toward equity enhancement that corrects the erstwhile ways of cronyism, superstition, and tradition by introducing better governmental practices. Mahmud (2012b) explains that, as a cornerstone of the liberal demos, transparency has multiple sides: it is simultaneously a modern yearning for wokeness that drives us in this present piece. Transparency is a practice that needs faculty to both conceal and reveal different priorities at different times. Sometimes it is the priority of academic integrity that needs to be revealed and faculty rights/academic integrity concealed, and sometimes it is the other way around. It is further complicated by the fact that issues of faculty rights and academic integrity are often dealt with using measures of secrecy.

Thus, despite expectations of transparency, the social process of becoming an in-group member among academic faculty depends on the performance of information exchanges that are appropriately concealing and revealing. It depends upon successfully negotiating processes of discretion. Among Freemasons, experts model how novices ought to act and think when faced with the symbols and practices linked to membership (Mahmud 2012a). New members look to insiders for tips on where to stand and how to set their gaze. This creates an “intimate relationality” in the cultivation of discretion, which produces “contradictory positionalities” of new member inclusion and exclusion as they pass toward

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³ Moreira (2011) notes that for ethnic minorities, women, global south and indigenous people, people with disabilities, LGBTQ, and those who speak non-majority languages, the process of “becoming” a professor mixes with “indignation” when addressing disconnection often felt by marginalized bodies before communities of knowledge production (pg. 147).
membership (p. 434). In this article, we explore how NTT and TT faculty experience such contradictory positionalities and encounters between experts and novices as they navigate the uncertainties of career advancement in academia.

Methods of Discretion

To produce the social data for this analysis, we stream together representations of voices that have appeared at the nexus of the secrecy/transparency contradiction of the neoliberal university (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The voices have been constructed from a diverse range of available sources—TT academic groups on Facebook; union meetings; colleagues at various institutions; our own self-reflections and experiences; and informal conversations at professional conferences. What this means is that, in order to give full protection to those who have shared their stories regarding their experiences in the academy, we have refashioned individuals into composite sketches. Bricolage as a methodological solution means drawing on available techniques in situationally determined ways (Lévi-Strauss 1966); in light of the sensitivity of the subject matter we discuss, where promotions and reputations rest uneasily in the liminal space between what is seen and unseen and stated and unstated, we shroud our methods in their own form of discretion. In telling the story of the academy, while in the secrecy/transparency dichotomy we academics maneuver in, we couch our methods within the traditions of storytelling, where characters emerge from circumstances, thereby protecting individual voices embedded in institutions under critique (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

Where’s My Power? Literacies of Discretion for TT and NTT Faculty

In the following analyses, we examine the experiences of junior TT faculty followed by those of NTT faculty in meetings, salary negotiations, and social and community gatherings. Through these experiences, we explore how academia conceals and reveals, not “by an act of malice” but rather to separate and hide as a rite of passage, a journey of discovery the novice scholar must take to “emerge transformed into a new member of society” (Mahmud 2012a, p. 427). This involves knowing how much to say, to whom and when, and learning to steer social and institutional spaces that necessitate forms of suppression and exposure.

Social Interventions Hidden in View of the Tenure Track

While universities have traditionally promoted the spirit of free speech, TT faculty commandeer public posts that call for discretion at the microphone. Administrations in recent years have cracked down on faculty members’ social media usage, for example, determining what can be said and done by employees in the public domain. There have been incidents where members of universities have lost their jobs for social media posts that commented on controversial matters pertaining to the institution (Donoghue 2015). Discretion in navigating expectations of transparency therefore greatly shapes how probationary faculty respond mentally and physically to the spaces they operate in.

Laura (pseudonym), a mathematician, was hired in fall 2017 as a TT assistant professor in a computer science department in the Northeast, USA. Here she explains the lessons she has had to learn on comportment in academic spaces.

“I have always been a person who has no issue speaking up for myself or others, but like many academics I ask questions, give feedback, suggest ideas. I have the impression that this may be looked down upon in meetings where, for junior faculty, it’s like that old saying about children—it’s better to be seen than heard. I’ve managed to cause some friction between myself and higher ups in my department who weren’t open to my comments during faculty meetings,” Laura mentioned. “On two separate occasions, two different faculty mentors, with good intentions, kindly mentioned that if I wanted to, I could just sit back during the meetings, that that would be ok. In other words, I shouldn’t participate so much as show up. So, yeah, I am learning to tone it down or at least regulate what I say in circles of people who have such a stake in if I’ll keep my job or not.”

Laura’s story brings to mind Mahmud’s (2012a) analysis of how apprentice Freemasons were not allowed to speak during rituals their entire first year. She calls this silencing “the construction of discreet bodies,” which spills over from formal ritual scenarios into informal get-togethers (p. 430). This rule of silence is meant to instill humbleness in the novice, serving as a reminder that they have much to learn from others, that they “should not rush to voice opinions of his or her own before adequate training” (p. 432). Like first year Masons, Laura too found herself needing to navigate two conflicting priorities: academic freedom, which would seem to encourage outspokenness, and acceptance among the faculty, which would seem to require “learning to tone it down” or learning some form of self-regulation. The senior faculty, acting as fully-fledged members helping to train a novice, suggests that silence might provide a layer of protection for TT professors in vulnerable positions. For one is no longer merely protecting one’s likeability in a room of one’s workmates, but one’s professional reputation and job security. As was the case with Laura, she was the first to admit that the balance between what should and should not be said, and by whom, was complicated by her outspoken nature. “It’s bad that I have to silence myself to be accepted, but I have to think about it when I decide to speak up.”
like this—this is part of an evolutionary process. I’m not at the fully evolved end of my career path just yet.”

Pressures to practice transparency with skillful discretion are especially acute in situations where certain bodies, such as hiring committees, speak with more consequential power and know more than others at the table do. In 2018, after two years of working in a NTT capacity, Ximena (pseudonym) landed a TT position as an assistant professor in a history department at a satellite campus of a large university in the Southwest of the USA. She talks about her experience of interviewing for the job and what she perceived as both overt and clandestine operations during the hiring process.

“While on my job talk, women who I was introduced to on the faculty took me aside and told me, woman to woman, you need to negotiate. It felt awesome, empowering that they had my interest at heart. How often are women encouraged to speak at the negotiating table? Of course, when I received the job offer I had absolutely no idea how to negotiate. What could I have gotten? I think about this more than I’d like. I gave a number I felt mildly comfortable speaking out loud, let them mull it over behind closed doors, and they came back with something in between. At that point, I didn’t have it in me to make a counteroffer. How much more of a salary could I ask for without being laughed at or worse, rescinded the offer? Where’s my power to negotiate when I had sent out 10s of applications and this had been my only offer? I had no power to negotiate, they knew it and I knew it. I didn’t find out until months later that my colleague, a man with the same start date, makes $5000 more than me.”

Ximena’s story reflects the entanglements that many junior faculty experience when entering the workforce. As was her experience, for departments to get the best candidate at the lowest cost, salary markers are hidden at the negotiating table, and those without the cultural capital to put a price value on their intellectual worth are shortchanged. With a market flooded with qualified PhDs, emerging academics are defenseless and subject to the whims of those in positions of higher power. With the prospect of joblessness, many forfeit perks that were once par for the course with the TT contract—childcare, summer funding, positions for significant others (Whittaker 2016). Although trained and supposedly valued as critical scholars, many entry-level faculty find they are implicitly expected in their first decisive act as (almost) professors—negotiating their compensation—to tone down their input and requests for an equitable standard of living.

Unlike in Laura’s case, where mentoring was essentially effective at clueing her in to how to be discreet and why, Ximena’s experience was confusing to her because she essentially was told to be revelatory—to disclose—but it was unclear how or what she should disclose, and, importantly, why. Freemasons disclose to other Freemasons because they have reasonably good assurance that it will get them accepted and recognized as equal members. In Ximena’s case, while commendable that she received the kind of under-the-radar mentoring she did from women on faculty, the reason her mentors give her for disclosing is because, as a woman, she already categorically does not belong. This disclosure, an act of transparency, is supposed to help her gain equity—a reason many universities give for adopting transparency as a policy in the first place. It does not work, however, because in order to preserve transparency’s other neoliberal priority, which is economic efficiency, there is concealment on the other end of the negotiating table. Ximena’s attempts at discretion go awry because there are two ways to demonstrate membership at this point—promoting equity or promoting economic efficiency—and Ximena’s discretion does not get her the equal membership she desires. She was trying to prove membership using discretion in a different system of codes (signs and symbols) than the hiring committee.

The difficulty of knowing what system of codes one is dealing with as academic faculty can be confusing in other areas of job advancement as well. This is seen in what another junior faculty member described as having taken place between herself and a well-known scholar in the field of education from a public university in the northwest. She was told that published papers needed to cite particular authors or one published paper needed to cite another. Where was the transparency? Where was the mentoring? Where was the equity? Where were the social interventions, not unlike initiates of secret societies, where their attendance at community gatherings serves to make alliances in the field. But the senior scholar tells her that she may have to conceal the sources she actually used and, instead, for the purpose of career advancement, disclose other sources that she knows are significant in her field.

The need to practice transparency with discretion results in the probationary faculty member embodying contradictory positionalities, which are “not simply inside or outside but, rather, somewhere along the many degrees that make up the initiation path” (Mahmud 2012a, p. 434). This means renegotiating ways of being and relating to others in interactions of conviviality, where TT faculty are encouraged to go through social interventions, not unlike initiates of secret societies, where their attendance at community gatherings serves to discipline their becoming discreet permanent faculty. Mahmud (2012a) explains that for Freemasons, socializing lets members observe the behaviors of others, where they are made aware of

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6 In efforts to be more transparent, public universities frequently post-state employees’ salaries online; however, these are intermingled with health costs and other institutional contributions that blur the gross yearly incomes of individuals.
the intricate ways of performing proper Masonry. They learn to recognize and greet Masons from other lodges, how to interact with waitstaff at celebration halls, as well as how to offer judgment-free opinions on political matters in moderate tones. For new assistant professors, socializing manifests for many, especially women, in learning to perform “niceness” with co-workers. As one assistant professor put it: “I had no idea how important things like going out to lunch with faculty were, or how you need to be on good terms with senior faculty because they may be the ones on the committee deciding your tenure.” Junior TT faculty’s willingness to be social may be an overt performance of transparency with discretion: they are showing that they have nothing to hide about themselves and that they see themselves as social equals with other faculty members, whatever rank they may be. Contradictorily, the reason why they may feel pressured to perform these social duties may be because they know they have not yet reached social equality and they have to hide their very self-consciousness of, or anxiety about, that fact (Jaremka et al. 2020).

**NTT Faculty Navigating Spaces of Inclusion and Exclusion**

While TT faculty must learn to see and then perform the hidden institutional rules of conviviality to advance their career, NTT faculty must practice their own discreet forms of inclusivity in pursuit of job security. On the one hand, NTT faculty’s work at universities links them to communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) where research and activism matter; on the other, echoing Gappa and Leslie (1993) and Kezar (2012), their teaching on a contingent basis has led to their invisibility in the campus community. Serving as schedule placeholders in course catalogs, where they are represented as nameless faculty “TBA” or “staff,” has turned such faculty into, sadly, instruments of human resources (Fuller et al. 2017, p. 23).

While some authors read the boom in faculty contingency as a hindrance to academic freedom (Gappa and Austin 2010) and excellence (Adult Education Council 2018) and as others see the casualized labor shift as an opportunity for professorial entrepreneurship (Carroll 2003), a NTT literacy movement has materialized. Such literacy practices have attempted to give a face to adjuncts as campus actors by publishing narratives that describe the inclusionary and exclusionary practices they experience. There is Hensley (2017), for example, who worked as a NTT faculty member at a private institution. Student organizations invited his participation as a faculty advocate and advisor; however, departmental colleagues and administrators refused him grant funding, awards, and participation on decision-making boards. Hensley turned to co-creating personal stories with other NTT faculty as a way to nurture the connection between “disparate factions of college personnel” (p. 39). Another NTT worker, Pots (2017), engaged so actively on his campus that students referred to him as “professor.” This inaccurate rank distinction offended a tenured professor, who reminded Pots that, as a NTT instructor, he was not a professor. Stunned, Pots, who had never claimed professorial status, established a community-of-practice group for NTT workers that met several times a term. Putman and Kriner (2017) observed how such NTT communities of practice, through “self-directed” and “collaborative learning networks” (p. 64), have fostered common ground among NTT workers. These spaces operate in discretion, concealed from a larger university system that wants NTT faculty to keep out of sight, while at the same time allowing for some amount of shared revelation among NTT faculty.

Other spaces of discretion for NTT faculty exist. Here, we introduce Alix (pseudonym), a NTT faculty member and union organizer. Alix took to adjunct teaching at a university on the West Coast of the USA to keep a foot in the door for TT job searches. Instead of participating in autobiographical efforts or informal groups as described above, Alix found inclusion through union activism. Alix is a NTT representative in his American Federation of Teachers union local. Following the 2018 *Janus v. AFSCME* US Supreme Court decision that allowed faculty to opt out of paying union dues, whose effects were reinforced by the privately funded Freedom Foundation’s campaign for faculty opt-outs, Alix noticed a surge in NTT faculty at his local union. NTT faculty saw the union as a prospective space for the community. The local now represents a new social network for many. Unlike TT, NTT faculty lack mentors to guide them through the process of becoming faculty members of permanent standing. Contingent faculty therefore negotiate relationships of discretion through communities of practice.

The interplay of inclusion and exclusion is troubling, but it has not silenced NTT faculty, who have become adept at literacies of discretion in response. Take, for example, the case of one NTT faculty member at an all-woman’s college who, in the blog *The Professor Is In* (DeFoster 2017), published the letter she sent to the president of the small Midwestern US college where she taught. The NTT faculty member reached out to the administration multiple times on labor issues only to be ignored; however, when NTT faculty planned to vote to form a union, the president finally took interest in their concerns—by writing “15 emails, letters and phone calls” with interest in “working directly” with NTT faculty, while at the same time encouraging them to vote against their own interests by voting “no” to forming a union. Sarcastically defiant, the NTT faculty member answers the president by stating: “in this renewed spirit of direct communication, I would like to respond specifically to several troubling points you’ve made in your many emails and letters.” She then goes on to counterpoint each of the fallacies raised in the “many emails and letters” regarding contracts, course load, and job security. The letter to the president, with its use of sarcasm and irony,
shows apt usage of literacies of discretion. Springboarding off the experience of the administration’s dismissive and supercilious treatment, the faculty member demonstrates how the university only takes NTT faculty as worthy of full disclosure when they organize, so, in the spirit of transparency, she would disclose without censor. Though the letter is serious in tone, its defiance resembles the practice of humorous, coded wordplay common in teacher social movement protests (Sadlier 2016), where getting the last word becomes a form of revenge for social actors excluded from official forms of participation.

**Becoming Permanent Faculty After Covid-19**

TT and NTT faculty must learn to navigate the social codes often hidden in plain sight on their path to job security. This involves a performative pedagogical effort to learn to see and seize opportunities for belonging, not unlike the initiation processes of secret societies. As the voices that have emerged in this essay suggest, these hidden social interventions require probationary faculty members to embody certain ways of being and relating to others within the institution. Likewise, faculty build solidarity networks with peers and through personal stories. The social networks may or may not lead to a permanent work situation, but they undergird the social dynamics of how to operate inside their institutions. Such acts may contradict what one hopes of higher education—that it is a place where freedom of thought, speech, movement, assembly, and debate thrive freely.

Universities run like secret societies, institutions that Mahmud (2012a, b) observes as based on secrecy and on social connections, in regard to practices of tenure and promotion for junior faculty. Unlike secret societies, universities, for all their opaque expectations, simultaneously run on transparency. As an anti-corruption measure, transparency in recent decades taps the neoliberal turn toward good governance, working against inequities of sweetheart deals and nepotistic contracting. However, as this paper directs, do not take transparency as nobly informative and secrecy as sneaky silent. Transparency is political; the pedagogical shift toward clear rubrics and accessible syllabi is a shift toward self-responsible individuals more than a neutral, pragmatic effort to promote equity. Secrecy is communicative; when people are excluded, they reach out to others to be more connected.

This article has offered a description and critique of the conflicting priorities within universities’ call for transparency and secrecy and how this requires complicated and contradictory concealments and disclosures. Novices use discretion to negotiate the subtle social cues, in what “cannot be revealed in words” (Mahmud 2012a, p. 435) of institutional life. They handle the discretion of social connections that arise out of a “contradictory positionality” (p. 434), where more experienced individuals provide cues on how to navigate the system for the less experienced. Ximena met women faculty members who suggested she negotiate her contract, which turned into awareness on unequal pay for women. Others deployed discretion to interpret the history of the institutes and their presence in them, like when mathematics professor Laura noticed how academic freedom entangles with how certain bodies can safely speak out at meetings while others cannot. These stories offer a better understanding of the ways universities resemble secret societies and how junior faculty earn membership through the social process of their communities of practice.

Moving forward, the economic effects and public health measures of Covid-19 have elevated the importance of understanding discretion for TT and NTT faculty navigating their way toward greater job security. As we have shown, a probationary faculty member’s greatest resource comes by way of social interventions of formal and informal networks, which are that much harder to achieve when lunch dates, office camaraderie, and face-to-face social organizing have moved to online happy hours and Zoom meetings. How TT and NTT faculty will adapt to these changes remains to be seen. We offer scholarship that examines the symbols, rituals, and actions that colleges and universities use to uphold transparency and secrecy, lending important insights into actual ways job security is attained in neoliberal universities through discretion.

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