



## Is Tenure the End or the Beginning?

Associate professor Michelle Espino Lira feels uncertain about how to prepare to grow professionally. And Stevon offers advice on creating your own career rubric, and helps us figure out how to stay aligned with our purpose after significant benchmarks.

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Stevon Lewis:

What's up, everybody? Welcome to How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. Today we welcome Dr. Michelle Espino Lira. Michelle is a tenured associate professor at a public university, who's been diligently making her way up the ranks in academia. She's now on a rigorous track to advance to the next level of her career and become a full professor, but without a concrete rubric for her to follow, the path seems daunting and the uncertainty nerve-wracking. Let's get into it.

Michelle Espino Lira:

I'm Doctora Michelle Espino Lira. I am an associate professor at a four-year public research university. I'm a first-generation college student. My parents did not know the steps to going to college. And I didn't really know this entire process, but I did my best. I have a little spreadsheet. I actually accepted the university site unseen because they gave me a scholarship, and then decided to get a master's degree. And then I was like, "I think I need to get a PhD, because I want to become a vice president at a university."

There's so many different milestones in a doctoral program that I thought it was very important to write them out for my parents and help them understand, what is the process of getting a PhD? And I wrote a piece of paper and a checklist, and I put it on the fridge. And every time I met a certain milestone, my parents could check it off, so they could see, as I was going, what my development was. So for example, first on the checklist was I had to complete all the classes that you have to take to be eligible to then become a doctoral candidate.

I really had originally thought I would be an administrator, but in the time that I was there, I had faculty who really invested in me. And I thought, "I really like doing research. Could I be a professor?" And I started asking my faculty, "Do you think I

could do this?" And they mentored me and invested in me. It really helped me to see models of possibility. These are racially, ethnically minoritized people who are professors in all kinds of institutions, and I can do this too. And so I did my dissertation on the life stories of 33 Mexican-American PhDs and their journeys from the very beginning of their lives all the way through to what it meant to earn a degree.

Michelle: I applied to different faculty positions. And this was in 2008 when the recession was happening, so there were very few positions that were available, and particularly for what we call tenure-track jobs. So it's changing now, but it should be a permanent job at a university. And you have to go through steps to do that. And again, this was another checklist I created for my parents to understand the process for tenure.

I earned tenure in 2018. It took a year for that to happen. Becoming a full professor... The title does mean a lot, because there's less than 1% of Latinos who get to reach that level as a professor. And I'm at a crossroads with it, because I don't know what happens without the checklist. Then I get to figure it out for myself. What is it that I really want to achieve with this title?

Michelle: One of the things that I've always been very successful at is following the rules. And I entered a profession where I've been trained to get tenure. I haven't been trained to be a full professor. They don't talk about that part of it. They just want you to achieve tenure. And so once you're done there, you're like, "Okay, how do I get to the next rung?" And that one, you have to build your own checklist. You have to motivate yourself.

And with full professorship, it's very vague. It could be five years from now. It could be eight years from now. And it isn't really you making the decision. It's your colleagues who tell you, "Oh yeah, you're ready to go up now. You're ready to be reviewed as a full professor." Only the senior full professors can vote on other full professors. So that makes it a little bit more daunting, because I'm so used to the checklist, and now it's like, "Other people are going to decide for you, and I have no idea when that will happen."

Stevon: Thank you, Michelle, for sharing your experience with us.

When I listened to Michelle's story, the thing that stood out most was... And you'll see this oftentimes with people who have an experience like she does with wanting to have a blueprint when you what I like to call trailblazer in your family, the first one to go and do something that hasn't been done. There's this fear that you don't know what you're doing, and that maybe because you don't know you won't be successful. Listening to her, talk about being a first-generation college

student and how she's had to work to explain the process of becoming a doctor to her parents, because they don't have a real reference point for that. I mean, here's how Michelle put it.

Clip: *I wrote a piece of paper and a checklist, and I put it on the fridge. And every time I met a certain milestone, my parents could check it off, so they could see, as I was going, what my development was*

Stevon Lewis: Helpful for them, but also for her, because it simplifies or illuminates the process for herself. I think that's out of safety, that if I do the steps as they're ordered, then there's no way I won't be successful. So for people that are like Michelle, it's a unique experience that I notice where they are more confident when things seem to be decided for them or there's a very clear direction. She finds that she can be pretty confident when she can create a checklist or if there are rules to follow, because it gives her parameters about how to operate and move toward success.

She has some fear when that is a less clear path. Not even just less clear, but when she has to come up with the checklist herself. And I think that her confidence wanes in those moments, because she's not sure what the next step ought to be. And then there comes this idea of, "Well, what if it's the wrong next step?" And then all the self doubt and the negativity.

And that stuff... for me, it's interesting that the mind creates that. The situation is the same. The skills she'll use to be successful are the same skills she'll use when she's creating the rubric as opposed to when the rubric is provided for her. I think about it like athletes, or maybe a quarterback specifically. If the coach calls the play, cool. You know what to do. If you call the play, now all of a sudden you don't? And I guess the way I think about it is that at some point you're going to have to call "hike". You're going to have to throw the ball. And something's going to happen. So whether someone told you what play to do or whether you called it yourself, those mechanics, those skills are going to be the same.

So when someone is tasked with coming up with their own rubric or parameters about how they are to move forward in a space that they haven't done before or don't have a ton of familiarity with, the goal is to slow down. And so I think oftentimes the tendency is to see the big picture and say, "I need to get there." Which is good, right? We need to have a destination in mind. There's some discomfort that exists when you aren't able to see far enough down the road. I get the benefit and the safety, the feeling of safety that comes from having five, six steps ahead in the future visible for you, and you know exactly what to do. Also, sometimes that's not possible, and that doesn't mean that you need to live in fear. That actually, the thing to do then is just say, "Hey, can I do the very next thing? And then when I get to that place, what is the next thing I need to do?"

Part of Michelle's experience and why she's somewhat anxious about where she is now... It's a thing I think that happens or is more common for folks, especially high achievers, because they're used to accomplishing, because that gives me purpose. And so now once you've reached that level or that goal, then what? And I think that it's an opportunity or a really good time to sit back and reflect about your "Why." What started out as the driving goal may change along the way. She's like, "I thought I was going to be administrator, but that's changed. Now. I think I'm going to be a full professor. That wasn't on the radar when I started, but now it is." And so getting to the point of where she's really close to making that happen, she's like, "Huh, is this what I want? And why? Why do I want that?" And I think as long as she's able to do that, or people like her are able to reflect on their experiences and evaluate whether or not things remain in alignment for them and give themselves compassion if it doesn't, then they'll be okay with the outcomes that they receive.

My fear is that you'll become so attached to doing the thing that you will lose sight of your value and your wants and your desires and needs. And I think when you lose sight of those things, then the resentment creeps in. And I think that's what I'm hoping people will be able to stay away from, is resenting the decisions and accomplishments they've made and being more compassionate about if that changes, that doesn't mean it was a waste.

I think the key to identifying our big whys is based in what brings us joy and what we want to leave as part of our legacy. And so I don't want to make that sound so grandiose or huge that people become fearful like, "I've got to know what my legacy will be." It's a much easier question. It's asking, after you've done something and you've interacted with folks or you've been in a space, what do you want that to look like, after your presence is removed? After you are no longer occupying that space or no longer actively in relationship with that individual, what do you want the takeaways to be? And I think if people think about it like that, it becomes much clearer to understand or see what the true goal or our "big why" is.

As a last bit of advice, I would say people or hope that people will be mindful of the pressure they put on themselves. I think when we are moving into a new space that we haven't occupied before, or doing something that isn't so clearly defined for us, we intensify the pressure, and we say that the stakes are higher. Let's try to reduce some of that by thinking about it more holistically. So basketball players, if they're a good free throw shooter and they shoot free throws really well, they know how to make free throws. That process and the mechanics of shooting a free throw are consistent whether there's no time on the clock, whether it's practice, or whether we're in the last few seconds of the game and it's tied. Don't

allow your mind to intensify or create more pressure than is required for you to be able to do the thing you've probably done before.

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything*. We have really big plans for our show, and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated, and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer Virginia an email, and we'll get your story on the show. She's at [virginia@lwcstudios.com](mailto:virginia@lwcstudios.com). *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything* is an original production of LWC Studios. Virginia Lora is the show's producer. Kojin Tashiro is our mixer. Juleyka Lantigua is the creator and executive producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram, we're @talktoachievers. Bye, everybody.

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