

Episode 2.24 Being a Little Bit Bigger and More Awesome than you Feel Most Days with Jennifer Askey

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Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. So I kind of an interesting experience last week. You may or may not have noticed this, but I do a lot of my academic production these days in the form of podcasts like this one. And I really love doing this work. I take a great deal of pleasure in thinking out loud. That's always been one of my primary modes of thinking. I loved grad seminars for that reason. My friend Claire used to joke that she could tell that I had a thought because I would just be sitting there with my mouth open waiting until I got to talk. It's a lot easier for me a lot of the time to process things by talking them through. During my PhD I shared office space with a lovely friend named Rob. Shout out Rob. And we would sometimes go into the room with a whiteboard to just talk ideas through. One of us would explain what we are trying to figure out to the other one and the other one would take note, and that's just, it's always helped me to, to think out loud. But I also really like writing and I think I've been doing so much podcasting lately that, I mean for one thing it's just been hard to find time to write at all, and I also, I kind of struggle to think of myself as a writer. You know, I think of myself as an academic first, and the mode in which I produce my scholarship is sort of a secondary question. So you know, my teaching, my service, presenting at conferences, writing articles, sharing stuff on social media, podcasting, those are all extensions of what my primary role is, which is to be a scholar, but obviously the particular mode that I'm producing, things in informs sort of the way my thinking actually works. And, and last week I sat down and actually did some writing, like some sustained writing for the first time in a long time, and it felt really, really great. It just reminded me that, that I think about different things when I approached them using different tools. Anyway, this, this has been sort of on my mind because the topic of this week's episode is being an academic and how to do so in a way that really serves you, and how to sort of figure out what your priorities are going to be in, and what you particularly want to do with this job. So heads up for those of you who are deeply disinterested in, in academia and who come to this podcast for different reasons. This one is going to be pretty inside baseball. And I think for those of you who aren't academics, you might still find it interesting, particularly if you've been to university but we're on sort of the other side of the desk, so to speak. But yeah, we're, we're, we're definitely, we're definitely getting into the academic talk in this one. So without further ado, let's meet Jennifer. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Jennifer Askey is an academic coach with a PhD in Germanic Languages and Literatures and a research background in Girlhood and Nationalism in 19th Century Germany. After getting tenure at Kansas State University in 2010, she threw caution to the wind and moved with her husband and kids to Hamilton, Ontario to follow her husband's career. She eventually left academia to get certified as a coach and start her own business. She now works

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with academics to help them take charge of their careers, plan their academic legacy, and get big writing projects done. She's moving to Edmonton, Alberta at the end of the summer where she'll be working at the University of Alberta, providing leadership coaching for chairs, deans, and other academic leaders. Jennifer and I met over Skype to talk about coaching, working to make change from within the institution, and resisting the urge to just burn it all to the ground. [Music: "Das Rehlein" by Hiss.]

Hannah (Host): We are here today to talk about coaching.

Jennifer: Yeah. What I do as part of this business that— I work for myself, right? I'm sort of a freelancer or small business owner, whatever you wanna call it— is I do one-on-one coaching and then sort of group workshops and whatnot around academic stuff. And so I don't know if you've ever heard of or you follow on Twitter, Jenn Polk in Toronto who does from Phd to Life.

Hannah (Host): Mmhmm, I do. Yeah.

Jennifer: Okay. And so she and her business partner this past weekend and this coming weekend run a conference called Beyond the Professoriate. Where it's, it's a virtual conference, it's super affordable, and it's just a bunch of panels and resources for graduate students who are looking at careers outside of academia. And Jenn and others— like, there are a few other people out there in this sort of coaching space— really invest a lot of energy and time in sort of working with graduate students and helping them imagine their futures as something that can be productive and happy and well remunerated outside of academia. And that's great and super, super valuable and it kind of helped me a bit as I was sort of involuntarily leaving academia after more than a decade or so. But what I have found because of when I left academia, so I was a tenured professor in the US at Kansas State University, and then there's, there's a moment after tenure when you're like, "Ugh, now what?" It's a bit of a letdown, sort of an emotional lull. And in precisely that moment my husband said, "hey, I got this offer in Canada, let's go." And I said, "sure."

Hannah (Host): You're like, "Actually I don't like doing this that much. Alright."

Jennifer: Yeah. And I was like, "I can do something else. No big deal." And sort of doing something else turned into like a five year project of trying to work in various ways in universities and kind of being unhappy and, and then finding coaching. But what, what I felt that I could have used, and so many of my colleagues could have used, is like a faculty advocate person. Like somebody who is on your team and is not competing with you, is not evaluating and assessing you, that knows a little bit about the kind of work you do and wants to help you succeed in doing that work.

Hannah (Host): So you sort of fill a different coaching niche than like Jenn Polk's work does, which is more aimed towards people leaving academia and you're more aimed

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towards people, people who are already employed. Is that sort of like the sweet spot, is people who have gotten the job and now need to figure out how to do it?

Jennifer: Yup. Gotten the job and need to figure out how to do it or who have gotten tenure and are either sort of "now what?" Or that second book. The second book seems to be something that I hear a lot about in my clientele, because the first book is a revised dissertation often, and then for the second book it's like, "Oh wow. Like I don't have a dissertation fellowship. I can't hole myself up and write for x hours a day. I have committees, I have classes, I have students I'm supervising, I have a family," So trying to create space for intellectual creativity when you're an associate professor and you, but you want to get promoted and you want to do all those things. And so I do, you know, some productivity strategizing and whatnot, but a lot of it is "how do you want to feel about this? How do you, how do you, how do you feel when you sit down to write?" Like what, what is going to be productive and sustainable writing practice for you? Who are you talking to? Why are you talking to them? What do you have to say? Sort of those sort of meta issues around scholarly productivity.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. It's so interesting to me how all of these different forms of coaching have emerged, because like we could add to this like Karen Kelsky's work, which is mostly oriented towards helping people get--

Jennifer: Get the job.

Hannah (Host): --academic jobs. So we've got people helping people leave the academy, helping people get academic jobs, helping people figure out how to survive in the academy. And all of it seems to point pretty clearly towards like a real lack in how we think about the PhD as a like educational stage in terms of like, well if it's not teaching you how to get an academic job, and it's not teaching you how to do that job once you do it, but it's also not teaching you how to get any other kinds of jobs, like what is it teaching you?

Jennifer: Yeah, like that's one of those, do you really want an answer to that question?

Hannah (Host): Yeah, sure. Do.

Jennifer: Gosh, in my field, you know, literature, it's teaching you how to write one big long book.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. And to write it in a very particular mode, which is often, like never taught explicitly, but taught by virtue of like you read a bunch of other examples of what those one big long books look like, and then you just mimic them. And then that ties into all kinds of those questions you alluded to of like, well who are these for? Who's reading these? Why do they take the form that they take? Who do we imagine our audiences are for scholarship in the first place?

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- Jennifer: Yeah and for a dissertation, you know that your audience is this committee which is maybe put together in some super weird, idiosyncratic way to meet university criteria, and they might not be who you really want to be talking to.
- Hannah (Host): No.
- Jennifer: Like if you got to pick where your research went and what it did, you might not do what is going to fit the requirements of a committee. You might do something entirely different. Yeah. I what I have found in working with people who've gotten their first job or their first postdoc and are navigating that transition into the academy, is that like go back to graduate school in your mind. You're kind of, even if you're a rockstar graduate student, you're kind of a supplicant. I kind of picture, I don't know if you ever watched The Simpsons back in the day, but Mr. Burns' office had a door that you had to crawl to get through.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Yeah. That's a really good metaphor for grad school.
- Jennifer: Right? So that is, that is the stance of a lot of graduate school programs is that you're like, "I'm jumping through all of the hoops. I am kowtowing to all of the appropriate authorities, both theoretical and actual. I'm doing all the things that I'm supposed to be doing because this is training and so I'm going to tick off all the boxes in my training manual." And then if you're lucky you get a tenure track job, and still again, like who are your colleagues? Who's going to be voting on your tenure case? What are you writing on? Where are you publishing that? Who's going to be reviewing this outside research? What conferences are you presenting at? How frequently are you presenting? What's you're...Right? It's still a lot of, maybe, maybe you're not crawling through the door, but you're still a little like, "ummmm." You know, looking for something to like the piano to fall on your head. And then you get tenure and you're an associate professor and like [snaps fingers] that you're supposed to lead something.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs]
- Jennifer: There's this instantaneous, expectation that you go from literally decades of being a supplicant to like, "I am the master of my domain." And that's a super hard transition I think, and it certainly isn't anything that, that anywhere along that line you've been trained towards. And a lot of these professionalization seminars that are cropping up, maybe some of them are addressing that, but the position of a graduate student, and even frequently the position of a new assistant professor, they're not super empowering positions to operate from when it comes to managing your own career or a bunch of other things because you're so hell bent on doing what's right in the framework that you're operating in.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. And the thing that, a conversation I've had with a lot of people is that sort of, the way through grad school we're encouraged to always make the most

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conservative choices. Write the dissertation that's going to get passed, do the research that's going to get you a job. And then once you get the tenure track job, if you get the tenure track job, publishing in the venues, do the kind of work that is going to get you tenure. And it's this sort of, this inbred conservatism of don't rock the boat, don't speak in venues that aren't perceived as scholarly, don't articulate your arguments in ways that aren't directed towards an audience that is first your committee, and then your tenure and review board, and to arrive at that point like 15 years into an academic career by the time you get tenure, if you count school as part of your career, to arrive at that point and suddenly be like, "Aha, now I will do things differently." And you have spent literally your entire career always making the most conservative choices. And then we're surprised when you know, when in so many departments, new grad students who want to do things differently, don't get support because the people there in a position to support them are people who have deeply internalized this idea that professionalism equals making conservative choices.

Jennifer: Right. And that impacts the kind of work people do. And I think it's really important that you brought up the kinds of venues that they do that work in. Right? If you, if you've been in Women's Studies or Women and Gender Studies spaces in the academy, I think that's where, where that tension is so terribly evident. Because you meet all of these people, or in my case, I ran into a ton of graduate students who really thought of themselves as activists and then they're getting a graduate degree in this scholarly discipline. And navigating that, that tension between, "well, I want to be out doing and writing about what I'm doing and yet I still have to sort of adhere to this. I'm relatively conservative formula for what that's gonna look like."

Hannah (Host): Yeah. That part of it, you know, really is that like reproduction of disciplinary norms that is there to prove that you can. You know, can you write like this? Can you think like this?

Jennifer: Yeah, and only once you've proven that you gotten the disciplinary norms and you know the canon of whatever your field is, only then can you be granted at least a limited authority to speak back to it.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: But you have to first know it. You can't just come in and say, ah, this kind of bullshit.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Right? You can't arrive and be like, "actually the disciplinary norms and the canon are all like oppressive structure, so I would just rather ignore them and do something else."

Jennifer: Good luck with that.

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Hannah (Host): Yeah, yeah. Good luck with that because you know, the university, it's always, it's interesting to me. I do feel like the university, this isn't, this is not a radical point, the university's a real flash point in the past couple of years over conversations about, you know, freedom of speech and, and the politics of what we're teaching. And there is this narrative about universities being these sort of bastions of like radical leftist thinking, which is just wild to me because like, yes, there are some disciplines where things like antiracism or feminism as a discourse are taken as the standard. That absolutely does not translate into how the institution is run on any level. It's not translated into the experience of faculty or students and it's sure as hell not translated into like the kind of work we do.

Jennifer: No, that's, I love that argument. And really for me, that sort of ties into this notion that like when people talk about, because okay, on the one hand the university is a pinko, lefty militant Marxist sort of smear, and then if you look at the internal discourse, it's a lot of people talking about the neoliberal economy and austerity of the university, like the way the university has glommed onto neoliberal policies in order to manage their budgets for the outcomes they want, or in order to manage the outcomes for the budget that they want. Like I'm not entirely sure what the end game is.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Jennifer: But I gave a presentation to a group of faculty a few weeks ago on PhD supervision as a coaching practice. And I mean at sort of one level, coaching is just a different kind of conversation to have with somebody where you give them an opportunity to voice and make visible their motivations, their values so that they are in a better position to act on those and that you, like I try to help my clients imagine themselves as a little bit bigger and more awesome than they feel most days.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Jennifer: To sort of hold that space that, you know, you got into this because you're really good at it. Now let's hold onto that and see what you can do if you step into that identity more regularly.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: So talking about PhD Supervision as coaching, it was a lot of opportunity for the group there of professors to reflect on how did they learn how to supervise? What's their agenda when they supervise? How has that agenda communicated to their supervisee? Is that agenda communicated to their supervisee? In what fashion? At what intervals? Where do they feel responsibilities for various things lie? What are the disciplinary norms that they're working with that they're...Right? Just again, vocalizing things that are perhaps tacit in a structured, conversational way. And it was, it was a great workshop. I really

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enjoyed it. I got the impression that the participants enjoyed it. And afterwards, this man who's retiring a couple of years early comes up and says, "you know, I didn't want to bring this up during the workshop because I wasn't sure it was the right place, but do you think that what you're doing is sort of making the neoliberal university more palatable?"

Hannah (Host): It's such an interesting question for all of these forms of coaching that have been emerging. Right? Like, in some ways they are saving people from the broken university system. It's kind of like a, "Yes, and..."

Jennifer: I told him, "you know, thank you very much for not derailing shop with that."

Hannah (Host): What an unusual level of restraint.

Jennifer: I really appreciate that not becoming the topic of the university, but at the end of the day I, I'm not gonna say that that isn't what I'm doing. But it is a need and it's a need that I can fill pretty well and enjoy doing.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: But the fact that like, somebody leaves their institution to hire me privately to help them navigate the B.S. of their institution is a bit sad.

Hannah (Host): It is. Yeah. It points towards like, I mean it's fine. There's, there are all kinds of forms of help that we seek out. Like I have friends who aren't academics who have career coaches, which is another form of counseling, another form of support to figure out what you want in your life. But there does seem to be an abundance of forms of coaching emerging around academia that do absolutely point to, I mean point to the crisis of the university right now, which is like, the overproduction, the massive overproduction of PhD with very little sense of how to justify that overproduction. And we see that, you know, the coaches whose work I'm more familiar with, because I just started my job and so I knew the people who are sort of more working on that entry level stuff. So you know, I've used Karen Kelsky's work a huge amount, and it's a very sort of love hate relationship with her site. Not with her, I don't know her. So I neither love nor hate her, but with, you know, the work that she produces, which is very oriented towards, you know, "this is a game and you need to figure out how to play it." And that might make you feel disillusioned, but that's the way it is.

Jennifer: And she's not wrong--

Hannah (Host): Is the thing.

Jennifer: --at all to say that.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

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Jennifer: And when, when I work with people I don't want. Yeah. See if I, if my rationale had to be like, "this is a game and you need to know how to play it," I don't think I could do that because--

Hannah (Host): I might bum you out a bit too much.

Jennifer: Like I'm pretty cynical, I can go, but you got to be able to look in the mirror in the morning when you get up, and there, just like that isn't...Because once you're in there, especially if you, if you have tenure, you have a little bit of autonomy. And, and on like a personal level— and this is where you're really or where I am really making, you know, neoliberalism palatable— is, okay. So you're a tenured faculty. Imagine yourself a couple of years in the future, Hannah, you're a tenured faculty member at Simon Fraser. Bask in that glow for a moment.

Hannah (Host): I did it. How unlikely.

Jennifer: Oh, hush.

Hannah (Host): I made so many bad choices. How did I get here?

Jennifer: We'll get back to that in a minute. So, so right now when your chair comes to you and says, "Hannah, we need somebody for this committee. How about you?" And you're like, "oh gosh, I had nothing better to do on my Tuesday afternoons then to go to that meeting. You bet. I'm your girl. I'll go." Because you're playing nice because that's part of your job, right? You're maybe not crawling through the door, but you're still. Once you have tenure, you can maybe say, "you know, I'm doing these three other things and I really want to get this done and blah blah. So no." Or, or you have something that you really care about. I had a client who was spearheading sort of the pilot of a new gender studies program at a religiously affiliated institution, so they didn't have one and it was questionable whether this was going to fly in the context of this institution. So she did not like being the public face of this effort, not because she didn't want to claim credit for it, but because that's just not how she operated. But we did a little examining of what her motives were for starting it, and where her loyalties and values and motivations lied, and then she figured out, "oh, I actually like to do this work over here. That's more prepping in the background, blah blah blah. And I think I do have a colleague who would like that more public facing stuff." So I talk about it in terms of like feeding and watering the stuff that does nourish you a little bit.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: And trying to look at the things that don't nourish you or that kind of rub your further wrong way and say, "can I get out of it? Can I find somebody else who wants to do it or can I minimize the amount of time I give it?" Because if all of the things are valuable, is there a way to load your plate up with at least things

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that make you feel good about your job? That play to your strengths that support your values, that support your image of yourself as a scholar and a person, and a little bit less attention to the soul sucking stuff that you don't like. Because somebody really wants to like, proofread the university handbook and it's maybe not you, but maybe somebody really wants to do it.

Hannah (Host): Maybe. I believe that there's maybe somebody who wants to do it. I am not convinced that there is somebody who wants to sit on all of the committees. And the saying "no" is such a, it's such, has ended up being such an important recurring conversation on this podcast because of the ways that that sort of additional, like the labor that keeps institutions of all kinds running is disproportionately feminized labor and disproportionately undervalued. And I mean my experience of being a student who was very much like, go to the undergraduate or graduate student conference. Who are the faculty there? Who's coming to see students and support them? Who's, you know, who's going to these events? Who's sitting on these committees? Who's doing this work? Often tenured female faculty who are saying "yes," not because they love it and want to do it, but because they know nobody else is going to step up and they know that it matters. And it's a real, it's a real, saying "no" always feels like a very— not always. There's some "no" that feel very good, but there are some "no"s that feel like--

Jennifer: "If I don't do this, who is going to step into the role?" Which is a good point, but also a very frequent topic on your podcast is like, well, yeah, but you can't do everything.

Hannah (Host): You literally can't

Jennifer: Like the whole, you know, put your own oxygen mask on first before you help the children and old people next to you. You can't drink from an empty cup, yada, yada. I mean all of the metaphors.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: You know, at what point are you like, "nope, can't do it anymore. Reached my limit."

Hannah (Host): Yeah, frequent topic with my counselor as well. It's like, you know, you know, if you burn out then you're not good to anyone.

Jennifer: Precisely, precisely.

Hannah (Host): We'll see.

Jennifer: Oh, are you, is this the experiment you're conducting?

Hannah (Host): Yeah. We'll see.

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- Jennifer: I'm conducting an experiment around scholarly communication and podcasts and another experiment around at how many ends can you burn the candle before you actually fry?
- Hannah (Host): It's just another, just another form of scholarly inquiry.
- Jennifer: And how is that going for you?
- Hannah (Host): It's not great. [Laughs] I mean I do very much feel like the, the transition you were describing as being a post-tenure transition, I think in a different way felt similar to me in the movement from sessional to faculty that I very much moved from, you know, I was a grad student, then a postdoc, then a sessional, and at all of those stages someone was the boss of me.
- Jennifer: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): And you know, that leash loosened with each step out of grad school, but it was still there. I was still directly answerable to somebody with a very clear sense of what it was my job to do. And then I got here and it was like, "all right, here's your office. Bye!" And I was like, "where are the adults?" Like the first time I filled in a grant application and then didn't have like a grownup to read it, to check that I did it right, it was like, "oh, it's me. I do it."
- Jennifer: Yeah. You're the grownup and other people are going to be coming to you to check their stuff.
- Hannah (Host): And like if I made a mistake, I am letting my collaborators down because I did it wrong. Like I'm only 33, I'm not ready for this level of responsibility. Let's talk about the delayed, delayed adulthood of grad school. But like that experience of like that level of autonomy and how rapidly that is given to you, but a weird autonomy that is accompanied. And I don't, I'd be really curious to hear from listeners if you've experienced something like this in a career that is not academia because I'm never sure because it's the only career I've had, so I'm never sure how much these things overlap, but there is this very strong sense in academia that you have complete autonomy, but there are 99 ways you could do things wrong and one way you could do things right. So there's like you can absolutely fuck up, but there's no clear rules. There's no clear guidelines. There's no clear, nobody will tell you what to do, but you can still absolutely do it wrong.
- Jennifer: Yes.
- Hannah (Host): And like that's pretty intimidating.
- Jennifer: I liked your metaphor of the leash, right? The leash got looser or longer with each step away from graduate school until you get a tenure track job where the least turns into perhaps a length of rope sufficient to hang yourself from.

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- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] That's good. That is a good metaphor.
- Jennifer: Carried that a bit further. A caveat to the, you know, "there are myriad ways to fuck it up and only one way to do it right," is I kind of feel like one of the criteria of the way to do it right is your ability to narratively defend what you have done, right? Can you, can you make the proper intellectual and/or administrative or argument for why that was the way to do it. So there actually wasn't a right way. It's just, it becomes the right way if you can claim it was the right way. And so--
- Hannah (Host): If you can convince people that was the right way,
- Jennifer: If you want to take that little cynical nugget, then then it can be kind of freeing. Like, "okay, I'm just going to do it this way and I know why I'm doing it this way, so come at me and I'll tell you why I'm doing it this way," which, you know, is sort of the way that a bunch of male colleagues have behaved for millennia, so.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Yeah. I mean I, I don't know a ton about tenure denial. I get the impression that it is more common in the states than it is in Canada. I've heard horror stories from friends of universities that will hire two or three people, knowing that they will only tenure one of them.
- Jennifer: My graduate program did that.
- Hannah (Host): It's pretty horrifying. Right?
- Jennifer: And one of them was female, one of them was male. And this being a private institution in the states in the 90s, there was no maternity leave. The female had a baby, her sabbatical became her mat. Who got tenure in that scenario?
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, absolutely. And I absolutely know that there've been studies about tenure denial and gender and race. There's huge examples of people being denied tenure for reasons that are like pretty evidently racist. And that like, negotiating that system which just becomes this really transparent, like you are supposedly being hired because people are interested in radical work that you're doing, but you have got to play everything so safe to get through this hoop. Cuz like the thing, the thing that I think a lot of non-academics don't really realize is that like, when you go up for tenure, if you don't get it, that's kind of it for you. Like you're going to go do something else now.
- Jennifer: And you're in your 40s. And I can tell you that starting over in your forties is not a piece of cake. It sucks. Just frankly, it's hard. Not that starting over involuntarily at anytime as a cakewalk, but yeah. I think one of the reasons that tenure denial is less common in Canada, at least based on my super limited sample of watching it happen, is faculty unions have a role to play there that has no parallel in US institutions, right? Like the AAUP not is not count. Right. It's a very different setup in the US, so.

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Hannah (Host): So so, so back to this like, this way that when we think about, you know, coaching and the role that it can play, that it's like providing people the tools they need to navigate a system and an institution that's like, not inherently on your side, and doesn't particularly care about you, but also doesn't care about your wellbeing. Right? Like as far as the university, as an institution is concerned, you working yourself to death would be great. I mean that's the logic of neoliberalism, is like absolutely let people just work themselves to the bone. That is fantastic. And the more we can put systems in place, for example, deeply unclear expectations about how productive you're supposed to be, that encouraged people to like overwork, the better because it's just extracting more labor from people. And there's no value attached to people's mental and emotional wellbeing. So who cares? So there is that like yes, in its most cynical formation you can say like coaching is some way supplementing the neoliberal university, but like there is also this way that it's just like helping people survive an institution that's like, not super in favor of survival.

Jennifer: Yeah. I think of it as— and regardless of if it's Karen or Jenn or Joe VanEvery or me— as deeply caring. Like, the people who are doing this, are doing this because they see the, the hurt that happens like on a, on a really individual level. Like, I can't fix academia, but I can work through, you know, reviewer two comments with you and help and help you gain a couple of different perspectives from, from which to read reviewer two's, comments so that you can sit down and get some work done that you like a little bit and not like curl up on your couch crying. And that's, that is a human to human connection, that frankly the university has tons of space for but just doesn't reward in all cases. Right? When I was talking to administrators about this, about sort of the way coaching can function as part of faculty sort of leadership development— which you know is as a term might turn you off, but it's something good— is that the university, the research that happens in universities around whether you're looking at psychology, whether you're looking at organizational development, organizational psych, if you're looking at even, you know, best practices in HR, like all of these, we know how to make big organizations function in a way that keeps people healthy and happy and motivated. We just don't do it because the logic of the neoliberalism, as you said, is to let people work themselves to the bone. But we have research the stuff that we create and supposedly value in the academy that shows us this is actually not great. This is not what creates sustainable anything, either sustainable research productivity or sustainable institutions or sustainable lives.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: Right? So we know that. So I ended up taking the research that the university produces and then bringing it back into the university and say, "look at this. You know, doesn't it tell you how students learn best? Let me clue you in to something. It is not in an online course with 700 people they will never see, a professor in whose eyes they will never look." People learn best when they have meaningful human interactions with other people around content. That is how they learn. We know this. That is research that the university supports and then

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they implement things that fly directly in the face of that. So, you know, reminding the university as a system like, you know better than this. You know what's good pedagogy looks like, you know what sustainable research looks like and you choose to reward different things.

Hannah (Host): Do you have any hope that universities, individually or en masse, like might be convinced by that research to make these sorts of structural shifts?

Jennifer: And see now I'm going to cry.

Hannah (Host): I'm so sorry. Like, it's hard. It's hard to feel optimistic about university, but you know, I see a lot of conversations happening.

Jennifer: And I think there are pockets of awareness that there are good ways to do this. And I think that that one way to sort of find those pockets and create them is to encourage people to be— and this is something that actually really find valuable about your podcast when you are talking to academics, like how much of your whole self are you bringing to your job, and how much are you either playing it safe or letting certain things be squashe And you know, safety first. Don't divulge things that you don't want to or need to divulge, but like pretending that you're okay when you're not okay. Or pretending that yeah, of course these are the choices I would normally make, when on the inside you're like, "eee. No, ick, ick, ick!" That sort of sending out the bat signal of humanity on occasion. I think that, you know, when humanity recognizes itself and says, "Oh, here's, here's good people. Here's people I can do work with because they're operating from a place that honors the inherent worth and dignity of me and of other humans in this process."

Hannah (Host): Yeah. There's always sort of in the back of my mind this like, do we want to work within institutions to try to make them livable or do we just want to say like, fuck these institutions? And I think, yeah, I think many of us have made the decision. Some of us have made the decision to try to try to work from within institutions to try to sort of leverage our positions to make them more livable for ourselves and for others. And there is a way that those things relate, that when you are fighting to make the institution more livable for yourself, you're fighting to make it more livable for other people like you. You know? So when, when someone like, you know, Zoe Todd is fighting to make the university a livable space for herself as an Indigenous anthropologist, she is also fighting to make the university a more livable space for other Indigenous students like the this is, this is opening up potential. Right? And that a big part of that, I think for those of us who recognize that this institution is really messed up in lots of ways and choose to engage with it anyway, is you know, knowing that if people aren't in it trying to figure out how to open those spaces, then it's only populated by people who aren't doing that work and then we're in more trouble.

Jennifer: I agree with you and then I add onto that the understanding that most of us got our PhDs because we were deeply and profoundly interested in and moved by

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something. And to hold onto the opportunity to spend time with that, and teach people that, and engage in meaning making activities around that is pretty special and it, it might be worth defending.

Hannah (Host): It might be.

Jennifer: Right? Like this is— But, but as we're talking, I'm thinking of an article I read this morning on the chronicle of higher education. It's premium content because a subscription to it as a business expense for me, so I have one. And it is a promo essay for a book that's coming out by a UK scholar named David Graber, and the title of the book is called. Let me get this right. It's a super, super involved and complicated title called Bullshit Jobs.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Jennifer: [Laughs] It is out this month from Simon and Schuster and the opening paragraph says, "I would like to write about the bullshitization of academic life that is the degree to which those involved in teaching and academic management spend more and more of their time involved in tasks which they secretly, or not so secretly, believe to be entirely pointless." So when you were, when we were talking about committee work and saying no and whatnot, like if there is a way to at least engage in productive dialogue with universities around what meaningful work is, you know, making copies of this essay and tacking it on every cork board on campus might be one way to begin because you know, it starts with the statistics that student numbers and faculty numbers doubled in an era when administrative, purely administrative posts at universities have gone up like 250%.

Hannah (Host): Ha!

Jennifer: So what are those administrative jobs doing? Are they making the jobs of teaching, and research, and scholarship easier? Or are they creating what one of my mentors once called "administrivia" for other people to like, how many assessment forms do you need to fill out around this? We need to have a committee about the problem of this other committee that's doing the managing of that committee thing over there, right? That's what the proliferation. And acknowledging that, and this is again, part of the neoliberal plan, which is we need to be able to quantify things so that we can assess them, so that we can scrap the things that aren't efficient and let what little money we're putting into the system go to the places that had been identified as efficient. And so what area is there to resist that logic?

Hannah (Host): The logic of efficiency and numerous and evaluation and--

Jennifer: Yeah, and I think just naming it as a logic that is only one way of looking at things and maybe not the right way of looking at things, but just saying, "This is

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a perspective that in order to be valuable, it has to be quantifiable in a certain way."

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Jennifer: You know, coming from my disciplinary background as a sociologist or an anthropologist or an economist, I can offer that there are other ways to assess the value of something that are rotated, or that do this other thing with the narrative, or that measure impact differently. And just like pointing out the logic of the system is something that scholars are in a good place to do and is a more empowering place to work from then burn it all down. God, I hate it.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Jennifer: Not that. Not that I have a problem with the people like, "Yeah, burn it all down!" [Music: "Das Rehlein" by Hiss.]

Hannah (Host): If you'd like to hear more from Jennifer, you can find her on Twitter @Jaskey. That's J A S K E Y, and on Instagram @Jennifer_askey. Her current website is energizedacademic.com, soon to switch to JenniferAskey.com, so check them both. As per usual, As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Also, don't forget to head over to whatever platform you use and rate and review the podcast to help other people find it. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Jennifer's theme song was "Das Rehlein" by Hiss. Yes, it is German and no, I definitely did not pronounce it correctly. Secret Feminist Agenda is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been Secret Feminist Agenda. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]