

# Surviving Tenure - Ten Lessons the TV Show Survivor Teaches Strategic Perspectives

By [Dr. Kathleen P. King](#)

Every time I share my analogy of tenure to the TV show Survivor™ faculty colleagues start laughing, nodding and poking each other like school children. Why do they react this way? Because the comparison strikes home so squarely and exposes the extreme pressure, high costs and yes, some, absurd, but necessary, strategies to successfully navigate the tenure process.



## Opening Scene

- The camera zooms in on a dark room, quite mysterious, and with wisps of smoke dancing in the air.
- The chanting theme music of the TV show Survivor™ plays in the background with the drum punctuating the darkness with looming fear, even dread.
- Our eyes are drawn to the glowing torches positioned around the campfire and empty benches...
- The music crescendos as the tenured faculty enter (in full academic regalia of course). They keep their eyes cast downward and walk in solemn procession. With precision, they take their privileged places at the "tenure tribal council".

The scene provides a vivid and quite comical picture, doesn't it? No doubt if you are in higher education tenure track position, you are chuckling and adding more details to the scene. Therefore, join me in considering the lessons that we may learn about the tenure process if we consider its parallels to this popular reality show.

1. You will be voted on by the tribal council, but in your case it's the tenure and promotion committee.
2. You can be voted off the academic island, if you do not "play well with others."
3. Determine the mores, rules and expectations of the tribe or else you will make fatal errors in public and choices.
4. *Modestly* excel beyond the expectations of the tribe or else you will disturb the dead wood.
5. Have a strategic plan for handling the demands of the tribe, or else you will be run ragged.
6. Make yourself invaluable to the tribe or else you will be the first to exit.
7. Build strategic alliances in order to protect you from the attacks which will come.
8. Watch out for enemy alliances. It is not a matter of if, but when, they will attack.
9. Blindly trust no one, there are too many hidden agendas to learn in this lifetime.
10. Document your achievements to the tribe using the approved code (oral tradition, tenure box, letter) or else you will not be valued and *will* be disqualified at the council meeting.

**Please note**, this article is not intended to question, nor devalue tenure and promotion. The author highly values these processes and what they stand for when they are followed with the best intentions of the academy. However, this brief parable does provide insights to help us laugh at the pressure and strain we all experience in this process. It may also help us consider real, and tongue-in-cheek, strategies which may help people evaluate their actions in this difficult organization-wide experience.

I want to clearly state that I greatly appreciate the hard work of all the tenure and promotion committees, deans, division chairs, mentors and faculty who give of their time to make the process work well. Most of all, I wish all those candidates pursuing tenure and promotion great success! I earnestly hope we can all enjoy a good round of laughter as we look at ourselves from a different perspective. Who knew we were probably stars of this show?

## Written by

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## About Dr. King

Dr. King is a dynamic, motivational keynote, public speaker and accomplished author who invigorates and empowers audiences on a variety of topics. Widely recognized with professional awards for her innovative publications, research and service to the field, she thrives on working with faculty, teachers and other adult learners in all contexts. She specializes in guiding faculty in their professional development journeys. From designing and facilitating distance learning, navigating the tenure process, meeting the needs of 21st century learners, and "bringing transformative learning to life."

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