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# Collaboration vs. Individualism: What Is Better for the Rising Academic?

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## Collaboration vs. Individualism: What Is Better for the Rising Academic?

### **Abstract**

In academia, scholarship and research productivity is the lifeblood of success. The question is, “What is the best way to be productive and move forward in an academic career — collaboration or individualism?” Obviously, the final choice is personal. However, for the purpose of this paper, the two sides will be discussed regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each avenue. Recommendations regarding the viability of collaboration and competition will be discussed in relation to personal attributes, career goals, and rank. In addition, a new methodology, tentatively called Layered Narrative, will be piloted with this project

### **Keywords**

Promotion and Tenure, Collaboration, Individual Achievement, Research and Scholarship, Layered Narrative

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## Collaboration vs. Individualism: What Is Better for the Rising Academic?

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*In academia, scholarship and research productivity is the lifeblood of success. The question is, “What is the best way to be productive and more forward in a academic career—collaboration or individualism?” Obviously, the final choice is personal. However, for the purpose of this paper, the two sides will be discussed regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each avenue. Recommendations regarding the viability of collaboration and competition will be discussed in relation to personal attributes, career goals, and rank. In addition, a new methodology, tentatively called Layered Narrative, will be piloted with this project. Keywords: Promotion and Tenure; Collaboration; Individual Achievement; Research and Scholarship; Layered Narrative*

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### Introduction

As a young scholar near the beginning of his career, I will readily admit that I have concerns over the promotion and tenure process. What are the expectations regarding my productivity as a scholar, my ability as an instructor, and my contributions toward service to the university and greater community? A quick discussion with other tenure-track faculty, tenured faculty, administrators and a brief search of literature on the subject leads to enough different answers that it seems to be an experiment in chaos theory. However, the answers regarding teaching and service are the most tangible. Be a good teacher, expand the curriculum of your department and serve in areas where you can help and are visible. My apprehension comes where I assume it does for most faculty in higher education. What about research and scholarship?

While the amalgamation of information has lead me toward a semblance of understanding of the requirements (or I have rationalized an answer to calm my fears), there is one overarching question that I have based on my personality and beliefs about the nature of scholarship. Is it better for me to work alone and create a name for myself as an innovative scholar who has carved out a recognizable niche for myself, or do I collaborate with my colleagues from this institution and other institutions to combine specialties and increase productivity at the expense of individuality and personal acclaim? Which avenue will prove to be most beneficial to my career and my aspirations to become a full professor at some point in the probably distant future?

### Structure

The structure of this paper will be in two parts that are inherently linked. The bulk of the paper will be a discourse regarding collaboration vs. individualism. It will be the academic and rational argument for each side along with a discussion, recommendations, and some semblance of a conclusion. The other part of this paper, written in italics, will be reflections of my own personal experience regarding collaboration and individualism. While not standard in academic writing, hopefully, these parts will add insight to the paper.

The structure of this paper is loosely modeled after *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by N. Scott Momaday. In this non-fiction work, Momaday layers myth, anthropology, and personal

reflections as a three-part narrative about his personal, familial and tribal history. The ensuing text creates a multilayered perspective that fuses the mythic, the academic, and the personal. While there are no mythic aspects of this paper, the structure of Momaday's work is being emulated. For this paper, each section will be concluded with this personal narrative as a reflection of my personal experiences, thoughts, biases, and reflections.

This style of Layered Narrative was created for two reasons. First, it will allow me, the author, to fill in any gaps in logic that might have been created in morphing ideas into academic writing. It will help answer some of the questions that readers might have. Second, it will allow for introspection on the part of this author. This auto-ethnographic stance will force me into considering my decisions and my motivations behind what I am doing while helping me actively forge my academic, social, educational, and research identity.

Finally, as to the utility of this proposed method, it potentially serves two purposes. First, it will allow writers to share the intangibles of the writing process. Where expository measures can become labored under the auspices of academic writing, the addition of a layered commentary will allow for authors to give more personal rationalizations of methodological and summative decisions. Second, it might be faculty a tool with which to assist student writing. Students could supply their personal understandings, their motivations, and their rationale for decision-making—in text. This personal narration could create a learning tool for better understanding the learning process.

*In the interest of transparency and ultimately irony, I am writing this paper alone. However, it is based on a series of conversations I have had with colleagues. Sometimes academia can be a lonely endeavor with only me and my thoughts. That is part of the genesis of this work. Many times in writing, there is a self-reflective moment when I have to decide why I am doing certain things. Is what I am saying showing bias? Why did I decide to choose a certain word with a certain connotation at a certain time?*

*Personally, I am a faculty member in a College of Education at a university in transition. I am close to going up for promotion and tenure. With recent changes in university policy, my promotion and tenure clock has changed. What is, might not be. When, has become relative.*

## **Background and Significance**

As anyone in higher education knows, the road to promotion and tenure is long and tenuous. Aside from the mandatory five to six years before the first hurdle can be attempted (the move from assistant to associate professor), there is the ephemeral cloud of requirements that are “necessary” to be promoted and gain tenure. The purpose of this paper is to outline and discuss one of the least studied issues regarding this process—whether it is collaboration or individual achievement that is better for the rising academic, particularly related to research and scholarship. In addition, if a case can be made that one is better for the rising academic, is the same true for the seasoned academic that is striving for full professorship? Youn and Price (2009) note that a background in, and evidence of research-oriented skills were one of the most focused upon aspects of individuals in the hiring process, even at universities that promoted themselves as teaching institutions. Therefore, a discussion of what should be done with regard to research and scholarship might be a necessary and worthwhile topic of discussion. After all, the focus on research and scholarship is one of the things that define the academic.

Of primary concern is the dearth of information on this topic. While there is ample information regarding general promotion and tenure guidelines available, what is more difficult to discover is the nature of scholarship regarding personal efforts versus collective

efforts. Taggart (2007) suggests that this dichotomy of authorship can lead to serious tension. Because of this, there are a large number of publications regarding the order of authorship (e.g., Muller, 2012; Musoba, 2008; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2006; Welfare & Sacket, 2011).

At the heart of this discussion are many essential questions. What is best for the rising academic? What is best for the seasoned academic? Is a career built upon collaboration with colleagues, in which multiple individuals benefit from publication and presentation more beneficial on the path to promotion and tenure? Or is a career of individual achievement more important to ensure that there are no questions about a candidate's qualifications for promotion and tenure? The purpose of this paper is to look at the pros and cons of each career path with regard to a number of variables such as institution type, current promotion status, and career goals. In addition, the notion of collaboration and competition will be specifically addressed and the strengths and weaknesses of each will be discussed.

*I, myself, am an assistant professor. I have had experience writing alone and with colleagues. I have traversed the isolated life of the doctoral student and the dissertation, the momentary solitude of a career change into higher education, and confronted and embraced collaboration. I am sure that we all have. Like all journeys, mine has allowed me to gain a variety of experiences that me uniquely qualified to share my opinion.*

### **Collaboration vs. Individual Achievement**

At the crux of this discussion is the notion of collaboration vs. individual achievement for the academic. Is being a collaborative scholar best for not only for the individual, but also for the institution of academia? This brings up a difficult fundamental question. What is the purpose of the academy? In his 2010 address to the Royal Irish Academy at Trinity College, Ireland, Harvard University president Drew Faust suggested that the role of the academy is, "making meaning and making sense out of the world around us" (Faust, 2010, para. 18). And while a more thorough and insightful venture into this discussion is for another time and place and has been amply addressed throughout the history of higher education (citation here), this simple assertion is essential. More specifically, for the purposes of this discussion, is what is the purpose of the academy regarding research and scholarship? Obviously, the production of the knowledge is fundamental to higher education. However, is it knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or is it knowledge for the sake of the individual and personal advancement? Are these two mutually exclusive? While the ultimate result might be similar, fundamentally the process could create two very different and distinct institutions.

If the goal of the creation of knowledge is a collaborative endeavor, individuals could use combined skill sets to quickly expand knowledge bases. Faculty members could work as collaborative groups, share expertise, and generate new ideas from the fusion of thoughts. On the other hand, if faculty members work individually, there is the possibility of expertise that would bring notoriety and potentially grants to the department, college and university. In this section, the strengths and weaknesses of each method will be addressed.

*I constantly do battle with the concept of collaboration vs. individual achievement. To be honest, I am competitive by nature. I want to do more, publish more, know more. And yes, it does feel selfish in way. However, I know that it is part of the reality of higher education. However, my behavior is otherwise. I am all about collaboration. In fact, I recently looked at my CV. I noticed that while I have been productive over the last few years, all of my work has been collaborative. In fact, in pursuit of helping other faculty with research, I have put myself as the second author more often than not. Will that look bad? Will my lack of singular recognition hinder my advancement?*

*I remember those days of doctoral work where papers were solo, research was solo, and the dissertation was solo. I know that it is part of the process to earn the degree. But, while there is a sense of satisfaction at being able to do it alone, ultimately, it is lonely. Now, I believe that if we all succeed, we all succeed. I know that I have strengths and weaknesses.*

## Definitions

In order to help layout the foundation for the argument for the remainder of this paper, it is important that the concepts of collaboration and competition are defined under within the structure of this line of reasoning. It is important to note that these definitions are in terms of this paper in order to make a point.

- *Collaboration:* For the purpose of this paper, collaboration is the act of working collectively with other individuals for an agreed upon mission. The collaborative individual seeks to not only work toward individual goals, but toward mutual goals.
- *Individual Achievement:* For the purpose of this paper, individual achievement is the act of working alone with the goal being to win. The goal of the individual is to focus on individual accomplishments over the goals of the/a group. The individual is competitive.

It is with complete understanding that these are limited definitions of these terms. It is entirely possible to be an individualistic academic with no thoughts of competition. It was done merely to create a diametrically opposed template for the collaborative personality. The purpose of creating this duality is for the sake of argument.

*In writing this paper, I knew that creating this dichotomy was artificial. It was done more for the sake of argument. However, in a general sense, I do see these as the two avenues in higher education. There is the dog eat dog world of competition. It might not be direct competition, like a sport. But, it is an academic competition that creates jealousies, draws intellectual lines in the sand, and creates a world of haves and have not's. While there might not be explicit winners and losers (except those that don't get promoted or tenured), there are scorekeepers. This environment can be debilitating for some. On the other hand, collaboration allows for mutual benefit. However, at what expense?*

## Collaboration

The idea of collaboration in research and scholarship is not new. Just looking through the content of any journal it is obvious that there are many articles written by colleagues, research teams, and other groups of academics. The question is, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the collaborative process?

## Advantages

Perhaps the biggest advantage of the collaborative process, especially for the new academic would be the exposure to new ideas, methodologies, and insights. Because new doctoral students are trained to be specialized, their backgrounds in areas outside of their area of expertise might be limited. However, faculty members that are actively engaged in their careers can also benefit. By collaborating on research projects, faculty members could be introduced to new ideas and gain a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of subject

areas. Likewise, individuals could hone their skills by becoming the “resident expert” on certain methodologies, topics, or writing styles.

This collaboration would also have a secondary effect. It would allow faculty members to create a collegial environment that could be used to benefit the department or college in a variety of ways.

- Understand the strengths of colleagues;
- Develop working relationships outside of committee work;
- Utilize the skill sets of colleagues so as to assist students with research.

In addition, when teams of faculty work together, there is the possibility of creating large data sets that can be used for multiple publications. This would allow for sustained research over a topic that would foster the development of a research agenda.

### **Disadvantages**

Some of the disadvantages to collaboration include over-specialization, selflessness to the point of self-defeating behavior, and anonymity. First of all, collaboration works best when each or all parties have something unique to offer the final product. However, the uniqueness of the contribution can lead to individuals being pigeon-holed into limited roles, that while necessary and important, lead to intellectual stagnation. In addition, depending on the institution, authorship can be of ultimate importance. In any collaborative effort, authorship is an issue. First authorship means something. In some universities, it can mean everything. In addition, collaboration can be a slow process. When each person has a say, the research and writing process can become bogged down in turn taking. There is something to be said about efficiency

*I have worked on a lot of collaborative projects. I am the methodologist and stats person. Why? I hate doing lit reviews. I have a colleague that loves doing lit reviews and hates doing methodology. We work together well. However, because of this, I haven't done a lit review is quite a while. He hasn't set up a study. We have become specialists. In fact, we work with other people, too. He still does the lit reviews. I still do the methodology and research. However, we do work together on introductory materials and conclusions. Because we have formed this research partnership, we have submitted four papers together. Two have been published. One was rejected. One is under review.*

### **Individual Achievement**

The idea of individual achievement is one of solo effort. It is also about competition—competition for recognition, competition for publication, and competition for funding. It is a more academic competition that involves individual achievement. This is not to suggest that the faculty member focused on individual achievement isn't a good colleague, although this could happen. The individually focused academic values.... Like collaboration, this type of competition has strengths and weaknesses. In this section, these will be addressed.

### **Advantages**

Primarily, the greatest advantage of individual achievement is control. Because a person is a sole author, there is complete control of the research and writing process. There

aren't any debates. There aren't discussions over wording. There aren't any compromises. The process is streamlined.

For the purposes of promotion and tenure, the ability to work alone allows the academic to 'prove' him/herself worthy of moving up the ladder. With the individual publication, there are no questions about authorship. It provides indisputable evidence of the ability to be an academic.

In addition, the ability to work alone helps foster a broader skill set. By writing alone, there is a more homogenized voice throughout the introduction, lit review, methodology and conclusion. In turn, the researcher develops each of the skills equally. What this offers is a burgeoning, well-rounded academic.

Finally, being an individual researcher in the competitive sense also allows for personal choice. When working with others, you are limited to what the group can agree upon. When working alone toward personal goals, you have the ability to stop a project, start a project, renew a project, and quit a project and it won't effect someone else's career. When working together, it is difficult to do those things.

### **Disadvantages**

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage to working alone is the responsibility. By this, the researcher is solely responsible for the content and the quality of the work. While individual acclaim couldn't be enhanced, individual failure would also be noted. While there is something to be said for sole authorship, especially toward promotion and tenure, the chance of rejection over time can weigh on the individual.

Another drawback to competition is collegiality. An academic that is isolated might have a less collegial working relationship with the department and/or college. While there are those that would accept this fact as a part of the profession, for a new academic this isolation could lead to dissatisfaction with the job. In addition, a solitary academic might become disjointed from the mission of the department or college that could lead to weakened professional relationships.

Finally, by working alone, an individual could become a "jack-of-all-trades and a master of none." Research is a complex process. The skill set required to do everything in the research process is wide ranging. There are conceptual issues, methodological issues, technical issues, and finally issues of synthesis. While learning to be an academic, the wide scope of scholarship and research could become problematic.

### **Summary**

It is obvious that the advantages and disadvantages of collaboration and competition are complex and intertwined. It would be easy to say that a dose of each would be the best avenue. Collaboration allows for experiential growth, specialization, productivity, and collegiality. Competition promotes a wider expansion of skills, the ability to make a case for expertise, and independence. These are all things that an academic should strive to achieve. However, an argument needs to be made for a scholarship development model that is progressive and fosters the intellectual and academic growth necessary for not only professional success but also personal satisfaction.

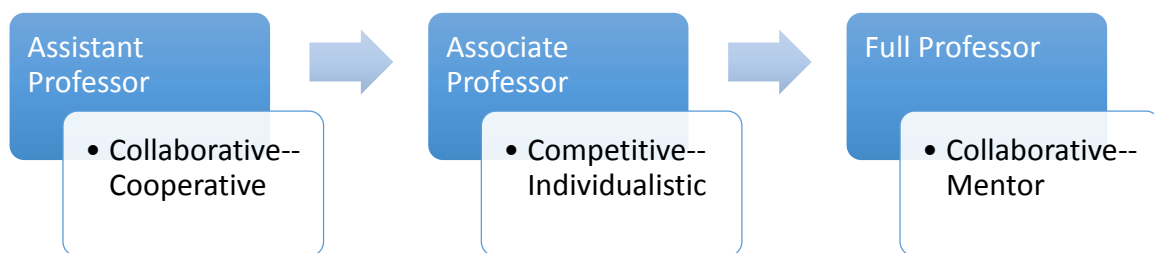
*I have found that colleagues motivate me. Perhaps it is because I am much better at starting projects than finishing them. When working with others, I have responsibilities. When working for myself, I can postpone those. I find that working alone, while sometime liberating because of ability to venture out on my own, has a major drawback. I see the world as I see it. Another set of eyes can be helpful and in most cases necessary.*



*Perhaps it is at this point that I share my feelings. I am a collaborative researcher. I have found that the integration of skills sets has allowed me to gain confidence and competence as an academic. In fact, I take the process of collaboration as a necessity for the profession. Recently, I have been involved with a research project that had a broad, national scope. This project has allowed me to publish papers, work with colleagues in areas in which I don't have sufficient knowledge, and work on research that has allowed me to gain a greater understanding of my professional world. The project expanded during the data collection. There were many individuals who were interested in the project. After our research was done, I offered the data to people who had asked and am now embarking on numerous other projects and discussions.*

### **Collaboration, Competition, and Rank**

Now that a basic description of collaboration and competition has been set forth, the looming question becomes, "Which is better?" While it is assured that there are no definitive answers, for the purpose of this argument the answer is going to be based on rank. The argument being made is that academia is a progressive endeavor that evolves through the advancement of rank. Likewise, the necessity of collaboration vs. competition should be seen as a calculated move that is ultimately cyclical. In a nutshell, whereas an argument can be made for collaboration at the assistant professor level, competition at the associate professor level, a move back to collaboration and mentorship should occur at the level of full professor.



Of course, there are a multitude of variations of this model. Ideally, no faculty member should ever be totally isolated. At the associate professor level, collaboration would be a virtue. However, the nature of academia might not allow for this type of academic behavior.

*Currently, I am on this path. Well, with the exception of this paper. Almost all of the work I have done as an academic has been collaborative. Not only does it allow me to meet my professional goals, but also it helps promote my colleagues. But, necessity requires individual ownership, not only of research, but of my academic identity.*

### **Conclusion**

What can be taken away from this obvious excursion from reality? While there is a notion, and a correct one, that competition is alive and well in academia. There are departments, colleges and universities that reinforce the notion that a scholar is a scholar and scholarship is a solitary enterprise. Individuals are judged based on individual merits, not their contributions to their peers. However, if the overarching aim of the professoriate is to create knowledge, collaboration would be an excellent way to promote thoughtful scholarship that helps everyone excel.

*I recently made a position change. I moved from a Research One university to a teaching university. Why? I was uncomfortable with the judgment of my personal merit and worth. I was doing a lot of work with colleagues and beginning what I thought was a promising career. However, it was mentioned numerous times that I had to show what I could do. I had to show that I was an academic. Now, a few years after my move I find myself back at an R1 university. What have I learned? Academia is about promoting yourself. How do I choose to promote myself? I promote myself as a collaborative colleague that works toward the good of my colleagues, my department, and my college.*

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