**Episode 1: Dr. Michelle McMullin**

**Wil Flores:** Hi there! Welcome to on the job with the sweet land digital rhetoric collaborative podcast.

**Nupoor Ranade:** Today we your hosts, Nupoor Ranade and...

**WF:** Me Wil Flores.

**NR:** Talk with Michelle McMullin about what insights she has about navigating the end of student life and then transitioning to the job market and eventually getting a job.

**WF:** So here's Michelle, welcome to our podcast! Can you please introduce yourself for our audiences?

**Michelle McMullin:** Sure. Hello, everyone. My name is Michelle McMullin. I am currently an assistant professor at North Carolina State University. I am wrapping up my first year as new faculty there. I did my PhD in rhetoric and composition with a specialization in tech comm at Purdue University.

**WF:** Cool. Nice!

**NR:** So wonderful to have you here.!

**MM:** I'm very excited because when I was interviewing at NC state, Nupoor, and I talked about podcasts—I listen to way too many podcasts. I have a problem. And so we talked about a podcast, and then I went, "Oh no, now this is a thing I have to do!" And I knew I wasn't going to have time, so I'm very happy to see that she is working with you Wil and that y'all are getting it done because there was no way I was going to have time for like two more years.

**NR:** Same. I had this idea for quite some time, especially when I was on the hiring committee at NC state and I was like, we need a resource for this. And when I pitched this at DRC, I was just lucky to find Wil because he has extensive experience in the audio recording and all those sorts of things.

So I think it just made a great fit for our project, for the DRC, and I'm super excited to do this as well. So thanks, Michelle, for joining us and starting up our recording process. You're the first person that we're interviewing today, incidentally, so it's going to be fun.

**MM:** Oh good! We'll work out all the kinks then! That's perfect.

**NR:** So we have a few questions for you and we're going to get started now with the first one. So we would like to know how your transition from the grad student do a graduate class instructor—how has that been and how do you feel being a tenure-track faculty at a research institute, which is NC state university?

**MM:** That's a really big question. Where do you want me to start?

**NR:** You can start with how, like the first part, which is, how has the transition from being a graduate student to becoming a graduate class instructor be then for you?

**MM:** Mmm, it was a little surreal for a while. I was very lucky. The job market is a scary place. And I feel like I worked very hard in that process. But also I feel like I kind of won the lottery. Getting to come to NC state with such an amazing tech comm department was very exciting to me because it's not, it's not the kind of opportunity everybody gets. A lot of times when you're new rhetoric and composition faculty, or professional writing faculty, or tech comm faculty, you're kind of a unicorn at your institution.

You are the person who does the thing. And I get to work with such an amazing group of other tech comm scholars. So, and they're all just lovely, kind, amazing people. So, so all of that was very exciting. And that transition has always felt really good. I liked Raleigh the minute I got here. And NC State has been great and has really—really focuses on mentorship.

And we'll talk about this later, but that's a question that I think is important to ask during your interview process, is what does mentoring look like at your institution for new faculty? Because if you're figuring it out all on your own, it's really tough.

**NR:** So talking about the tech comm classes, and you seem to be more a person who is grounded in rhetoric and composition and you moved on to teaching a graduate class in technical communication where students come from varying experiences. Some of them have experience, have tech comm experiences from the industry. And was it intimidating to enter a class and teach these students?

**MM:** So every class, every new class, is a little intimidating. That's just how it is. I love teaching. And I was excited to get to teach a graduate class for the first time. I have some industry experience, though it's not technically tech comm experience.

I worked in hotel operations for about 10 years before I did my PhD in rhetoric and composition. And so that industry experience gives me at least a little bit of insight into those who are working or who have industry experience. But it is a very different mix in the classroom, especially in the MSTC program at NC state.

It's a very interesting mix of students who are coming right out of their programs—undergraduate programs—to students who are working full time and have been working in industry longer than I have. Which means there's lots of different perspectives and contributions there. It was... it was tricky and new preps are always hard.

It feels a little bit like getting on a rollercoaster that you have planned to be on. You're very excited about this roller coaster, but your safety harness is not as like tight as you would like it to be and it moves a little bit. But I really enjoy the interaction with new students, and I like teaching new classes. It's... it was a lot of work. I've spent most of my first year—and I'm very lucky in, again, I will say that many times on this recording. I am very lucky too, that I got to work with faculty and in a department that gave me lots of space to do that new prep. I've taught four new classes this year. And all of them required sort of rethinking my teaching and my perspective.

Because even with similar classes in my undergrad tech comm classes that I taught in the fall is something I've taught in sort of other variations at Purdue. But every university's students are really different, and their needs and perspectives are really different. And so it just takes a little trust.

It's the most important thing for me in teaching new classes is—and my best advice in teaching new classes—is to trust your students. They're smart humans. They want... they come to school to learn and to contribute their, their thoughts. And the more that I trust my students and rely on their perspectives, and sort of think of my teaching as scaffolding and giving space for that learning to happen the smoother my new classes go.

**NR:** Um, can you tell us a little bit about how is it being a tenure-track faculty at NC state? You did mention some things about mentorship earlier. Could you give us some more insights about that?

**MM:** Yeah, I think the most interesting thing. Being a graduate student is, is keeping is like spinning plates. You know, you, you've seen that sort of image of, you know, Amazon magician or somebody that is trying to spin plates on a stick and they get one going and then...Being a graduate student feels like that, right?

There's so many things. You are, you are trying to be a student. You are a teacher. You are usually an administrator in more than one capacity, or at least I was doing all of those things at Purdue, and you are trying to do research and create a meaningful, like research identity and, and plan for yourself with your dissertation.

And so when I first got to NC state, and again, this is a place where I'm super lucky, right? I'm teaching a 2-2 load, which means I'm teaching two classes each semester, and there are clear expectations for tenure and promotion and research. And I got a lot of guidance from our department chair and from my mentors in the program and from other faculty. So there was a lot of infrastructure that set me up to not be afraid of that sort of new set of plates I had to spin. But I think the most interesting thing for me was, in those first like six or eight weeks, I felt like. I don't know how to describe this to people who don't play Dungeons and Dragons. So if you have listeners that do, they will understand this and everyone else will just go that professors real weird, and both of those people will be right.

But when you play Dungeons and dragons, one of the things you do when you enter a new space to like investigate and find out what's going on is you roll the perception check. And if you roll high. Then the DM will tell you what you should notice in the room. Like there might be traps or there's a shiny thing over there, or there's a monster on the ceiling, or you know, all of those things that might be in your... might be dangerous. If you roll high, they tell you about those things.

If you roll low, they go, "Huh. It seems all right. You don't really notice anything. Everything's fine. Um, you know, you see the path ahead." And, and that's all you get. And the first six to six or eight weeks felt like I had rolled a low perception check because everything was fine. My classes were going well, I had enough time to do everything. I didn't feel that sort of low grade panic that I had spent the last year of my, my graduate education living in. And so I just felt like. I couldn't possibly be doing everything I was supposed to be doing. And that was a little unsettling. But also when I settled into that and realized, you know, "Nope, your perception check was just fine. No traps, everything's good," [laughter] it's been really great.

**WF:** Cool! Yeah, I've definitely had those experiences where I've rolled low perception, especially for a character who's supposed to be very observant, and it's like, "You look at the mud and you don't notice anything!"

That seems fine. It's going

**MM:** to be fine! It seems fine.

**WF:** Yeah!

**MM:** A lot of this first year has felt like that. And I, I do tend to describe my life and Dungeons & Dragons metaphors, so, sorry about that y'all

**WF:** I should be able to follow along. I, I love D&D metaphors. Please, if I could speak in those all day, I will.

**MM:** Oh, well, guess what? I'm faculty and I do, so you can!

Yeah, me too. You can too listener!

[Laughter]

**WF:** So I guess springboarding off of that we'd like to know a little bit about your worklife balance and how you kind of maintain that. So you've talked about spinning all of those different plates as a graduate student and then switching over to a faculty position and then learning how to spin all those plates all over again. Could you talk to us a little bit about what that process looked like for you?

**MM:** Sure. I think worklife balance is one of those stories we tell ourselves that story. Just lets us compare and stress each other out. Worklife balance in my experience... and my life is simple. I have a cat and that is all. I have colleagues that have children and partners and other work that they have to do and all kinds of, all kinds of things that, that make their work life balance very different. And I think it's very different for everyone, depending on what your health needs are, what your mental health needs are, what kind of person you are.

So all of that to say, I was a very focused graduate student. I was very busy. I had a lot of things to do. I, like I said, I was an administrator. I worked on a research project. I had my own dissertation. I was usually teaching one or two classes. So at least the last two or three years of my PhD program felt much like what I thought faculty life was going to feel like because I was doing all of the things: you know, research, service, teaching.

But I also was writing a dissertation, and I didn't have time for things. There are graduate students who will tell you, and I think it's good advice, that you have to maintain worklife balance and have a hobby and make sure you keep your friends outside of school. I think all of those things are really valuable.

That's not a thing I did. I mean, I kept my friends, and I did different, I did different things in my summers. And I had balance that worked for me, but I think balance is personal. And I worked really hard. When I had my, my faculty interview at NC State—I think it was Dr. Mulholland who's the director of graduate studies—we were at lunch, and he said, "So what do you do outside when you're, like, what do you do outside of school?" And I seriously blanked for just a second, cause I was like, I sleep... if I have time. [laughter] And other than that, I do, right now, all I do is do school, especially in that job market year.But to transition as faculy, I think that's part of that I'm missing a perception check feeling.

Suddenly I had lots of responsibility. I had new classes to teach. I had a new faculty to get to know. I had a research agenda to establish. I still am part of a research project that works at five institutions across the country. All of those things were still true, but the overall pressure of being a grad student changed.

And... so I have balanced in a way I didn't before. I don't work nights as often. I don't work weekends as often. It feels a little more like a job than it did as a graduate student. But again, that won't be everyone's experience. I'm sure you're going to talk to other people who are going to tell you that it doesn't feel that way for them.

So I will say my one concrete, here's how I keep balance tip and then you can delete everything else I said, cause I just babbled at you.

**WF:** No, you're fine!

**MM:** My one concrete "Here's how I keep balance tip," especially when I was on the job market and doing my dissertation at the end of my graduate school career, is I made a list. I break, I broke tasks down into small pieces. I didn't say, "Oh, I have to finish that chapter." I said, "Okay, I have to do this, these three things, or I need to write this section, or I need to deal with this part of my research, or I need to grade this many papers." I made that list and I made it every morning, and when I checked everything off on the list, I stopped.

I think the the tendency to just work. All the time because there's so much to do is so prevalent that we don't understand, or I didn't, I wasn't doing a good job of giving myself stopping points that said, "Okay, you have done all of the things you said you would accomplish today. You can listen to *Critical Role* without feeling guilty that you're not working right," or, "You can stop and make dinner. Or food prep for the week because you have done all of the things that you said you were going to do, and it's okay to not work."

So I think you have to build those structures for yourself, and I think they're different for everybody. And you need a buddy. I will say the world is a dangerous place. You need a buddy. And I'm not really good at like writing groups and stuff like that. I'm pretty introverted, and I'm a pretty solo worker most of the time. But I had friends both inside the program and outside of the program who checked in and who I made a point to check in with so that I could surface from my own brain.

And that's still been really important. It's less. I have time to play Final Fantasy now. That wasn't a thing two years ago. So it's, in my case, and again, I think this is different for everyone, but in my case, balance in that sort of elusive way that we think about it has been much easier as faculty.

**NR:** That's good to know. There is light beyond the tunnel. [laughter]

**MM:** Yes! Well, and I think, I think you have to create that for yourself. I certainly have colleagues who are teaching 3-3 or 4-4 loads who have much more grading and much more prep than I do. And their life balance might look different than mine. Right? And I think some, I think sometimes. And not,it's hard because... I do not glorify the sort of academic "We work all the time" sort of thing that permeates Twitter and permeates all the places where we sort of talk to each other and talk about being an academic. You don't have to be busy all the time.

You just don't, you can breathe. It's okay. But I also think comparing what my busy looks like to what someone else's busy look looks like is tricky. And I think it's a trap. You have to have that honest conversation about your balance with yourself, and if you have a partner, with your partner and your children, and all of the ways that all of the people that are closest to you and your life get to, you know, ask about what balance looks like and get to contribute to that conversation. For me, it's just my cat. When I've worked too long, she bites me. She's like, "I'm done!" [laughter]

**NR:** So I have a question about the accountability group work because, all of this sounds really great, and it does feel good to know that being a faculty is going to be better in some ways. But right now as students, we are in a place where a lot of us, especially Wil and I, we both are almost... Wil is about to defend his prospectus. I defended recently. So we'll be moving onto the writing phase soon. So there are several scholars in the tech comm field and we are in the same place about to begin writing. And was there an, is there an accountability app or like how did you share your status with the people that you worked

**MM:** with?

There's lots of accountability apps, and if they work for you get one. Iliked... I would have to Google it to think of what it's called, but there's one that will let you gameify where you like set up your tasks as quests that you accomplish. And it's like a little mini RPG. You get a character and when you accomplish tasks. You get rewards, and you can set up parties so that you work together and get bigger rewards. I can't remember what it's called. I'll, I'll Google it in a second. But there's lots of apps that will help you and if that's a thing that helps you manage, do that. What I will say is, that wasn't particularly useful for me. I use Google docs and a list. What *was* really helpful for me in being accountable was I had a chair who was super responsive and supportive. And I met with him once a week. Dr. Bradley Dilger at Purdue was as invested in my success both as a graduate student and on the job market as I was.

And so again, I'm very lucky. Not every, not every chair is able to, or willing to, invest that kind of attention in their graduate students. So if they're not, if that's not where your feedback and your structure and your sort of weekly progress reporting comes from, find that person. Whether it's another graduate student or a faculty member that also is invested in your progress or a group of graduate students. I worked with Alicia Karabinus at Purdue, Tony Bushner at Purdue, Lee Hibbard at Purdue. And the four of us had an ongoing back channel where that's partly just cheerleading and support. But was also a way that we checked in with each other and said, okay, this is what I'm doing today. And at the end of the day, Alicia would follow up and say, "Hey, did you get done all the stuff you were going to do today. And if not, you know, what do you need help with? Or, or is there stuff you need to talk about?"

 So the world is a dangerous place. Find a buddy. You need somebody to talk to. And whether that's an adviser or a colleague or another graduate student at another institution who is in a similar place, who can do check ins with you. Ashley Velasquez was another graduate student in my program, who is now at UWA Bothell. And when we both have deadlines, sometimes we just check in, you know: "What are you doing today? Do you have everything you need. What could you do to get what you need if you don't have it?" Like, sometimes just having another human to ask you those questions can help you problem solve.

**WF:** Okay. Nice. Thanks. That sounds great! The idea of an accountabilibuddy is really nice. Like trying to link that to the D&D metaphor. Like, who do I want in my party now that I'm thinking about that. I

**MM:** It's super importan! I mean, my little channel group from Purdue is very much... we would, it would not be odd for us to describe ourselves as an adventuring party. We have different strengths. We have different areas where we excel and different areas where we need help. And what check-in looks like was different for all of us. And I think that's, that's a conversation that when you're forming a writing group or forming an accountability group or whatever, is their method of check-in, is their way of being accountable, compatible with yours?

Do you need someone who's going to enter stuff in a spreadsheet every day, or who's going to look at what you entered in a spreadsheet every day? I was not that kind of person, but I definitely have colleagues who are, and who wanted that kind of accountability. I think the most important thing, I think the hardest thing about graduate school, is it's we are always comparing ourselves to everyone else's best, everyone else's model, everyone else's way of getting things done. And so it's very easy to spend a lot of time being a chameleon and adapting other people's systems or adapting other people's ways of working because theirs must be better than yours. And especially by the time you get to writing your dissertation, you are already the scholar, the kind of scholar, the kind of writer, the kind of researcher that you are.

You just, you just your processes—not that you won't learn new stuff or figure out new ways that work better for you—but trying to adapt someone else's system... if you have a colleague who drafts on Post-It Notes on the wall and it looks real cool to you, so you're going to try it, that's fine. But if that's not how you draft, that doesn't mean you're bad at the thing or that they know something you don't know. It's so important to understand your own ways of working and find ways to support those rather than trying to adapt somebody's system. There's just not... it's what I tell people about studying for comps. Do not invent a new way to study for comps. Study the way you study. Take notes, the way you take notes. You are not going to become a new person because you suddenly have new things to do. So adapt to your ways of working and your strengths and be comfortable with that—own that. It's part of, I think, developing a more secure identity as a scholar and a writer and a researcher is to say, this is how I do the thing. And you can share that. But it doesn't mean that it has to be someone else's process. It doesn't mean that there aren't best practices you can find from other people, but I think we spend too much time comparing ourselves to other people's ways of working. And it's exhausting.

**WF:** Thanks for that! I know for me personally, that's helped me think a lot about that transition looks like and how to think about accountability. So I'm guessing... we have one last question and it's kind of related to this, but what advice based on your experiences do you have for those who are either on the job market or will be soon like this coming market season, I guess. I don't know the term. [laughter]

**NR:** We have the first bullet point for that, which is find a buddy! [laughter]

**MM:** Yes, it's still find a buddy. The job market is tough, you guys. And it's tough because there aren't as many jobs as there used to be, but it's also tough because it's just hard to start imagining your life in all of these different, new ways, knowing that most of them aren't going to work out, right? You're going to get way more "No"s than you get "Yes"s. And it's hard to not take that personally or to feel like it's somehow a reflection of your value as a human. It's not; it's not a reflection of your value as a human. There's so many factors that go into a university hire and not all of them are good.

So here's what I will say about job market. So the, it's not... here's the constructive things that I will say about job market. The very best advice I go for the job market was from Bill Hart-Davidson at Michigan State University. And he said, you have an identity as a scholar. And because of the work I had done as a researcher, as an administrator, as all of those things, he said, you, you have the same kind of identity as a scholar as faculty who has as other junior faculty, as other assistant professors. So use that to your advantage when you write your materials. Have a clear point of view. That was super constructive for me, but it did change how I applied to positions. I wrote applications for lots of different kinds of positions. But I got fewer interviews for some of the more teaching heavy or generalist kinds of rhet comp positions because I had a clear focus.

So that worked out well for me. Like I said, I got very lucky in that the work I had done in my identity as a scholar fit very well in a place where I get to flourish at NC State. But when you're preparing for the job market, you have to think about what kinds of possible lives you are willing to imagine, right?And if you have a partner, if you have children, if you have family, all of those things sort of affect what kinds of decisions will be okay with you. And then, when you understand sort of what your parameters are, then you cast as wide a net as possible, right? You apply for as many jobs as will fit those parameters as possible. And that those parameters are going to be different for everybody. Like there's no clear, there's no clear way to do that. For me, I don't have a partner who I needed to negotiate, you know, where we were going to move out. I knew I wasn't going back. I knew it was unlikely that I was going back to—my family is in Utah—and it was unlikely I was going back that direction.

So I was able to cast a pretty wide net. But I also, if there were places I didn't want to live, I didn't apply for jobs there. So I think really just being honest with yourself about what is possible is really important. And then the most important thing, I think even more than that is job market is a place where you absolutely need a network of people who are helping you prepare.

Other people need to read your materials. Other people... you need to practice a phone interview. You need to practice your job, talk in front of humans. And there's a lot of ways that it's hard to support each other on the job market because you're applying for the same jobs. And it's the ongoing sort of weird competition about grad school where you are colleagues and friends, but also competing in weird and uncomfortable ways. It's the way that you can support each other.

Erin Brock Carlson and Beth Towle were in my cohort at Purdue. And Erin Brock Carlson and I were applying for a lot of the same jobs. We still shared interview questions. We still did phone interviews with each other. We still took care of each other. And I think if you can do that, it's less isolating and less scary to be on the job market.

**WF:** Yeah, I think that's one of the bigger themes that I'm taking from this is try not to be so alone. Cause... well right now we're all supposed to be alone, but try to build these support systems for you to get through these things.

**MM:** I think it's important. And, and I will, I will reiterate that what "don't be alone" means is very different for everyone.

**WF:** Right!

**MM:** And it's another place where I think we end up comparing ourselves to each other. Some of my colleagues need group work sessions and need dinner once a week with their cohort or with their friends. I am not that person. You are going to have to drag me out of the house. I just... not interested. I'm more likely to cancel plans than not. And that's okay. That doesn't mean that I'm too isolated because I understand myself and know what kinds of support I need and will ask for it.

**WF:** Right.

**MM:** I think my version of "don't be alone" is be clear about what your needs are and what kinds of support you need and ask. Whether that's asking your colleagues, whether that's asking your friends, whether that's asking your advisors, ask for what you need and expect that there is a way to get it, that there is a way to get what you need. Be that kind of self advocate. nd then I think the "don't be alone" part comes naturally, right?

**WF:** Right.

**MM:** Nobody succeeds in this field—as much as being an academic can feel like a solo pursuit, it's your research—nobody succeeds alone. There's too much we have to do. There's too many pieces that have to happen. It's like building bridges. It's not like, I don't know, something you do by yourself. [laughter] And if you think of it that way, then it's not. Asking for help isn't a weakness. Asking for the resources you need isn't a weakness. Asking for the kinds of space and feedback and communication and accountability you need is where I think, to circle all the way back to the beginning, good life balance come from.

**WF:** Nice. Well, this has been super helpful! Thank you so much, Dr McMullin for agreeing to interview. I know, just again, we've said this is the first interview in a series and I already feel like I am like super well prepared now and, yeah, we really appreciate your time. Thank you so much!

**MM:** Yeah, no problem. I think keeping each other in a community of scholars is really important. I'm @chellemcmullin—C-H-E-L-L-E McMullin—on Twitter. And regardless of where you are in your academic process, I'm always willing to be a lifeline or a sounding board or to offer what advice or help or resources I have available to me.

**WF:** Awesome. Thank you so much, and we'll be sure to link that in the notes and everything. Thank you again. Have a good day!

**MM:** You too! Thanks everybody!

**NR:** Thanks, Michelle!

[light piano music plays and fades out]