

BEING BRIGHT IS NOT ENOUGH
The Unwritten Rules of Doctoral Study

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Peggy Hawley holds a Ph.D. from The Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California, with an emphasis in counseling psychology. She spent twenty years teaching and conducting research at San Diego State University, San Diego, California, and is now Professor Emeritus. As founding director of the Joint Doctoral Program in Education (with The Claremont Graduate School) she served as dissertation chair, committee member, and general academic advisor to many students. In preparing this book she traveled from coast to coast interviewing hundreds of students and dozens of professors whose comments are sprinkled throughout as “real life” examples of major points. Dr. Hawley’s background in counseling psychology, her research skills, and her concern for the high dropout rate of Ph.D. students, make her uniquely qualified to write this book.

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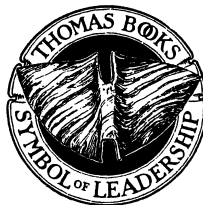
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By

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TO PERRY

PREFACE

Looking back on my academic career, one of the memories that brings me the most pleasure is a message that students used to pass along to one another, “If you’ve a problem, just go see Peggy Hawley.”

My interest in students as individuals, and my interest in social science research in general, combined to provide the impetus for writing this book. Students inspired much of it; I interviewed hundreds of doctoral students (and many professors) on a sabbatical leave which gave me an opportunity to visit a wide variety of academic settings across the nation. Now as professor emeritus, I have finally found the time to put my thoughts into written form.

Written from a student advocacy perspective, this book is intended to speak to non-traditional students as well as those typical of past generations. Because of the large influx of women into graduate study, I have become very conscious of pronouns; instead of the awkward “he or she,” I have occasionally alternated masculine and feminine pronouns.

In making the unwritten rules of doctoral study more explicit, I have attempted to be insightful rather than scientific, personal rather than objective, and practical rather than theoretical.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The most important facilitator of this book is my husband, Perry, who always gives me unwavering support for all my efforts, literary and otherwise. My brother, Marvin Martin, helped me sort out differences between Ph.D. experiences in the sciences and those in the social sciences, humanities and education. My friend and colleague, Larry Feinberg, gave graciously of his time and advice, especially in the areas of research, student advising, and in the protection of human subjects. Ceci Necoechea, my assistant and dear friend, contributed to this book in more ways than she will ever know. Also, kudos to the bright and thoughtful students I have worked with over the years—I got much more than I gave. Finally, to Sandra Ryan, my editor, who provided her expert help along with moral support.

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Chapter 1

AN “ABD” (ALL BUT DISSERTATION) BEHIND EACH Ph.D.

Robed figures stand in a scraggly line, gowns flapping about their knees and mortarboard tassels fluttering like corn silk in the spring breeze. At last they hear the long-awaited words from the President of the University. . . .

“Upon recommendation of the faculties concerned and by the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees, I confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities appertaining hereunto.”

This ancient ceremony is repeated annually in thousands of institutions of higher learning throughout the western world. Heavy with the symbolism of medieval scholarship, the conferral of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is public acknowledgement that the recipient has successfully pursued and captured academe’s highest award, the terminal degree in a particular field of study.

Yet standing behind each smiling graduate is the shadow of another person who also expected to be there on this auspicious occasion, but dropped out somewhere along the way. Are these “shadow people” intellectually inferior to those who stayed the course and received their Ph.D.s? Is the graduation ceremony portrayed here simply an example of Social Darwinism in which only the fittest (brightest) survive?

Some of the Best and the Brightest Drop Out

Most academicians to whom I have put these questions say the answer is “no.” Somewhat ruefully, they acknowledge that many of

their best and brightest drop out, not even staying around long enough to take preliminary (qualifying) exams. In fact, the dropout rate is so high (nearly one-half of the students who start doctoral programs) that it has spawned its own acronym, “ABD,” or all but dissertation.¹

This acronym has come to stand for any dropout, regardless of the point at which they leave their studies. Some stop in the middle of course work, some during qualifying examinations, and still others quit just before the dissertation or in the middle of it. No matter where in the process it happens, the loss of such a large proportion of bright scholars-in-the-making is astonishing . . . and also, as this book will show, largely unnecessary.

Consider the case of Michael who talked with me just after returning from a conference of the American Psychological Association where he interviewed for an assistant professorship in counseling psychology at a small college in the northeast.

My interview went well at first. I had studied under Dr. X who is well-known for his work in social intelligence. That was considered a plus as was my practical experience in the “walk-in” office at the university counseling center. It was when they learned I’d been ABD for four years that everything just fell apart. I tried to explain that there had been some family problems and I fully intended to finish, but I could see they had lost interest.

Mike was living in the “no man’s land” inhabited by students who, often for good reason, fail to finish in a timely fashion. Each year of delay increases the danger—the probability that the Ph.D. will remain an unfulfilled dream. In Michael’s case, I am happy to report, his wife went to work, he secured a part-time teaching position at a community college and was able to graduate two years later. While he didn’t get the position he applied for at the APA conference, he did find one and was happily teaching and working on a research grant, the last I heard.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

My purpose in writing this book is to help you earn a Ph.D. instead of having to settle for an “ABD.” I write from a student advocacy position, drawing from years of experience in advising doctoral candidates as well as insight gained from interviews conducted with hundreds of students and many professors while preparing material for this book.

Occasionally, I put on my professor’s or administrator’s hat in an attempt to explain the thinking and aims of academics without abandoning my student advocacy position. I strive to be insightful rather than scientific, personal rather than objective, and practical rather than theoretical. I try to make explicit many of the unvoiced institutional expectations that distinguish doctoral study from other experiences in education, and suggest some coping strategies to reduce the ambiguities that trouble most aspiring Ph.D.s.

This Book as a “Literary Mentor”

My hope is that this book will serve as a kind of “literary mentor” to help you meet the challenges ahead with a minimum of stress and even *enjoy yourself* along the way. Despite the grim picture people like to paint of doctoral pursuit, it is not unrealistic to promise you moments of joy: a serendipitous research finding offers new insight into your problem, a strong sense of kinship develops with fellow students (and possibly with a faculty member or two), and you find yourself looking at the world differently, all at once realizing you are developing a point of view, a *zeitgeist* that is all your own.

Those Who Need Them Most are Least Likely to Find Mentors

Conditions are improving for non-traditional students: minorities, women, older people returning to school to update their skills, and part-timers holding full or part-time jobs. Still, members of these groups tend to be isolated from the communication networks enjoyed by traditional students. Networks are important socializing agents helping people address the political, social, emotional, and intellectual problems they are likely to encounter on their way to the doctorate. Colleges and universities are gradually becoming more aware of the needs of diverse groups and are devising ways to help. Mentoring programs have been especially useful in providing one-on-one advising at times convenient to the student.

Martha was a newly-appointed assistant professor at a large urban university and we were discussing student-faculty relationships over coffee one morning. Laughing, she confessed her viewpoint had changed since her student days.