

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 University, 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 University) 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, qualifies her to write this book.

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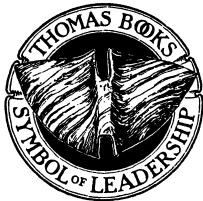
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The Unwritten Rules of Doctoral Study

By

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To Perry

PREFACE

Looking back upon my academic career, one of the memories that brings me the most pleasure are the words students used to pass along to each other, “If you have a problem, go see Peggy Hawley.”

My distress at seeing bright students drop out and my interest in social science research combined to provide the impetus for writing this book. On a year-long sabbatical leave I interviewed hundreds of doctoral students and dozens of professors across the nation. Then as professor emeritus, I finally found the time to put my thoughts into words.

Written from a student advocacy perspective, this book is intended to speak to students from a variety of backgrounds. 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.

P.H.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The most important facilitator of this book was my husband, Perry, who gave me unwavering support for my efforts, literary and otherwise. My brother, Marvin Martin, who spent his life working in the sciences helped me understand the differences in student experiences compared with those in the social sciences. My friend and colleagues, Larry Feinberg and Emery Cummins, helped me in the areas of empirical research and the protection of human subjects. Patricia and Darwin Slindee gave generously of their time and expertise in data management and everything related to computers. Gooldie Estrella graciously provided computer assistance. Ceci Necochea, my former assistant and long-time dear friend, contributed to this book in a variety of ways out of her years of experience managing a graduate division. Debi Salmon assisted with reviewing and editing this final edition. Also, kudos to the bright and thoughtful students I have worked with over the years—I received much more than I gave. Thank you to Lauren Clark for the cover design.

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	vii
 <i>Chapter</i>	
1. AN “ABD” (ALL BUT DISSERTATION) BEHIND EACH PH.D	3
The Purpose of This Book	5
For Whom is This Book Written?	5
Those Who Drop Out	9
Those Who Finish	9
That Entrepreneurial Spirit	17
Summary	19
Endnotes	20
 2. HOW DOCTORAL STUDY DIFFERS FROM PREVIOUS PURSUITS	21
Differences in Intellectual Demands	21
Differences in Psychological Demands	24
From Student to Scholar: A Metamorphosis	29
Straws in the Wind: A Renewed Interest in Teaching?	31
Grant-Getting	31
What Graduates Wished They had Known from the Start	32
Summary	34
Endnotes	34
 3. CHOOSING A DISSERTATION TOPIC	36
Dozens of “Right” Topics	37
The Purpose of a Dissertation	37

	When to Look for a Topic	38
	Where to Look for a Topic	39
	Sources	41
	Criteria for Choosing a Topic	46
	The Problem Statement	50
	Assumptions	51
	Summary	52
	Endnotes	52
4.	YOUR CHAIR, YOUR COMMITTEE, AND YOU	53
	Sequence of Steps	55
	Those Rare Individuals, Mentors	55
	Desirable Professional Characteristics	58
	Desirable Personal Characteristics	60
	Effects of “The System”	62
	Professors to Avoid	62
	“Divorcing” Your Chair	65
	Strategies for Finding the Chair You Want	66
	Understanding Your Learning Style	68
	How to Convince a Professor to Sponsor You	70
	Selecting the Rest of the Committee	70
	Technical Help	71
	Working With Your Chair	74
	Summary	78
	Endnotes	79
5.	WRITING THE PROPOSAL	80
	The Many Functions of a Proposal	80
	Dissertation Expectations	83
	The Elements of a Proposal	84
	Basic Research Concepts	89
	Human Subjects	93
	Data Gathering	94
	Advantages of a Pilot Study	98
	Research Ethics and the Protection of Human Subjects	100
	Writing Style	102
	The Proposal Hearing	103

Summary	106
Endnotes	107
6. THE DISSERTATION	108
Time, the Irreplaceable Resource	108
Conducting Your Investigation	112
Data Management	118
Common Difficulties and What to do About Them	119
Dissertations Using Qualitative Methods	123
Working With Your Committee	126
Updating the Proposal	126
Making Sense Out of all Those Data	128
Writing the Conclusions Section	129
The Dissertation Abstract	130
Summary	131
Endnotes	132
7. DEFENSE OF THE THESIS	134
Spanish Inquisition or Piece of Cake?	137
Who Will be There?	139
Getting Ready	139
Questions, Questions, and More Questions!	142
Psychological Preparation	145
Coming Down the Home Stretch	146
Summary	147
Endnotes	148
8. SPOUSES, LOVERS, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS	149
Spouses and Lovers	149
To Wives With Degree-Seeking Husbands	150
To Husbands With Degree-Seeking Wives	151
Children with a Degree-Seeking Parent	152
Family and Friends	152
Summary	154
<i>Index</i>	157

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The Unwritten Rules of Doctoral Study

Chapter 1

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

Robed figures stand in line, gowns flapping about their knees and mortarboard tassels fluttering 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.” One study found little to no academic difference between those who dropped out and those who finished as measured

by their Graduate Record Examination scores and undergraduate grades.¹

Somewhat ruefully, professors 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 posi-

tion, 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.

FOR WHOM IS THIS BOOK WRITTEN?

This book is written primarily for Ph.D.-seekers in the social and behavioral sciences, the humanities, and such professional fields as education, counseling, and social work. I won’t presume to advise those in the sciences, although I suspect there are political and psychological similarities, bureaucracies and humankind being what they are. Some of you may be preparing for careers within academic settings and others in business, industry, foundations, think-tanks or government, any place where the doctorate is an advantage. This book is also intended for professors who want to remember what it felt like to be a student in order to be more sensitive to their own students. In the following pages, I offer many of the suggestions I have made to students in person over a span of 20 years. I draw upon my own experiences as a student, faculty member, dissertation chair, and as a director of doctoral programs.

This Book as a Mentor

My hope is that this book will serve as a kind of mentor to help you meet the challenges ahead with a minimum of stress and even enjoy yourself along the way. It is not unrealistic to promise you moments of joy: a serendipitous research finding that offers new insight into your problem. Usually, a strong sense of kinship develops with fellow students and possibly with some faculty. I think that 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.