

Book Review

57 Ways to Screw Up in Grad School: Perverse Professional Lessons for Graduate Students, by Kevin D. Haggerty and Aaron Doyle. London, United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2015, ISBN 978-0-226-28087, 191 pp. \$42.75, hardcover.

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Every graduate student, especially doctoral students, can be weary, confused, or uncertain about the long road and commitment that entails a graduate degree. Despite all of the existing research available on the statistics and findings of the percentages of students who mustered through such a program and the obstacles they overcame, there is uncanny value in a book that simplistically lays out extensive details of the entire doctoral experience. Such a statement is certainly true of Kevin D. Haggerty and Aaron Doyle's 2015 book, *57 Ways to Screw Up in Grad School: Perverse Professional Lessons for Graduate Students*.

Haggerty and Doyle offer a well-structured text on the day-to-day challenges and pressures students face during graduate programs. The chapters are presented in an organized timeline manner, which helps readers quickly locate applicable chapters for their current stage in the degree. Though the title of the book suggests that each chapter is a way to “screw up,” the reader soon understands these as points of recommendation. All graduate students can find relevance in the information provided; however, doctoral students will benefit the most from this text. In fact, several of the elements covered in the book speak directly to doctoral students.

The book begins with suggestions that should be considered prior to one's application to a graduate program. The authors urge those considering graduate school to spend time self-reflecting upon their reasons for wanting to attend graduate school. One is encouraged to thoroughly understand the field they wish to pursue and research the best degree programs for that field of study, while also keeping in mind the postdegree job market that they would enter. A focus was also placed on the university one chooses to apply to and the available financial resources, graduate resources, student life, and the stated degree completion timeline.

The sections then proceed based upon challenges and circumstances that students encounter during the program. The authors honestly discussed the nitty-gritty of what one would actually encounter in graduate school: covering the supervisor relationship, the committee creation and purpose, and aspects of a program—taking exams, teaching courses, writing for publication, and conferences. While all the suggestions posed during these chapters offer a realistic glimpse into graduate school, Haggerty and Doyle continue a step further by incorporating sections on social life, attitudes and actions, and a miscellaneous section outlining legal issues, plagiarism, and faculty–student relationships.

Finally, the closing section appropriately addresses finishing the degree and the following steps. Readers can expect information about the dissertation defense, applying for jobs, expectations of the departments hiring, and job interviews. Two other important topics addressed in this section deal with not finishing the degree and having a positive outlook on finding jobs outside of an academic setting.

Haggerty and Doyle conclude with five key principles to help students thrive in school and a sketch of four different areas: the thesis, the program, the department, and the people. The five principles leave students on a resounding positive note and offer a complete summarization of what the book covered. These entail maximizing opportunities, taking responsibility, building healthy professional relationships, looking for help, and forging a reputation of which you are proud.

Evaluation

In my critical analysis, I identify positive and negative attributes of the book. In the following section, I discuss the positive points—the authors’ voice and writing style, topics covered, the honest discussion on perseverance, the use of real-life stories—and the negative points—the lack of specialization toward one college or field and the occasional usage of discouraging tone on the authors’ part. Each of these aspects provides a better illustration of the structure, content, and language in the book. I conclude with a section discussing current and future work.

Positive Critique

The first and most important thing one will recognize about the book is that it is not written as a research document but instead with a very casual linguistic style. A text that reads like scholarly research might be viewed as a barrier for many new students seeking advice; however, the language and first-person references in this book makes it an easy read for individuals in all stages of graduate school.

Secondly, the book’s breadth of topics increases its real-life application, which is essentially one of the most noteworthy aspects of the book. This is true both for students beginning their program search all the way to those nearing the finish of their program. For example, those in the applying stage are reminded to consider their desired degree, funding, and the program’s faculty. Those in the middle stage of their degree are suggested to build a strong relationship with their chair and publish in journals. Admittedly, the book becomes less useful the further along you are in the program; however, there are still relevant suggestions on dissertation completion and the job market for students nearing completion.

Haggerty and Doyle write candidly about the mental framework that is required for graduate school, especially if one is pursuing a doctorate. In fact, they dedicate a section to discussing “thin skin” (p. 113), the opposite of what is required not only in graduate school but in the professional academic world as well. While this topic is discussed in relation to the submission of articles to journals, it really becomes a basis for how graduate students should mentally approach their academic journey and profession. The authors provide an accurate glimpse into the perseverance that is required for students who are beginning to recognize their new environment is highly competitive. This piece of advice is offered in relation to rejection: “Becoming bitter about failure will cloud your judgment and take your focus off what you need to do better, and it can poison important relationships” (p. 115).

Finally, and perhaps the part that students will enjoy the most, the authors incorporate several real-life stories that help solidify their points. These stories offer students a glimpse into the realities that can come from not taking their suggestions into account. Haggerty and Doyle give an example of a graduate student who was unprepared for her thesis defense because she did not take the appropriate steps to meet with the chair or prepare a timely opening statement. Such stories serve as a warning for students who have not yet entered that phase of the process.

Negative Critique

The lack of specialization toward a certain college or field may present an element of frustration for those who are in opposition to some suggestions. While it is important to note that Haggerty and Doyle's intention was never to focus on a specific field, students may find that their departments do not handle some of the stages in the same manner as what is presented in the text. An example of this is Haggerty and Doyle's sixth suggestion, which states that one should not do an unfunded doctorate. They are adamant in their stance, even closing the section by stating, "If the only offers you receive are for unfunded PhDs, you should rethink your career aspirations" (p. 30). When applying to graduate schools, it is wise to look for funding as an assistant, as research shows the value of graduate assistant or teaching assistant positions (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). Unfortunately, not every student can afford to live on such a salary, but that should not be a deterrent for students who are motivated to pursue such a degree. In fact, many individuals hold full-time positions within the institution in which they are pursuing their degree, while others work full time in their field of study. For example, some doctoral students within education continue in their role as a school principal. Readers should be cognizant of this and recognize that their field may operate with slightly different rules or that their trajected career path might alter the rules applied to their degree, as well.

Admittedly, readers will encounter parts of the book that could be viewed as discouraging, especially for students in the application stage who are still deciding if graduate school is for them. Statements such as "If you hate being judged, you are in the wrong institution" (p. 18) are presented as strong stances of who should not be in graduate school. Though very direct, these statements should come as no surprise, considering Haggerty and Doyle state the following in their introduction to the book: "We do not want to scare you off. Okay, maybe we want to scare you a little bit, but just to help you understand grad school and the wider university" (p. 6). They hold true to this stance throughout the book, and while there may be some students who decide graduate school is not for them, the more motivated and dedicated students will take these suggestions and continue with their degree route.

Current Work

Haggerty and Doyle offer an easily readable text that approaches the topic of graduate school expectations from a different perspective than much of the relevant work available. While there are several helpful books available on the topic, Haggerty and Doyle's book stands out for two primary reasons: their approach and their directness. The authors wrote the book from the standpoint of ways to screw up. From the reader's perspective, each of the points mean, "If I do this or approach this situation in this manner, then I will not be successful." Secondly, the authors are very straightforward and truthful about graduate schools. While there are several books that touch on this as well, Haggerty and Doyle go a step further because they challenge a reader to self-reflect and honestly decide whether graduate school is a good option.

Future Work

In light of the suggestions the book provides, there are areas that deserve further attention. Students certainly find value in books that cover these topics while looking at specific colleges within the university setting, which is something this book does not address. That direction would offer a more concrete glimpse of what students could expect entering their specific program. Finally, students would benefit from a deeper look at each of the different areas covered in the text, such as thesis defense, interviewing, and committee relationships.

This book is a beneficial read for graduate students and provides applicable information for those at all stages in the process. The authors present the information in a direct format, which gives readers the validation that the information presented is accurate and trustworthy. Despite the at times direct approach the authors take, readers finish feeling motivated and inspired to overcome challenges they will face and to spend their time as a graduate student diligently working toward a successful career.

References

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