

Preface

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This book is something I needed when I first entered graduate school in the 1980s. I was basically clueless. My story is very similar to the stories that the editors of this volume recount. I had no idea what graduate school was like and was poorly prepared to be a successful political science graduate student. At the time I first entered graduate school, I had the wrongheaded assumption that political science was like “contemporary history” which had been told to me by one of my professors at my undergraduate institution. I thought graduate school was just an extension of undergraduate (which, frankly, I skated through). Man, was I wrong!

As this book so rightly points out, not everyone comes to graduate school with the same amount of academic cultural capital. My story is not so different than the experiences recounted in this book. Many questions face students like me who had no idea what graduate school was. I went to Bowling Green State University as an undergraduate—it was the only school I had applied to, because it was not very far, but far enough from my home in Parma, Ohio. I majored in political science and history (I was more a historian than I was a political scientist) and then decided I would go to the University of Michigan to study Russian history (and got an MA in Russian and East European Studies). Something happened to me at U of M, and I realized I wanted to be a political scientist (of all things!), so I ended up entering Michigan State University’s PhD program in political science (again, the only school I applied to).

When I arrived in the fall of 1985, I was confronted by the fact that I knew virtually nothing about political science. I did not know anything about research, nor what a seminar was, and barely knew there was something called regression. I did not know what an assistantship was, and I knew nothing about financial aid or scholarships, nor how to navigate the program. Fortunately, I did not incur debt, largely because I worked as a short order cook in addition to my assistantship throughout graduate school (although that was not a smart thing to do). I must say it was a rough time for me. I was also beset with a terrible sense of being an imposter.

All of those challenges I faced are addressed in this book. Issues covered include how to apply in a smart way to a variety of schools (not doing what I did) and how to leverage a better assistantship deal than I did. This book offers advice on how to take full advantage of the orientations (unlike me) and how to build a network of mentors and colleagues (who helped me a lot). This volume also offers great advice on how to deal with administration and where to go for help.

There is great advice provided in this book that talks about structuring your class work to help develop your research ideas, that eventually develops into a dissertation topic and a research agenda. There is also an extensive discussion about how to prepare for the comprehensive examinations (as well as guidance as to how to pass those exams).

One of the most important choices that a graduate student can make in preparation to tackle the dreaded thesis or dissertation is the selection of their major advisor, someone who is a notable scholar, but also someone the student can work with. There is also very valuable advice offered as to the process

by which a dissertation or thesis is put together ranging from selecting a topic, writing a prospectus, collecting data, navigating relationships with advisors and other expectations. And what to do after you are finished (such as figuring out conferencing and the publishing game). Perhaps most importantly, the book covers how to prepare for teaching. When I was a graduate student, I was thrown into a class, and I learned how to teach on my own. This book provides insights on how one prepares to teach. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, how to get a job in academia and beyond.

But there is also personal advice such as balancing parenthood and graduate school, maintaining your health and wellness, and resources that are available on campuses that are often not known about. And significantly, what can the student do if they are victims of harassment.

This book is the most comprehensive resource available to prospective and current graduate students to date. It should be required reading for any student who is taking professionalization workshops or courses in our departments. My life would have been so much easier had this book been available when I was a student. I believe it will have lasting impact on the next generation of graduate students in political science.

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