



Behind the Academic Curtain: How to Find Success and Happiness with a PhD

Furstenberg, Frank F.

University of Chicago Press Chicago Distribution Center, 2013

Book Review

Tags: faculty development | faculty well-being | teaching career

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Date Reviewed: March 5, 2015

In this superb book, sociologist Frank F. Furstenberg offers readers a sweeping description of the five stages of an academic's career from graduate school, to choosing a career in (or outside of) the academy, to tenure review, all the way to retirement. The author, who is an Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, provides graduate students and professors his personal reflections on the many twists and turns that every PhD will face in his or her career. In today's difficult economic climate, coupled with the precipitous drop in enrollments in the Humanities across the board, Furstenberg's realistic explanation of what it takes to succeed while traversing the marathon of graduate studies and then landing either a research or liberal arts teaching faculty position should be mandatory reading for anyone considering a doctorate in religious studies. While an academic career is rightly coveted by many young and ambitious minds coming out of college, this book in many ways provides a much-needed reality check.

The book contains five chapters. In Chapter 1, "Entering Graduate School," the author chronicles the various professional and emotional stages that graduate students experience. He emphasizes the amount of hard work, consistent self-doubt, and high level of competition that students face, and provides information about doctoral exams, writing a dissertation, dealing with faculty, and retaining funding.

Chapter 2, "An Academic Career or Not?" delineates the various options, or plan B's, that a recent PhD has with respect to finding meaningful work, alongside some sobering statistics about the slashing of available positions of tenure-track jobs in today's market. Furstenberg explains the steps one goes through when searching for an academic position (for example, the

application process, postdoctoral fellowships, campus interviews, and contract negotiations).

Chapter 3, "Being an Assistant Professor," describes the many challenges experienced when transitioning from graduate student to professor. Among the important topics the author discusses are acculturating to one's home department, building a positive rapport with colleagues, choosing how and when to live up to the expectations of service, and managing the often heavy burden of teaching, all while not allowing one's research to lag. With respect to research, the author includes useful advice on how to circulate one's work and network at conferences and other venues. The chapter concludes with a helpful ten-page treatment of the nuts and bolts of the tenure process.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with the new tests that PhD's face in the middle and end of their careers, such as avoiding complacency, grappling with intensified responsibilities of university and disciplinary service, training graduate students, and considering retirement. As the author himself notes, most of the publications on academic careers center on the beginning stages of one's career, so these two chapters represent a unique contribution to the literature.

In sum, *Behind the Academic Curtain* is an excellent summation of the stages, rewards, and challenges that every PhD in religious studies will face in his or her career. Tenured professors will be less likely to pick up this book to find new revelations or affirm what they already experience, but they should nevertheless know about it and may want to assign it as mandatory reading for undergraduates interested in graduate school, or graduate students working under their tutelage, who remain unclear about the path ahead of them.

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