

Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw and Lucinda Spaulding: Navigating the doctoral journey: a handbook of strategies for success

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Abstract *Navigating the Doctoral Journey: A Handbook of Strategies for Success* (Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding, 2014) offers current and potential graduate students and their professors vital guidelines and strategies for progressing through the doctoral journey. This book review will describe the contents of this new resources, as well as will point out some strengths and one weakness of this book. This text is both timely and practical and is a must read for doctoral students and their professors. Finally, given that the chapters were written by over 20 experts in their respective fields, the information presented is undoubtedly compelling.

Keywords Doctoral persistence · Doctoral studies · Ph.D. · Ed.D. · Graduate studies

While most travelers would not consider embarking on an unfamiliar journey without consulting their GPS or at least a recent map, many doctoral students do just that—they plunge into doctoral studies without adequate preparation. Given the increased access to higher education via on-line learning programs, doctoral studies are more accessible than ever in human history. *Navigating the Doctoral Journey: A Handbook of Strategies for Success* offers current and potential graduate students and their professors vital guidelines and strategies for the doctoral journey. In fact, the indicated purpose of this book is to “provide doctoral students across disciplines and programs with a comprehensive, yet practical resource to effectively guide individuals from the initial program selection to final dissertation defense to beyond graduation” (Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding 2014, p. ix).

Beginning with the preface, the editors establish the direction and encouraging tone of the book, as well as provide an organizational overview of the text. Specifically, the editors outline the following four stages in the doctoral journey: (a) the entry stage, (b) the

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knowledge and skill development stage, (c) the consolidation stage, and (d) the completion stage. In order to further encourage succinct and clear presentation of the content, each of the twenty chapters, written by over 20 experts in their fields, follows the same format: case study, research evidence, strategies, reflection, and resources. Rooted in the four stages, the first three chapters comprise the first stage and covers topics such as program selection, nurturing family relationships, and resource allotment. The second phase of developing knowledge and skills includes the next five chapters. Issues such as self-intervention, managing stress, learning (overcoming) statistics, using technology advantageously, as well as creating a support network are all included as essential skills for the doctoral journey. The third division, which the editors also deem, “The Research and Scholarship Stage” includes a discussion about the transition from autonomous learning to self-directed learning, networking with faculty through strong professional relationships, and preparing for the comprehensive exam. The final division, the completion stage, includes two chapters that address publishing and transitioning from being a student to a professor. As the described organization and included chapter topics highlight, this book provides key insights to its target audience; namely, current or future doctoral students and university professors.

Navigating the Doctoral Journey: A Handbook of Strategies for Success has many strengths. First, the introduction of clear language to identify the stages of the doctoral process is an obvious strength. Instead of presenting the doctoral process as a gigantic mountain to climb, the editors clearly break the process down into manageable (and less intimidating) parts. The rather mystical steps in the doctoral process are demystified. This delineation of the steps in the process also helps students to locate their personal position in the process and to better understand what to expect in subsequent stages. This knowledge can help to soothe anxious students as they journey through the doctoral process. Another general strength of this book is its wide diversity of contributing authors. Ranging from those with terminal degrees in education, psychology, and many other fields from American universities to authors with Ph.Ds. from universities in places such as Australia, the multifaceted range of expertise represented throughout the book is quite compelling.

While most people entering higher education may have an intuitive idea about possible challenges they may face, the editors not only identify these challenges, but also provide tools to overcome them. Much like a good travel guide book can warn travelers of possible pitfalls in their journey, as well as can give information about how to avoid or overcome these pitfalls, so too does this text identify possible roadblocks in the doctoral journey while it simultaneously offers detours for navigating around the obstacles. As such, students who read this book are no longer doomed to wonder aimlessly through a doctoral maze, but can instead proceed with confidence down the doctoral path. Likewise, professors who read this book can be better equipped to guide their students through the unique challenges of contemporary graduate education. Thus, this text’s strength is in its usefulness in higher education practice as it provides a quick, but thorough reference for both students and professors.

While the book is easy to read and is written more like a conversation with a good friend than a weighty academic text, the imagery used throughout allows readers to easily connect with and internalize the process. Furthermore, the editors expertly knit the chapters together in a way that considers the needs of the student as a whole person. For example, the various chapters included in the text highlight the students’ multifaceted responsibilities and roles while further recognizing that family, work, daily demands, and academics, all compete for the doctoral students’ time and attention. Thus, the proffered advice for balancing all of these multiple demands is both timely and practical. Another strength of

this book is that the editors recognize that not all students persist to graduation. By highlighting the difference between being an autonomous learner and developing into a self-directed learner the editors highlight a key reason that many students do not persist in their doctoral studies. In Chapter Nine Ponton explains, “Even though high grades may be achieved during coursework, doctoral students who engage in all modes of autonomous learning also limit their development as self-directed learners thereby threatening ultimate program completion” (Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding 2014, p. 99). Clearly this distinction between being an “autonomous” versus the more desirable “self-directed learner” is paramount. As such, this chapter is perhaps, the most useful chapter among a host of stellar competitors.

The only critique that this reviewer can offer of this text is in the omission of a chapter to address students who have already become an all but dissertation (ABD) dropout. Granted, the text offers preventative strategies for not becoming an ABD statistic; however, this near perfect guide book would have been perfect had it included a discussion of suggestions or strategies for students who have already dropped out, but desire to once again resume their doctoral journey. Yet, in spite of this one critique, this book provides a vital contribution to the literature in higher education for students and professors. Simply stated, *Navigating the Doctoral Journey: A Handbook of Strategies for Success* is a must read for anyone in higher education.

Appendix 1: Letter of permission from the editor



School of Education

Dear Editor,

It is without hesitation that as the editor, I give Cheri Crook permission to write a book review for, *Navigating the Doctoral Journey: Strategies for Success*.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me on the phone at 434-582-7423 or through e-mail at aszapkiw@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Amanda J. Rockinson-Szapkiw, LPC, Ed.D.
School of Education

Appendix 2: Letter to the editor

July 19, 2014

Dear Dr. Shin:

Navigating the Doctoral Journey: A Handbook of Strategies for Success (Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding 2014) is an excellent book that directly aligns with the stated purposes of your *Higher Education Journal*. Thus, as a doctoral student who has benefited from this text's content, I would like to write a book review about this newly released resource. I noticed on the *Higher Education Journal's* website that potential book reviewers are advised to check to make sure a book is available to be reviewed. Is anyone reviewing this book for your publication? Would you be interested in having this book reviewed? Are there author submissions fees? If so, how much are they? Thank you in advance for any assistance you can provide.

Best regards,
Cheri Canode Crook
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Appendix 3: Response from the editor

July 19, 2014

Dear Cheri C. Crook,

Thank you for contacting me.

I would be pleased to publish a review of the book.

Actually, the book is also one of my interests!

Please see the attached guide and some sample review papers by well known scholars.

With best wishes,

Jung Cheol Shin, PhD

Review Editor, Higher Education

Reference

Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. J., & Spaulding, L. S. (Eds.). (2014). *Navigating the doctoral journey: A handbook of strategies for success*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

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