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‘Failure’ of graduate education is no joke

Blame for lack of success falls on students, but it shouldn't.

By MELONIE FULLICK | November 4, 2015

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Recently *University Affairs* published [an interview with Kevin Haggerty](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/career-advice-article/57-ways-to-screw-up-in-gradschool/) [and Aaron Doyle](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/career-advice-article/57-ways-to-screw-up-in-gradschool/), two Canadian professors who have written a book of advice for graduate students. The book’s gimmick, if you want to call it that, is that it’s presented as a guide to failing—an anti-guide, perhaps?

—as evidenced by the title, *57 Ways to Screw up in Grad School: Perverse Professional Lessons for Graduate Students*. According to Haggerty and Doyle, “students often make a series of predictable missteps that they could easily avoid if they only knew the informal rules and expectations of graduate school.” If only! And this book, we’re told, is designed to help solve that problem.

Dropping all sarcasm, the first thing I have to say is: *really*?

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… grad students’ “failure” is somehow all about the mistakes *they* make? How many times do we have to take this apart before faculty giving this kind of “advice” start realizing how it sounds? Maybe this is just a part of the “joke” and I’m not getting it, but how long is it going to be before the irrational and erroneous assumption that student success is entirely about *individuals* and their intrinsic merit and skills, is displaced with a more realistic perspective?

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Haggerty and Doyle have been promoting their book in the higher ed press for a couple of months now. While the *University Affairs* interview is relatively subdued, I want to bring your attention to their August 27th piece in [*Times Higher Education*](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/ten-steps-to-phd-failure?nopaging=1)(THE), in which we were treated to a lively sample of just 10 of the ways grad students can ruin their own chances of academic success. Back when the article was first published I shared a [series of critiques](https://twitter.com/qui_oui/status/637614892179169288) on Twitter; I’m going to risk boring you by repeating them here, because the book is receiving attention and there are some fundamental problems with the ideas that it reflects and reinforces.

At the outset, the authors explain how they’ve “concluded that a small group of students actually want to screw up. We do not know why.

Maybe they are masochists or fear success.” This sort of set-up trivializes and dismisses serious problems; but things get worse from that point. Here are a few of the “screw ups” listed in the THE article, along with some of the criticisms they provoked from me and [others](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/i-followed-steps-phd-failure-and-came-out-doctorate):

1. [**Business Administration - Chair**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=242159&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=be2ff41d061843c4ac4730459ceb52b0)[**(Supply Chain Management)**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=242159&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=be2ff41d061843c4ac4730459ceb52b0)Memorial University of Newfoundland
2. [**Surgery / Orthopedic Surgery -**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=245293&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=8cf09bd034c75113fd9c1838648b0a5c)[**Assistant/Associate Professor**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=245293&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=8cf09bd034c75113fd9c1838648b0a5c)[**(Sarcoma)**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=245293&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=8cf09bd034c75113fd9c1838648b0a5c)

McGill University - McGill University Health Centre (MUHC)

1. [**Management and Organizational**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=245249&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=c949655bf85227cbf17bf9dabe4a0cbd)[**Studies - Assistant Professor**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=245249&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=c949655bf85227cbf17bf9dabe4a0cbd)

Huron University College (affiliated with Western University)

1. [**Multiple Disciplines**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=243957&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=61ecc21c7e548eb3df208ebc6571eca0)

Mount Royal University

1. [**Architecture - Assistant Professor**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=244673&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=3fd4f58171ddf06389af85314fd8f1c6)[**(Design Technologies)**](http://g.adspeed.net/ad.php?do=clk&amp;aid=244673&amp;zid=15912&amp;t=1447266075&amp;auth=3fd4f58171ddf06389af85314fd8f1c6)

McGill University (Quebec)

**“Stay at the same university”** for all your degrees. This assumes students have unimpeded [mobility, and a degree of financial](https://twitter.com/celeste_sharpe/status/637616725534601216) [security,](https://twitter.com/celeste_sharpe/status/637616725534601216) from an early stage. Mobility is also affected by your family situation, for example—if you’re married with a partner who can’t relocate, or if you have dependents who need to stay where they are, this is a problem.

**“Choose the coolest supervisor.”** Bad supervision can be career- limiting. [But who is going to be really honest](https://twitter.com/tressiemcphd/status/637621412539314180) and [tell prospective](https://twitter.com/the_other_jeff/status/637621246004301824) [students](https://twitter.com/the_other_jeff/status/637621246004301824) about a faculty member who is (for example) a research “star” but also a terrible supervisor? Not the program chair; not the other faculty; and not the students who are [happiest](https://twitter.com/oprisko/status/638715131673886720) to represent the program. It’s also possible that your prof is new to supervision and not equipped to handle it. The student is being imagined here as a consumer who has the responsibility to make an informed choice, even when the relevant information isn’t available or when they [don’t actually have the option.](https://twitter.com/elebelfiore/status/637620539767554048)

**“Expect people to hold your hand.”** The issue of responsibility is already a sketchy one in graduate education, and we don’t all arrive with the amount of cultural capital that’s required to be autonomous or “just know” what we’re responsible for—and what we can reasonably ask of a supervisor. So, what constitutes appropriate mentorship and guidance, and what is merely [“hand-holding”](https://twitter.com/Ask_anAspergirl/status/637629532510400512)? Who gets to decide? (Hint: not the students.)

**“Concentrate only on your thesis.”** Assuming, of course, that this is an option for everyone. When the authors suggest non-thesis activities, though, these are not things like family time or self-care (and definitely not a job), but other academic professionalization activities such as authoring journal articles and attending conferences—as if grad students don’t already receive the message that they must do All The Things if they want to be minimally employable.

**“Have thin skin.”** As with other things on the list, this is a difficult call because it’s so subjective, and the party giving feedback is often also in a position to define its appropriateness. As I said [in a](https://twitter.com/qui_oui/status/637629452114075648) [tweet](https://twitter.com/qui_oui/status/637629452114075648), giving and receiving feedback, like most professional skills, requires practice and modeling—and that’s a two-way street.

I hope you’ll forgive me for not finding the topic of grad student “failure” an amusing one. Usually I like a good joke (especially at the expense of academe), but I just don’t see how it’s appropriate for this issue. The “light-hearted” approach is grating to me, and I wasn’t alone. Reactions

to the article included: “[horribly smug](https://twitter.com/francesbell/status/637620357265027072)”; “[their post is not amusing](https://twitter.com/jatenas/status/637629303333781504)”; “[I’m](https://twitter.com/CharlesOppenh/status/638724691595821056) [a Professor who has supervised dozens of PhDs and I disagree with](https://twitter.com/CharlesOppenh/status/638724691595821056) [almost all of what the authors said](https://twitter.com/CharlesOppenh/status/638724691595821056)”; “[this is ridiculous](https://twitter.com/nanaslugdiva/status/637643163415351296)”; “[clickbait,](https://twitter.com/AcademicJess/status/637622977530626048) [consumerism, classism](https://twitter.com/AcademicJess/status/637622977530626048)”; “[I had trouble getting past #1](https://twitter.com/tseenster/status/637617753655001088)”; and “[much](https://twitter.com/the_other_jeff/status/637630701420986368) [could be turned around into ‘do your job, grad schools.’](https://twitter.com/the_other_jeff/status/637630701420986368)”

What’s even more frustrating is that almost every point made in the THE article could have been made in a helpful, critical and inclusive way, and simply wasn’t. In choosing this particular approach to “advice” the authors render their points not only unpalatable, but also condescendingly uncritical. Even if the advice is potentially of use, why put it in terms that are exclusionary to some students, and infantilizing to all? The authors make the argument they’re sharing [tacit knowledge](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/hiding-in-plain-sight-changing-the-unwritten-rules-of-academe/), thus doing us all a favour. But they also seem to be ridiculing students from not having this knowledge at the outset. The use of the word “guilty” (in their interview) just reinforces the feelings many students *already* experience when they discover something’s going wrong.

Haggerty and Doyle aren’t [alone in their assumptions](http://depts.washington.edu/geog/ToughLove_Haggerty.pdf), and that’s why these kinds of articles and books represent a problem. They aren’t mere one-offs; as I’ve [argued before](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/war-of-attrition-asking-why-phd-students-leave/) (and no doubt you’re all [sick of hearing](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/re-framing-the-picture-on-phd-completion/) [it](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/re-framing-the-picture-on-phd-completion/)), it’s still too convenient for graduate programs and supervising faculty to dismiss students’ “failure” as a problem with selection of students, students’ lack of commitment, and/or a bad “fit”—an approach that shifts the blame away from problems of supervisory competence, appropriate social and academic support, and departmental climate and culture. That this perspective is espoused publicly by respected senior faculty members who not only supervise grad students but have also spent time as graduate chairs, shows how pervasive and influential it is in academe.

As always, I’m not trying to argue that students have no responsibility for their own success. What I’m responding to is the framing of this as a problem *almost entirely in their hands*. We already know (from [research,](https://meloniefullick.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/bibliography-graduateeducationpublic1.pdf) [in fact](https://meloniefullick.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/bibliography-graduateeducationpublic1.pdf)) that this is an inaccurate depiction, and that students’ experiences in graduate education are affected at least as much by the supervisor, department, and peer group—as well as by [structural factors](http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/doctoral-faculty-are-more-responsive-to-white-male-prospective-students-study-finds/97459) such as class, [race](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/11/03/study-finds-serious-attrition-issues-black-and-latino-doctoral-students), [gender](https://www.wiareport.com/2015/01/gender-differences-in-the-road-to-the-doctoral-degree/), and disability—as they are by individual merits and choices.

I’m aware that [the book will provide more detail](http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/Other/bo20832370.html) than a short post on THE, but because it’s the framing rather than the content that’s a problem, maybe “less is more.” You don’t need a book like this when the

same or better advice is available from people who’ll give you a constructive *and* critical perspective on professionalization and the norms and values of academe—the latter having been taken for granted by Haggerty and Doyle. I recommend you check out those diverse perspectives instead—there are too many to list here, but a few online sources that spring to mind are [Pat Thomson](http://patthomson.net/author/patthomson/), [The Thesis Whisperer](http://thesiswhisperer.com/), [Conditionally Accepted](http://conditionallyaccepted.com/blog/), [PhDisabled](https://phdisabled.wordpress.com/), [Explorations of Style](http://explorationsofstyle.com/), [Gradhacker](https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker), and also (for some background) the [bibliography of research on doctoral](https://meloniefullick.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/bibliography-graduateeducationpublic1.pdf) [education](https://meloniefullick.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/bibliography-graduateeducationpublic1.pdf) that I linked to above. You can also try #phdchat on Twitter, where you’ll find a wealth of resources.

Given the variety and quality of the research and resources available, surely at this stage there’s no excuse to reiterate the same old tired themes about irresponsible students and the silly mistakes they make. I only hope we can move beyond this in future debates about graduate education.

ABOUT MELONIE FULLICK

Melonie Fullick is a PhD candidate at York University. The topic of her dissertation is Canadian post- secondary education policy and its effects on the institutional environment in universities.

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[William Badke](http://williambadke.com/) / **November 4, 2015 at 3:23 pm**

I could not agree more. Students are so often forced to fit into “the system” with all of its vagaries, and put up with the personalities of supervisors and administrators. But a more serious problem is the “solve your own problems and don’t ask for support” approach of many universities. As a graduate student, to actually need the help of others is seen as weakness, even a lack of readiness for the rigours of advanced study.

Let me suggest a kind of support too few graduate students seek – academic librarians. No, not the book-shuffling shusshers of legendary lore but the keen information professionals who can do everything from critiquing your research question(s) to helping you set up your literature review to guiding you through finding tools that can enhance your bibliography. Most of this you won’t get from a thesis supervisor.

I am convinced that many of the challenges of graduate students doing theses and dissertations are process issues – clarifying your research problem, finding a coherent outline, locating the best and most relevant resources, organizing your material and figuring out how to incorporate resources into the written product. Academic librarians have amazing skills in these areas. They may not be able to help you with your experiment and with statistical operations, but they can give meaning to the process of putting everything together.

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Dr Cecile Badenhorst / **November 5, 2015 at 6:51 am**

Well said! This perspective promoted by Haggertty & Doyle is harmful and it begins with a deficit approach – that graduate students are the problem. Your

article does a superb job of highlighting the broader structural issues that are often hidden from view.

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Dr.Doinglittle / **November 6, 2015 at 6:49 pm**

That’s not what I took from their interview or what the book seems to be about – they appear to be providing some good tips that most students don’t see until the end of our schooling, when it is too late to do much about it.

The more important question is what is the actual impact of avoiding such “screw ups” on the final outcome. Will doing everything right in grad school make you more likely to stand out and land that elusive TT job? At best, these things will have a marginal effect. The outcomes are determined far more by factors beyond students’ control.

The painful truth is the failure really starts at the moment of enrolment. And professors selling false hopes and programs over admitting students are the ones failing students.

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