

## *Book Review*

### *Being Well in Academia – Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected: Insider Guide to Success in Academia*

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Boynton, P. (2020). *Being Well in Academia – Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected: Insider Guide to Success in Academia*. Routledge. 278 pages. ISBN 97803671867088 (softcover) \$37.04

As an interdisciplinary scholar, parent, and mature graduate student now at the final stages of completing my doctoral degree in Education, the book title *Being Well in Academia – Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected*, by Petra Boynton (2021), immediately captured my interest and curiosity. Many moons ago, at the young age of 17 as a naïve pigeon-toed first-generation post-secondary student, I began my undergraduate journey, which *eventually* led me to an undergraduate degree. I say ‘eventually’ because my academic journey was more like a meandering adventure with no specific destination in mind. What I wanted to study was not available locally, so I instead explored and discovered the fascinating world of knowledge that had been an opportunity opened up to me by my parents whose values for education were clear. Having grown up in a very traditional family, my father encouraged me to attend university, whereas my mother wanted me to have a family and not pursue my dreams of higher education. University is where I was able to find both my life purpose and my voice. It was where I became the adult I knew was possible. University was where I came to understand that I could be both a parent and pursue higher knowledge throughout my career. I soon came to realize that during my early years in school and in university, sitting in desks and listening to ‘experts’ talk about their subject matter, somehow uncovered a way forward for me as I began my life’s career adventure. First as an employment counsellor, and then working in rehabilitation and disability management, I came to understand that education and learning were an important part of individual growth and the advancement of society.

Alongside this deep sense of resonance with academia, there was also a tension that I experienced as I explored campus living

and learning on campus. Amidst constant activity, the joy of learning, and the feeling of endless possibilities, there was conflict and tension that I felt within me in the bureaucratic institutional culture wherein I found myself and others to be immersed within a lonely competitive world of scholarship. It seemed to me that everyone was always racing here and there, eyes down, no smiles, with no time for a friendly greeting. Sometimes I felt invisible, or like only my student ID. I do remember commenting to my mother what a depressing place the campus was at times. My time on campus as an early adult was sometimes disheartening, while at the same time, filled with excitement and discovery of a world that was personally satisfying and gratifying.

These first experiences in academia were during the time of typewriters, mind you. Since then, campuses have slowly continued to evolve into more friendly places where students feel welcomed, where support can be sought and found if one knows where to go or who to ask. Universities value research, new ideas, and innovation; they are places where ideas are nurtured and valued with open spaces available for philosophical conversations with others with similar and different beliefs and values, which opens one's mind to other ways of seeing and knowing the world. Post-secondary institutions are places where meaningful learning happens. Faculty members now practice more inclusive teaching methods, such as problem- or inquiry-based learning that include exploration of new understandings, deeper learning, and discussions that enhance student engagement, as well being more welcoming to diverse learners of all ages and stages. Collaboration, reflection, and interdisciplinary learning are essential components of growth and development for self-knowledge, personal intuition, creativity, and innovative mindsets.

These ways to embrace difference are essential ways that humanity can forge ahead in a global knowledge-technology economy and an unpredictable future, which requires mindsets and skillsets of critical and creative thinking to solve world problems such as pandemics, environmental issues, and poverty. In her book, author Petra Boynton (2021) seems to share these same sentiments about the importance of education and the realities of campus life as a student. She points out difficulties that students may experience as they strive for personal growth and navigate their way through academia. Working from Boynton's standpoint that it's always best to be prepared, she uses narrative effectively throughout her book that feels to the reader as if she is sitting on a park bench alongside the reader as a mentor and trusted friend.

Although I initially cringed at the idea of a ‘self-help’ book, Boynton’s approach to writing this guide maps out strategies for student success in a way that I found to be both thoughtful and helpful. The book offers insights into the workings of academia with easy to scan and easy to read Table of Contents and chapter headings, providing resources that offer support to students’ health and wellness, academic success, and relational strategies for student retention, which is important to everyone. Academia can be both the most rewarding time in any adult’s career or life course, while at the same time, it can be one of the most challenging and daunting experiences navigating through to find one’s way. And issues do arise. As a student, it can sometimes feel like forging one’s way through a forest path that has not, before now, ever been traveled. As a parent of four adult sons, and a mature student now in graduate school currently working to complete my PhD, I can attest to a sometimes unfriendly institutional culture that can still exist within the world of academia. Cut budgets, stretched administrators, and faculty working in a competitive research funding culture is a formula for creating student hurdles and barriers, no matter the age or stage along one’s educational journey. And as a student juggling tasks and responsibilities can bring along many challenges. One must trust in the process and carry-on. In Boynton’s book, student experiences and conflicts that may arise are stated simply and she offers various resolutions with consideration of different contexts and comfort levels.

Chapter One begins with wellness and being well, a necessary starting point. Taking on a new challenge such as an undergraduate or graduate degree takes a lot of mental energy, organization, and time management. Being healthy, centered, and ready to learn requires self-care and a quiet place to read, reflect, and write. For me, learning is meditation. To meditate means that one is healthy mentally, physically, and emotionally, prepared to balance one’s obligations, meet learning head-on, and work through any challenges or obstacles that one may encounter on the journey to personal growth. The ideal is to be the slow and steady turtle rather than the hasty rabbit, as the best decisions and the best learning happens when it is carefully and thoughtfully considered. A tired worn-out bunny will not survive the demands of academia. Make sure you are well positioned with confidence and a support network as you develop your career through further education. In this chapter, Boynton shares both her struggles and achievements in a way that offers insights into the complications that may occur throughout one’s academic journey.

Chapter Two provides a plethora of detailed suggestions for centering oneself and self-care, emphasizing support networks that are available on and off campus as needed at different times throughout one's academic journey. The analogies and metaphors used in this book and this chapter by the author are relatable situations that one might find themselves in. The links to digital resources provided to connect and support others are strategically selected with online activities related to diverse research interests. In this chapter, there are numerous ways to create stronger social networks to support students' academic endeavors.

In Chapter Three, Boynton shares strategies and resources to assess needs and seek help, with conversation starters for self and others to begin interventions that are appropriate for each person and each situation. Tips for helping others are specific and designed to protect safety and wellbeing, and again, resources and references have been selected to be helpful and rehabilitative when under duress or trauma, with suggestions to strengthen personal resilience in self and others.

Chapter Four supports learners in identifying help needed and offers diverse approaches to finding solutions to barriers among alternative options depending on specific situations or problems, including recognizing barriers and own personal limitations to support well-being and learning. This chapter includes strategies for those with different abilities and addresses issues of accessibility. Resources throughout the book are detailed, and well researched and cited.

Chapter Five covers an extensive list of threats and worries that have been expressed by people about academia, including issues of being a first generation student, discrimination that one may experience or perceive, bullying, competition, conferences, language barriers, learning challenges, motivation, politics, publishing, and others.

Chapter Six considers warning signs and symptoms of mental and physical distress as a reaction to stress and/or overwhelm, common experiences throughout grad school. Finding work life balance in academia as both a student or staff member can be challenging due to demands, assessments, competition, and perfectionist tendencies, for example. Scheduling breaks and relaxation, as well as self-awareness and care are essential to academic success. There is nothing like a calm and quiet space to recover from symptoms of burnout or exhaustion that can emerge from juggling too many responsibilities, especially in the case of students and staff with family and employment commitments.

As a chronic supporter of others first, I have learned that determining what is healthy and reasonable for you is your own responsibility. When fatigue and brain fog gets in the way, the best thing to do is to ask those in your close network for support and help to get through these challenging times that do come now and then for most people throughout their lives, and academia is no different in this way. In fact, academia magnifies these demands, and even though it may feel difficult to do so, one must stay aware and mindful of one's own health and wellness, including monitoring one's emotional well-being. Boynton's message throughout her book is to change what isn't working.

Of all of the Chapters, I found Chapter Seven to have the most impact on me personally. As a spouse and mother of four, looking after myself always seems to be at the bottom of my 'to do' list. Learning about what others do to offer self-care gave me new ways to nurture my own health and well-being, which I have come to understand as being the KEY to a happy and healthy life, a positive mindset in learning communities. Setting boundaries is important and changing routines does help to energize and refresh one's perspectives. I particularly liked the activities Boynton outlined: Reviewing your week and Creating a self-care menu. In this chapter, Boynton created a collection of activities that give ourselves permission to seek joy and fulfillment in our lives, including maintaining constructive and positive relationships that are reciprocal and nurture our well-being. Balance is important, and if one doesn't have balance in one's life now, surely graduate school will teach you this life lesson.

The final chapter in Boynton's book, Chapter Eight, invited readers to celebrate small accomplishments along the way and to move ahead with optimism and resilience. Transitioning from academia as a student to next steps takes planning and thoughtfulness. The author encouraged readers to find respectful, supportive, nurturing, and welcoming places to continue on our path to finding our own fulfillment and happiness, which seems to me to be an on-going life response/ability. This work is the task of building and maintaining resilience.

My experience is that lifelong learning is a career adventure towards personal growth that magnifies and invigorates one's meaning and purpose in life to enhance satisfaction and accomplishment at any age or stage. Despite being UK-centric, the advice, tips, resources, and references provided throughout Boynton's book offer sensitive and sound advice for any learner or staff member. I would consider Boynton's book to be a compass for

navigating higher education and a campus reference guide for personal well-being, which offers survival tips for students to overcome any difficulties or ruts that one may stumble over along their learning journey. An approach to planning for higher education must always be agile and flexible enough to be able navigate through rough waters. As in life, academia will not always be smooth sailing. My hope is that the pursuit of higher education and knowledge becomes part of everyone's daily life at all stages and ages. Courage and a strong focus on a goal can support one's aspirations and motivations along the way. It is also my hope that Boynton's book will be made readily accessible for all students in high schools, campus libraries, academic success and counseling centres, and on personal bookshelves making available sound mentorship and guidance for quick consultation when in distress, or when in need of reviving our routines and habits to enhance healthy practices to support academic productivity and advancement. This caring book was written for students from any background, and what I really liked about it most of all is that in her work, the author made no assumptions about the reader. The writing was accessible and well organized, and this student survival guide will continue to make an important contribution as a reference book in academia everywhere, and for generations to come. As an aside, at the time of writing this review, the read-aloud functions were not working properly, although I suspect that in the future this will be corrected by the publisher.

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