H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Peters. *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Masters or a Ph.D.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992. xii + 386 pp. $14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-374-52361-9.

Reviewed by Gretchen Reilly (George Washington University)
Published on H-Grad (August, 1997)

As a doctoral student in History, I picked up this book with a fair amount of skepticism, especially after I learned that the author had earned his Ph.D. in Biology. With all the differences between various academic fields and between institutions, how could a book meant for all graduate students give anything but vague generalizations? Yet, after studying graduate programs in the various fields and interviewing students, professors, administrators, graduates and grad-school drop-outs, Peters presents a firm course of action that could indeed be valid for all students, whether in the Humanities or Sciences.

As might be expected, there are chapters on choosing a school, the admissions process, and financial aid. Peters begins each of these topics with a general description, outlines the basic strategy for achieving success, then discusses how conditions vary from field to field. He readily acknowledges that some of his advice is less relevant to certain fields. He stresses at those points that students need to do further research, and backs that recommendation up with references to other books and organizations that can assist the student and an extensive bibliography. After noting the differences between fields, he identifies the universal truths applicable to everyone, often using quotes from both science and humanities students and professors to emphasize how his strategy could be applied in various fields.

Peters pays special attention to women, foreign students, minorities and students returning to school after years in the workforce; he identifies the special challenges that these groups face and suggests ways to deal with them. Of importance to these students, but also beneficial for mainstream students, he devotes considerable attention throughout the book to the institutional culture of American universities and to the student's position within it. He discusses bluntly what university handbooks often ignore: interpersonal relationships and politics in Academia.

Students already in graduate school might wonder what this book has to offer them. The advice this book has on how to survive the minefields of graduate school will be helpful even to experienced students. His chapters on writing a dissertation not only demystify the process, they offer excellent advice on how to prepare in advance for the work. For anyone who has felt isolated and unhappy in graduate school, the chapter on stress and depression shows not only how typical such feelings are, but also how to deal with them. If nothing else, the quotes from other graduate students provide comforting proof that we are engaged in a common struggle.

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Citation: Gretchen Reilly. Review of Peters, Robert, *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Masters or a Ph.D.*. H-Grad, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1193

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