Book Review

Getting the best out of college: A professor, a dean and a student tell you how to maximize your experience

Peter Feaver, Sue Wasiolek and Anne Crossman
Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA, 249 pp., ISBN: 1580088562

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Although several books have been written about how to get into college, very few have been published that focus on how to navigate the often murky waters of a university environment. Twenty years ago, Peter Feaver and Sue Wasiolek, two of the book's authors, envisioned a book that would fill this gap. Entering college, one must adjust to a new culture, overcome personal as well as academic hurdles and begin to face the world as a quasar adult. Throughout American history, particularly during the past half century, the biggest challenge faced by students has been getting into college – everyone knows about the intense focus on grades and ACT/SAT scores – yet, for many, today making good marks in high school and taking the entrance exam will be the easiest parts of their collegiate experience. The book, *Getting the Best Out of College*, provides a roadmap with

guideposts for students who are about to enter or who are already in college. Students are not the only ones who may be interested in what Feaver *et al* present; parents and family members, too, will find the book helpful as it simply describes the student experience on a modern campus, one that may be unfamiliar even to those who themselves attended college in the not too distant past.

The book reads quickly and flows easily throughout its 10 chapters. Their titles are simple yet catchy, such as Chapter 1, 'You Expect Me to Live with a Stranger?', and Chapter 3, 'I Have the Perfect Schedule – All My Classes are on Wednesday!'. The chapters flow in logical, nearly chronological fashion and include subjects such as moving to an unfamiliar environment, making decisions about a major and participating in clubs and

organizations. The authors conclude with some advice on the post-college experience, reminding students to give heed to why they are seeking a degree in the first place. Clearly the authors' objective is to provide counsel and guidance to students and their parents through the 4 (or 5 or 6) years that will likely consume their lives.

In this era of cheating and plagiarism, the authors rightly devote several pages to the subject of accountability. Students today freely admit to cheating with regularity – something plaguing schools at even the elementary level – and the book goes to considerable lengths explaining just how this problem affects students as the personal stakes and pressure rise at the college level. Creative tips to avoid cheating are revealed throughout this section. The book also provides suggestions for getting involved, whether it is academically, socially or extra-curricularly. The book offers valuable guidance in reminding students and parents that college is as much about opportunity costs as anything else. When a choice is made, particularly in situations where one's time is involved, other options may no longer be available for consideration.

A few flaws emerge in this otherwise solid effort. The book relies exclusively on the knowledge of the three authors. Although their knowledge base on the subject is undeniable and their experience is significant in terms of its variety and number of years, the authors all share a common background – Duke University – and their perspectives are certainly enhanced and clouded by that lens. This raises some questions: will the book's message translate to college experiences that are unlike Duke? Is

the information as relevant if the reader is a non-traditional student and/or commutes? Can a community college student garner the same benefits from the authors' advice as someone who is headed to the Ivy League? The book provides a good background for traditional students who plan to reside in campus for part or all of their undergraduate years, but it falls short by not specifying examples that will resonate with students who attend other types of institutions. In addition, the authors illuminate many of the so-called pitfalls of college life, but they do so without conducting any formal research or underpinning their findings with data. Their descriptions are anecdotal, at once easy to understand, but they lack the sophistication of a study where results from qualitative and quantitative data assist in delivering the message.

Getting the Best Out of College is an easy read with a soft approach to the subject matter. The book is aptly titled; much of what one needs to know about maximizing the collegiate experience is found within its pages. In writing the book, the authors combine their unique backgrounds in relative seamlessness and, for the most part, avoid obvious references and clichés. With no data to underpin the anecdotes and advice they provide, the book falls short of providing a complete package. Instead it relies on the wisdom from expert authors – a professor, dean and young alumna – to counsel students and their parents. Some questions arise, but the authors do not attempt to answer them by citing research or providing their own data. Whether or not the book is applicable to different types of students

and institutions will ultimately be determined by those who choose to buy it.

The book is an eight-tenths version of what it could have been – think Toyota instead of Lexus – perfectly fine but lacking some desirable accoutrements. It misses the opportunity to present a sophisticated, intricate account of college life by marrying the practical to the research. Clearly the authors were not attempting to do this, and understanding that is to understand *Getting the Best Out of College*. For

what it is and for what it is meant to be, the book succeeds. Although it breaks no new ground, the book should sell well because students and parents alike will enjoy the humorous stories and appreciate the non-preachy delivery. With the ever-changing landscape of higher education, the concept dreamed up by two of the authors nearly two decades ago is even more salient today than it was then.

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