PARTNERSHIP

The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

vol. 14, no. 1 (2019)

Book Reviews (editorially-reviewed)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v14.i1.5101>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Clark, A., & Sousa, B. (2018). *How to be a happy academic*. Los Angeles: Sage.
ISBN: 978-1-4739-7879-9 978-1-4739-7880-5.

Let me be upfront: I am a happy academic, and have been a happy academic for years, without this book. I am passionate about my teaching and I love helping students and faculty. I love research and publication, including writing book reviews; I like and respect my colleagues and am engaged in my university and community; I have been promoted as far as I can go; I have a wonderful home life and a good groups of friends; and, yes, I am also very well paid.

However, if that's not you, there is now a book that may help you.

The authors have structured this book into two clear parts. After addressing the nature of academic work as "extreme knowledge work" (Chapter 1), the first section outlines "The Success Pyramid" (Chapter 2), a systematic, values-based way to inform our conceptions of success (further described in Chapter 3), which can then be used to formulate priorities and strategies (Chapter 4), set goals, and do the right task(s) (Chapter 5). In the next section, the authors describe the range of underlying deeper skills, referred to as "The Core," that can help us do these *right* things *right*. This approach of deliberately developing practices and aptitudes that transcend discrete tasks is efficient. As these differ so much by context, country, and discipline, "The Core" focuses on deep elements that underpin academic work such as creativity (Chapter 6), human work and self-work (Chapter 7), learning (Chapter 8), influence (Chapter 9), writing (Chapter 10), and habits (Chapter 11). Finally, the authors bring "The Core" and "The Success Pyramid" together by providing some examples of real academic workers' experiences before reflecting on the future of academic work and their experience of writing the book (Chapter 12).

All chapters contain an "Over to You" section that allows readers to apply the discussion to their own lives and a list of "Remarkable Resources" containing brief tips on the topic. The book ends with an extensive bibliography (pp. 204-215).

The book draws on many sources both inside and outside of academia, including [workshops](#) given by the authors around the world. Both are well qualified to address the topic. [Clark](#) is currently Associate Vice-President Research at the University Alberta, where he is also a full professor of Nursing. [Sousa](#) has a BA in Political Science from Acadia University and a Project Management Certificate from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. She has leveraged these qualifications to become the Director of the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology at the University of Alberta, a position she has held since 2014.

In principle, the ideas in this book should help PhD students to mid career academics to established scholars. Since librarians, like professors (referred to here as “extreme knowledge workers,” (p. 11)—an idea borrowed from Peter Drucker), work with our heads rather than our hands, the book should also help those in our profession.

Here is an example of how this book might assist a newly hired librarian who seeks first to acquire tenure (or permanency) by excelling in their professional work, scholarly activity, and engagement. As a start, this librarian must figure out their core values. For anyone wondering what this means, the authors provide a handy list of possible values in Appendix 1 (pp. 216-218). The authors recognize that one’s personal values may conflict in some instances with those of the workplace, but as they wisely point out,

By being more aware of what our own values are and how these link to our scholarly identities, and being more open to the discomfort caused by value tension, we can be in a better place to handle our values and avoid these being eclipsed, suppressed or absent (p. 43).

After reflecting on values, the next step is to identify what success means in their environment and whether these indicators are consistent with their values. For a new librarian, one success indicator might be publishing three articles in peer-reviewed journals during their probationary period. While the authors concede that such indicators will vary widely from person to person and from institution to institution, they argue—correctly, I think—that success indicators should not be confused with short-term goals, that they should be challenging, and that they should make the individual excited to achieve them.

Once our librarian has reflected on the success indicators appropriate to their circumstances, the next step is to set priorities. We each have a limited amount of time available (1,440 minutes in a day) and doing the important before the urgent is often the challenge. This might mean saying no to anything that is not essential; for the new librarian, this might mean turning down a chance to serve on a Senate committee in favour of spending extra time on research.

The next step is to set goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) (p. 86). For the new librarian that might mean devoting three hours on a Friday afternoon to reading and reflecting on a journal article as part of the research process of preparing a peer-reviewed publication.

The second part of the book addresses other conditions for successful academic work, including creativity and working well with others. The second factor may be particularly relevant for librarians, most of whom do not have PhDs. A good strategy might be to secure co-authors with PhDs who will give any academic project instant credibility when applying for grants or publishing the results. A third condition for success is continuous learning, which often means figuring out what went wrong. As the authors note, “Failure is inevitable in academic life, but wasting it is not” (p. 139). A fourth factor is influence: being able to ensure that “your ideas or perspectives are set up to be well received and connecting with others” (p. 146). The focus in this book seems to be on presentations that professors are required to make, but for librarians influence can also be seen in relationships with coworkers, staff, administrators, and other faculty members. The fifth factor is the ability to write, which almost goes without saying, and the sixth and last factor is developing better systems for everyday tasks. In this section, the authors push the importance of scheduling: “If you don’t have control of your time, someone else will” (p. 174). They also offer advice on attending meetings, managing email, creating to do lists, and so on.

All good. My concerns are twofold. The first is that the book does not really acknowledge the impact of collective agreements on the model. A librarian might be excited about doing a scholarly bibliography, but if that kind of work is not allowed, they are stuck until they find something else that is both exciting and allowed. Further, if the librarian is not successful in achieving tenure and promotion, the union, rather than their own efforts, may get them across the finish line.

My second concern is that the book’s title is misleading: it should really be called *How to Be a Successful Academic*. Happiness may come from being a success at work, but a successful academic could still be unhappy for personal, psychological, or even spiritual reasons. Conversely, one could be an unsuccessful academic but still be happy for those same personal, psychological, or spiritual reasons. I have seen both types.

These caveats aside, the book sets out a process that makes intuitive sense to me as it reflects, more or less, the process I followed in my own career. To give the authors credit, they are cognizant of the many variables that affect the process. My overall takeaway is that a new academic librarian or a sad, more experienced librarian could benefit from reflecting on the process set out in this book and adapting it to their personal situations. They will likely become happier—or, more accurately—more successful at work.

Ashley Thomson, BEd, MA, MLS
Laurentian University
athomson@laurentian.ca