

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Roberts, A. (2010). *The thinking student's guide to college: 75 tips for getting a better education*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago. 174 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0-226-72115-6; ISBN-10: 0-226-72115-9

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The Thinking Student's Guide to College: 75 Tips for Getting a Better Education is a fun and candid guidebook from someone who has been there, and is writing to those who are yet to make the journey. In some ways it is portrayed as an academic work, with footnoted references, a lengthy index, and a lot of text, while in other ways seems to be in the style of Lonely Planet meets *This is Your Life* (...so do something important with it). Andrew Roberts is a recent and successful product of the post-secondary education system in the United States, having two degrees from the Ivy League and a research and teaching position at Northwestern University. He uses the tone of a kindly mentor, or even a big brother, in sharing his acquired wisdoms with the reader while maintaining an in-crowd mystique—he is letting us in on a lot of secrets, he seems to be saying. He writes in first person to an imagined “you”—but it is clear that his intended audience is a keen, bright, and likely well-appointed high-school student and, likely, these students' parents. And how does Roberts define the “thinking student”? Someone who thinks that “college should be a place where professors challenge you to do the best you are capable of, provide you with personalized feedback on your work, and show you new ways of understanding the world” (Roberts, 2010, p.1).

This book is divided into nine chapters, most of which contain between 10 to 20 tips to help the “thinking student” survive in college or university. Being an American publication, it uses the term “college” but the focus is clearly on what Canadians would consider the university setting. The book is set up in a very systematic and linear way, starting from choosing a college through to going to grad school, with chapters along the way on such important topics as choosing courses, a major, and learning outside the classroom. The tips vary within each chapter for a total of 75, as the title states, as well as five rules that professors live by. The tips range from the self-explanatory (Choose a Major that you Love) to the more complicated and mildly political (Don't Succumb to the “Two Cultures”). Within several of the tip sections, of which there are about three per chapter, there is a textbox with information and reflections from the author and other selected scholars on such topics as ‘Interacting with Female Professors’ and ‘Writing an Effective E-mail.’

Roberts touches on some important issues in this book. He raises some questions that students should begin to think about as they approach and enter their post-secondary career. But who, exactly, is the “thinking student”? Roberts appears to make a lot of assumptions about his audience. If this student is in fact so ready and well-equipped for the journey ahead, is he or she not likely to have a sense of the tips in this book, or at least be on the road to getting oriented once post-secondary education begins? Additionally, this book seems to follow the timeline from pre-undergraduate days to Ph.D. programs, yet most of the information is not relevant to a high school student. Presumably, Roberts imagines that the keen student will carry this book with him or her through the student's college days, making fastidious notes in the margins and perhaps handing it over to a younger sibling when the time comes. A book such as this is useful to a small group of individuals but is in large part

too specific to apply to many students at any time. Moreover, the functionalist approach of this tip book diminishes the entirely individualized experience that each student will encounter; it is not as simple as the Joe Ordinary/Jane Extraordinary dichotomy that he outlines (p.3). As someone who worked for many years in university recruitment and now is pursuing a career in academia, I would say that this book will seem dated and derogatory very quickly. The students at whom this book is aimed, according to Roberts, will figure out most of this information on their own. The most important thing about education is the experience of doing it—not reading about it.

Finally, *The Thinking Student's Guide to College* is overwhelmingly American in context, which is clear from the title. Perhaps for the niche of Canadian high school students who wish to venture beyond our borders, this book could provide some insight to the social contexts of American post-secondary that are distinct from our own. For example, it explains that some undergrad programs in the US offer access to Ph.D. programs, which is rather different from the Canadian system, and Roberts' book fleshes it out. I feel that Roberts has done well to reflect on his own post-secondary experiences in brief, and will likely enjoy sharing his reflections with his colleagues, students, and family. It could even be a useful book to already-successful high school students in middle-to-upper class American families. There are two references to George W. Bush in the index (albeit non-partisan) and no references regarding scholarships, awards, or bursaries, and, I think, that sums the book up rather well.