

KICKSTARTING  
*your*  
ACADEMIC CAREER

*Skills to Succeed  
in the Social Sciences*

ROBERT L. OSTERGARD, JR.  
AND STACY B. FISHER

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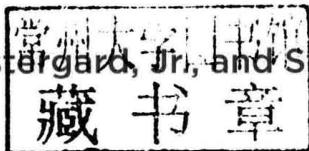
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# KICKSTARTING YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER

*Skills to Succeed in  
the Social Sciences*

Robert L. Ostergard, Jr., and Stacy B. Fisher



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## KICKSTARTING YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER



*For both of us, this book is dedicated to the thousands of students who have had to endure our constant nagging about the ideas and concepts we have put into this book.*

*From Robert: This book is specifically dedicated to my Dad, one of the funniest guys I have ever known, and the Pastafarian God, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, without whose divine wisdom this book would not have been possible. Oh, and my two cats Eubank-Kitty Meow-Meow and Hobbes-Kitty Meow-Meow (of the socialite and royal Meow-Meow Clan dating back to ancient Egypt), both of whom erased substantial portions of this manuscript while I was writing.*

*From Stacy: This book is dedicated to my wonderful husband, Todd, without whose divine wisdom this book would have been possible, but it was much more fun to write with him by my side. Love you, honey!*





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Of course, all errors are ours alone. Yeah, right ... we're already searching for someone to blame for the errors in the book. We've narrowed it down to an as-yet unnamed graduate student and the two cats mentioned in the dedication.



## INTRODUCTION

For more than 25 years now, dramatic changes have come to education in both Canada and the United States. On the positive and interesting side, the introduction of new technology, social media, the Internet, electronic information, and data have added new tools for inquiry and insight that many of us could not have imagined while we were in school. On the negative side, education has become a hot-button political topic with students and teachers at the center of public policy debates about course content, assessment and accountability, performance indicators, and budget cuts that can push the finer details of educating students to the background.

The end result is that students often enter colleges or universities without some of the basic skills that they need (and that professors often assume they have) to be successful in class. At the same time, students do not want to ask questions because they fear “looking stupid” and “being wrong.” Professors then find that they have a choice: help students acquire those basic skills or let students try to figure it out on their own. Add these problems to the fact that professors have large amounts of substantive material to cover, and these skills end up not getting the attention they deserve. Our goal in this book is to help both students and professors. We want to provide students with an easy-to-read, accessible reference book that they can use for their entire time at their college or university, while also helping professors who increasingly need to find time to help students with basic skills.

As such, this book focuses on basic skills that we, as educators, find students often need some assistance to acquire or to master. From transitioning to colleges and universities to basic research skills on the Internet and within databases, we seek to provide students a starting point upon which they can build. At the same time, we have narrowed the scope of this book to the most fundamental skills. Thus, this book is not a research methodology textbook, nor is it a social science writing textbook. These important areas have already been covered in

numerous textbooks on the market. Instead, our audience here is predominantly first- and second-year students who are making the transition from high school to colleges or universities and may need a resource to help them with work and with an environment that they may not have encountered previously.

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## **Why Am I Here? From High School to College or University**

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Transitioning from high school to college or university is an especially stressful period. New friends, a new city, stacks of books, large lecture halls, and maybe even a part-time job mean that you are going through a large period of adjustment. All of this is occurring without the structure of high school—no teacher to tell you they did not get your paper, no old friends that you can work with easily—and you might even be learning to cook for yourself for the first time. It is a time to have fun and to explore and to develop your interests. In other words, you are balancing many new things, but you are not alone! There are literally thousands (maybe millions) of students out there who are going through the same thing.

The problem with this balancing act is that it becomes tempting to ignore things that appear difficult. When classwork becomes daunting, it can be easy to let it go or to ignore it, hoping it will go away. The end result is that work may pile up and your first term can be a nightmare. In discussions with many of our students, we learned that students sometimes ignore assignments because they either do not know how to approach them or they underestimate the amount of time and the skill level required to complete them. Our goal here is to help students acquire skills that can speed along the process of getting work done and construct the basis for building those skills moving forward. But part of developing those skills is also taking on the responsibility for acquiring them and practicing them.

In making the transition from high school to a college or university setting, you are entering an environment where you are in charge of your education. While the tools and resources for you to be successful may be on campus, you must engage those tools and resources in order to make them work for you. Every professor will expose you to the pure educational experience—talking about big ideas, helping you learn about new ways to make the world better, opening doors into ways of thinking about problems and then solving them. In a practical sense, every professor is also providing you with the skills necessary to get you started in life after college or university. They can do all of these things for you, but only if you are prepared for it, and preparing for it means having an honest discussion with yourself about why you are at a university or college.

Everybody ultimately finds her or his answers to this question but, at the beginning, you may not know why you are here. Teachers and parents have told

you that you need to continue your education, but why? Some students are here to build specific skills needed for life after college or university; for others, the pure educational experience provides a basis for figuring out what they want to do with their life. In either case, you may not know what your major is going to be, or you do but you change your mind when exposed to whole new fields of study you never heard about in high school. And, for many people, education is not just a classroom experience. Getting involved outside the classroom can be just as important as what you learn from professors and teaching assistants.

While the reasons for being here vary, you still want to get the most out of the time you are at college or university. You have worked hard to get here and may be paying a large sum of money to be sitting in the classroom. Ultimately, this experience is about you and what you hope to achieve, and being active and engaged during your time here is an important part of achieving your educational goals.

Being an active and engaged student means many things. Primary amongst these things is moving beyond providing minimum effort and toward getting the most out of every college or university experience. That means figuring out how you can improve yourself by making your work, thoughts, and ideas better in terms of their depth or their expression. Learning and building skills is a multilayered process that requires digging a bit deeper every time you engage an idea or subject. Here's an example. In your introductory classes in linguistics or anthropology, you might find that languages are disappearing, that languages go "extinct." Your professor can assert that and move along in the class. But when you actively engage that proposition, your first reaction should be to ask "Why?" Every answer to the question "Why?" begins a new layer of a complex story that eventually develops a complete picture. So, the real and interesting story begins when someone asks this important question.

Professor: "Languages are disappearing around the globe. We will now move onto the next section of the syllabus ..."

Student: "Wait, why are languages disappearing?"

Professor: "There is not one particular reason, but we know that there are a few factors. Conflict can cause the disappearance of languages when populations are subjugated by invading forces. We also know that repressive governments that want to 'unify' populations will mandate that only specific languages be taught. Globalization and the spread of industrialization have also led to the extinction of languages."

At this point, the professor established some broad propositions to answer the question, but the details are still not clear.

Student: “But why would repressive governments want a single language enforced?”

Professor: “Languages can be a way for people to identify with each other. If you eliminate competing languages, people have a common means to communicate and may feel the differences between groups of people disintegrate. Repressing languages also becomes one of the first steps governments use in repressing entire groups. Thus, people have a real political and economic reason for wanting to eliminate language differences. The government of the former Soviet Union engaged in this type of policy by enforcing Russian as the common language of all the Soviet people. Many people lost the ability to communicate fluently in their native languages.”<sup>1</sup>

This short engagement has elicited a layered complexity that provides not just information about language extinction, but also gives you a line of logic and analysis about why it happens. The fact that languages disappear is not that interesting by itself. *Why* it happens provides you with incredible new insights into something that, as it turns out, is a pretty complex phenomenon. The basic skills we advocate in this book are meant to build your confidence and ability to engage this level of complexity through being active in your own education. Being active and injecting yourself into your own education can open new doors for you, your colleagues, and even your professor. But being active in a scenario like this may raise one of the greatest fears of first- and second-year students: hearing the words “you are wrong.”

During your time at your college and university, there are times you are going to be wrong. You are going to get things wrong in class, you are going to get things wrong on exams, you are going to get things wrong in research, and you are going to get things wrong in building your personal life. Some professors (and significant others in your personal life) will be gentler about telling you this than others. Just accept this basic fact: being wrong is a part of learning, and every person standing in front of you (i.e., your professor) has been wrong in his or her journey to the front of that classroom. The most important part of being wrong is not that you *are* wrong, but *what you do* with the information that you are wrong. Again, you need to be active and engaged with this as a part of learning. When you are wrong, you need to make sure you understand, again, *why*. Engage your professor, your colleagues, and even outside resources to find out. If your process of learning simply stops at “I’m

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Mt. Holyoke College, “Why Do Languages Die?”, [http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~alvar22n/Disappearing\\_Languages/Cause\\_of\\_Death.html](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~alvar22n/Disappearing_Languages/Cause_of_Death.html).

wrong,” you have stopped building the skills needed to get the best experience from your college or university. Don’t be afraid of being wrong—embrace it! Albert Einstein got things wrong on his journey to being one of the most famous scientists in history. It still seemed to work out okay for him.

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## How to Use This Book for Students

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This book is meant to help you engage a set of skills that you will need throughout your entire college or university career. You may be a first- or second-year student receiving this book in a class. It may be the case that you use only a few pages of it for *this* particular class. But, if you use it wisely, this book will be helpful in just about every class, regardless of level or year in college or university. From walking into your first big lecture hall, to taking notes, to doing research, and even to the dreaded group project, this book is meant to provide you with a quick reference on how to get started with all of the basic skills you need as a social science student. You may be tempted to set this book aside, to consider it “optional” or to even ignore it because it is not directly related to the substantive course material. But, in doing so, you may be ignoring some great suggestions for dealing with this semester. So, how do you want to use this book?

When you attend your first day of classes, grab a cup of your favorite drink and read the syllabi to identify the required assignments for each course. In doing so, you may find that you have two group projects, a number of multiple-choice exams, and a research paper due this semester. Your first action should be to open the table of contents for this book and read the relevant sections for each type of assignment. Doing this at the beginning of the semester will serve two purposes. It will give you a quick idea about how to adapt the strategies for what you have to do during the semester. And it will serve as a reminder for you to look at these again as you engage the assignments later. Not every suggestion or idea here may work for you (we hope they do!), but you will find that they help to spur even more ideas on how you can efficiently get through your already tough semester. For third- and fourth-year students who think they have all this down—take a look at the suggestions. You may find that an old dog can be taught a few new tricks!

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## How to Use This Book for Professors

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We know that everything we have put into this book is not how *you* might do it. Our approach is direct and, at times, stark. But our approach comes from a large number of sources and experiences, many of which we share with you.



We have drawn upon almost 40 years of experience (cumulative; we're not that old) in forming our approach to these ideas and topics. We have participated in extensive discussions with others and talked with social science professors to get their input and advice on specific topics. We surveyed and talked to first- and second-year students to see what kinds of problems and concerns they had in those first few semesters. We also talked to and surveyed third- and fourth-year students to discover what they wish they had known as first- and second-year students. Even with all of this, we are still open to adjusting and adding material in later editions (if it ever comes to that!). Contact us if you find topics your students could benefit from having in the book or to see what we are tweeting and posting to help you and your students. We can be reached on Twitter: @KickstartProf; and on Facebook: @kickstartingyouracademiccareer.

We know that not all colleges and universities are created equal. On the one hand, colleges and universities with adequate resources may already have other avenues to convey this type of information to students; it may even be the case that highly selective schools do not find many of their students needing assistance with these basic skills. On the other hand, our experience has shown us that many students have never been exposed to these skills, and more and more students can use a refresher even if they learned them previously. For instance, we have talked with students who never had a librarian in their high school. How is a student supposed to learn research skills without access to a librarian? These deficits do not mean you need to dedicate all your class time to these skills. As a quick reference, this book can be assigned in the context of your class as it is already structured. Mentioning and talking about the benefits of the book on your first day and referencing it in your syllabus next to appropriate assignments will provide students with an easy reminder for them to look here for ideas that can help them succeed. No reference will be perfect, but we do hope that this book helps you to help your students succeed in your class. So, let's get started!