

NAVIGATING ACADEMIC LIFE

How the System Works



STEVEN M. CAHN

Navigating Academic Life

This engaging collection of recent essays reveals how a professorial career involves not only pursuit of a scholarly discipline but also such unwelcome features as the tribulations of graduate school, the trials of teaching, and the tensions that develop from membership in a department. The author, who enjoyed a distinguished career as a professor of philosophy and senior university administrator, draws on his extensive experience to offer candid advice about handling the frustrations of academic life. Combining philosophical principles, practical concerns, and personal observations, this book serves as a reliable guide for both new and veteran academics as well as for anyone seeking to understand the inner workings of colleges and universities.

Steven M. Cahn is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the City University of New York Graduate Center, where he served for nearly a decade as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, then as Acting President.



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*To my wife,
Marilyn Ross, M.D.*



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Preface

Those attracted to a professorial career are typically motivated by enthusiasm for a scholarly discipline. They seek to study a subject in depth, then share their thoughts with those equally devoted to such exploration.

Certain unavoidable aspects of academia, however, may be an unwelcome surprise. First come the tribulations of graduate school, second the trials of teaching, and third the tensions that develop from membership in a department. These facets of academic life are rarely given extended treatment, but here they are my focus.

Several years ago, I was encouraged to submit materials to the blog of the APA (American Philosophical Association) and, finding the format to my liking, sent in numerous posts that, judging by the number of positive responses, were well received. In this book I have reworked these materials into a unified presentation that also draws on the following prior works:

Cahn, Steven M., *The Eclipse of Excellence: A Critique of American Higher Education*, Public Affairs Press, 1973. Reprinted by Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.

- _____, *Education and the Democratic Ideal*. Nelson-Hall Company, 1979. Reprinted by Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004.
- _____, *Saints and Scamps: Ethics in Academia*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1986. Revised Edition, 1994. 25th Anniversary Edition, 2011.
- _____, *Puzzles & Perplexities: Collected Essays*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. Second Edition, 2007.
- _____, *From Student to Scholar: A Candid Guide to Becoming a Professor*. Columbia University Press, 2008.
- _____, *Teaching Philosophy: A Guide*. Routledge, 2018.
- _____, *Inside Academia: Professors, Politics, and Policies*. Rutgers University Press, 2019.
- _____, *The Road Traveled and Other Essays*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019.

Part I

Graduate School



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