

Online Ph.D. Studies Nurture Authorship of a Prize-Winning College Text

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While reading about prize-winning performances, it's easy to make incorrect assumptions about how easily the winner achieved those results. In reacting to recognized brilliance, too many assume that the pathway to great success is closed to them . . . even when it isn't. In fact, many people are very close to greatness . . . and don't realize it.

I recently ran across an example of that kind of potential misunderstanding when a student of mine gained wonderful recognition that greatly surprised him. Let's take a look at his perceptions and experiences as a way to help you understand how you too can gain and be recognized for excellence beyond your expectations.

Here's the background: *Seismic Methods and Applications: A Guide for the Detection of Geologic Structures, Earthquake Zones and Hazards, Resource Exploration, and Geotechnical Engineering* (BrownWalker Press, 2008) by Andreas Stark, Ph.D. was honored in March 2009 by the Text and Academic Authors Association with its 2009 Textbook Excellence ("Texty") Award for college-level physical-science books. The Texty is the top award for a college textbook published in the United States. Earning the award means that a college text has impressed the very best people in that academic field.

If readers of the award announcement didn't already know Dr. Stark, they might begin searching for his name on lists of the faculties at universities with top geology departments such as MIT, Cal Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin. If that search didn't turn up Dr. Stark's name, the search might then be directed to the faculties of universities with great geophysics departments such as Cal Tech and Stanford University.

Those searches wouldn't locate Dr. Stark. Why? Because Dr. Stark isn't on any university's faculty. Instead, he leads a geophysics consulting and training firm, Clasina TerraScience Consultants International Ltd., based in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

In his leadership role at Clasina TerraScience Consultants, Dr. Stark gained 16 years of valuable experience in helping those involved in oil-and-gas exploration and development to understand the most useful ways to apply seismic methods. He had long dreamed of turning his training course notes and handouts into a text and earning a doctorate. Being curious about ways for students to be more successful, Dr. Stark also wanted to perform applied research to describe how risk-management decisions could be improved by petroleum exploration-and-production companies as well as businesses in other industries.

Occupied by a busy career going in his late fifties, Dr. Stark needed to shoehorn those dreams into very little spare time. For Dr. Stark, it seemed like a natural choice to select a university for his studies that would encourage and direct him to stretch his talents to the utmost while granting him considerable leeway in how he accomplished his difficult academic tasks. His investigations convinced Dr. Stark that Rushmore University was the right choice for him.

During his very first Ph.D. course, Dr. Stark discovered a whole new world of opportunity -- creating training and text materials aimed at being useful for millions of people around the world. In light of this newly perceived opportunity, Dr. Stark decided to turn his original dissertation concept into two planned dissertations: one for each of the two doctorates that he has studied for.

The first doctorate led to a dissertation that provided the most comprehensive college text and professional reference concerning seismic methods and their applications in the petroleum industry. With relatively few changes, that dissertation was soon published as the award-winning text book mentioned earlier.

Dr. Stark continues to work very hard on preparing his second dissertation, one that is built on deeper, more mathematical, research to earn another Ph.D. for applying stochastic processes, risk analysis, and neural networks in business decision making. Naturally, the Texty makes it likely that the second dissertation will also find a publisher and gain interest from the academic community. This second book will be aimed at a broader audience than the recent award winner.

Looking back at how he reached this success, Dr. Stark shared with me the large role that apparent chance played in turning what seemed to be setbacks into major advantages. Here are two examples:

After finishing studies at the Lyceum (somewhat equivalent to North American high schools) in his native Amsterdam, Dr. Stark's family emigrated to Canada in search of better opportunities. Due to Canadian immigration policies then, Dr. Stark wasn't permitted to begin college right away. Instead, he took a job as a manual laborer for two years on a seismic crew. Little did he know that was the beginning of a career in geophysics, beginning from the ground up (and down).

His career initially advanced upward like an uncapped oil well gusher. By 1992, he was the Director of Geophysics and General Manager of an international geo-science software company. In the industry downturn then, however, he soon found himself once again working as a geophysicist. Rather than being a setback, this was a blessing in disguise as Dr. Stark gained tremendous experience in training and technology transfer, skills that helped him launch his consulting firm a little later and that also contributed to his superb text-book writing.

Many people lack just a few morsels of knowledge to become much more successful. Because others can usually see our circumstances more clearly than we do, it's helpful to have an advisor. One great thing about Ph.D. programs is that candidates work closely with one or more advisors who help them shape their research and writing in ways that will make the work more valuable to them and to others.

During his doctoral studies, it has always been clear to me that Dr. Stark is rich in knowledge of his subject and how to share his knowledge. However, he initially lacked a sense of what the market might be for that knowledge. By carefully studying the potential uses of his work, Dr. Stark was able to appreciate for the first time that he could create an educational and industry standard resource that would put him in the forefront of trainers around the world. To do so required shifting his examples a bit and adding perspectives that would help those who aren't geologists and geophysicists to understand the lessons. These add-ons were modest tasks compared to helping geophysicists (and those in training to do that work).

I asked Dr. Stark to tell me about his reactions to the success his first book has enjoyed. Here is what he had to say:

I was rather happily surprised that the work received this award. I knew I had written a good book, but never in my wildest dreams imagined that it would win this award. Needless to say I am quite thrilled.

I then asked Dr. Stark to share his perspectives on what he has accomplished, why he was successful, and what may come next:

It should be pointed out that this book took only one year to write, but that the make-up of this text was an accumulation of at least sixteen years of refining and testing course materials. It is hoped that this text will benefit many young people who have an interest in the physical sciences and who would like to get a basic understanding of the subject before embarking on a course of study in the field of geophysics. My students have given me very good feedback so far. The book is also intended to serve the business community as it will give a good basic introduction into the procedures being used in trying to find oil and gas and therefore helps the investor better understand the risks he is entering into.

I also asked Dr. Stark to talk about the lessons for others who might seek to duplicate his experiences:

If there is any lesson that budding authors can learn from my experience in writing this book, it is that one has to be dedicated, has to be focused and has to have faith and the intent to provide help for others in the form of written communication that is of higher importance than the monetary payoff itself. Also it takes lots of hours of hard work to develop and complete.

Never lose sight of the fact that we are all here to serve and help each other and that rewards will come in many forms. As the current economic crisis clearly shows, when the focus is on greed it will only lead to disaster.

Although Dr. Stark doesn't say it, a humble heart and mind seem to help.

What do you already know how to do well that can be turned into great advantages for you and for those who benefit from your knowledge and hard work?

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