MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

RICHARD J. LIGHT

STUDENTS
SPEAK
THEIR
MINDS

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## MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

This book has been awarded Harvard University Press's annual prize for an outstanding publication about education and society, established in 1995 by the Virginia and Warren Stone Fund. I dedicate this book to my family. To Pat, who shares my life. To Jen and Sarah, who know they are the whole point of the enterprise. To my mother, Mura Light Stifel, who has given me a lifetime of love, and even suggested a title for this book. To Max, a kind, fun-loving stepfather. And most of all, to the memory of my father.

# MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

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# INTRODUCTION

Why do some undergraduates feel they are making the most of their years at college, while others are far less positive? What choices and attitudes distinguish between these two groups? What can an individual student do, and what can any college do, to improve the chances that on graduation day that student will say, "I really got what I came here for"?

I have been a professor for thirty years. Each year I meet with a new group of young advisees. And each year I think about these questions anew. What can I tell these young people at the outset that will help them make the most of their time in college?

Simultaneously, I wonder what thoughts I can share with my faculty colleagues. Anyone who teaches for any length of time gets caught up in a debate about how to help students learn as effectively as possible. My colleagues and I think long and hard about the best ways to advise students, to teach classes, and even to teach outside the classroom. Many think about how to enhance the quality of student life, especially on a modern campus that is increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Doing these many aspects of our job well is not easy. Translating good intentions into practice poses a continuing challenge.

Some years ago I attended a gathering of faculty and senior administrators from more than fifty colleges and universities. Each was invited to present a view from his or her

campus. What were the responsibilities of faculty, deans, and advisors for shaping students' overall experience at college? Not just in-class teaching, but the entire experience.

The first person to speak was a senior dean from a distinguished university. He announced proudly that he and his colleagues admit good students and then make a special effort to "get out of their way." "Students learn mostly from one another," he argued. "We shouldn't muck up that process."

I was dismayed. Soon my own daughters would begin thinking about where to go to college. What I had just heard was the exact opposite of what I hoped would await them. I had come to the meeting hoping to learn how other colleges and universities were working to help their undergraduates succeed. I expected to hear how campus leaders were trying to improve teaching and advising and the overall quality of student life. I wanted to know how each institution was helping students to do their jobs better. Instead, I was hearing a senior official from a major university describe an astonishing strategy: find good students and then neglect them.

I have never forgotten that remark. It got me to think hard about what decisions new students, as well as administrators and faculty members, can make to facilitate the best possible undergraduate experience. Since that meeting I have participated in ten years of systematic research to explore that question. I believe we have some promising answers. And after visiting more than ninety other colleges and universities, sharing key ideas, I am convinced that these answers apply to most campuses across America, including many that are very different from my own.

In this book I offer a synthesis of findings from years of research on two broad questions. First, what choices can

students themselves make to get the most out of college? Second, what are effective ways for faculty members and campus leaders to translate good intentions into practice?

For several years, more than sixty faculty members from more than twenty colleges and universities met regularly to design ways to answer such questions. Both faculty and students have been pursuing these inquiries. Many of the projects are now complete. Strong findings are emerging and are beginning to influence teaching, learning, advising, and residential life at Harvard and at some other colleges. In this book I want to tell you what we've found out.

#### Plan of the Book

Each chapter that follows focuses on certain choices a student must make at college. I have learned from interviewing students that some make these choices carefully and purposefully, while others make them haphazardly, with little thought and planning. The consequences often are profound. Many students say, on graduation day, "I wouldn't have done it any other way. It was a great experience." Yet a significant minority lament, "If only I had known."

A key theme in students' interviews is the strong interplay of different features of campus life. Course choices, advising, and decisions about residential life do not stand in isolation. They are part of a connected system. For example, the educational impact of racial and ethnic diversity on today's campuses is closely tied to choices students make about whom to live with and spend time with. In Chapter 2 I make the case for integrating these different parts of campus life. The chapter offers an organizing principle for thinking about one's college years in ways that can increase their meaning.

In Chapter 3 I present a series of specific suggestions

from students to their fellow students about how to deal with predictable questions. How can I get off to a good start? Will part-time work to earn money affect my schoolwork? What is a good way to find help if I need it? How should I think about choosing a place to live?

Chapter 4 focuses on what makes certain classes especially memorable for students. Hint: it is not primarily how much the professor knows—or how big or small the class is—or even whether it meets after 10 o'clock in the morning.

Chapter 5 describes especially helpful advising. Students point out repeatedly that getting constructive, somewhat personalized advice may be the single most underestimated feature of a great college experience.

Chapter 6 summarizes students' descriptions of how certain faculty members make a special difference in their lives. The punch line is that faculty members count more than they often realize. I hope students at all colleges will consider how they might find professors who will have a positive and powerful impact on them.

Chapters 7 and 8 explore the impact of dramatic demographic changes on campus. This new diversity has inspired delight, fear, conflict, new opportunities, and endless conferences. These chapters present students' perspectives on how the new racial and ethnic diversity affects learning, both inside and outside of classrooms.

One point that emerges from these two chapters is that broad generalizations about the educational effects of students from different backgrounds studying, working, and playing together are often wrong and rarely helpful. Racial and ethnic diversity can, and often does, enhance learning in the classroom and beyond. The examples students give tend to be far more positive than negative. Yet few students

from any background have the slightest trouble illustrating how, for them personally, this same diversity has at specific times had negative effects.

This mix of stories carries policy suggestions for students as individuals, and especially for campus leaders. It becomes clear in these chapters that details of campus policies matter a lot. The leadership at colleges, including student leaders, can do much to create a positive atmosphere—an atmosphere in which the benefits of diversity are maximized and unproductive conflicts are minimized.

Each student has a story to tell. Taken together, their stories reveal certain common themes. For example, many students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds draw a sharp contrast between positive experiences they are having with diversity at college and negative experiences they had in high school. Many undergraduates believe they understand exactly why their experiences in the two settings are so different, and their reasons sound both judicious and compelling. These differences lead them to offer suggestions both to fellow students and to those who run colleges. Many of their suggestions emphasize the critical role of residential living arrangements because of the remarkable amount of learning that occurs in residential interactions.

Chapter 9 offers specific suggestions from students to campus leaders. It is striking how many students seek leadership from administrators, deans, residence hall directors, and even college presidents. Most students don't really want us to just admit them and "get out of their way." And since nearly all students experience both fulfilling and frustrating occurrences in their years at college, they understandably want the people in charge working systematically to maximize the former and minimize the latter. Several of their

suggestions would be easy to implement. One or two others would require a certain degree of courage.

## Learning from Students

I am a statistician, but I am impressed by the power of individuals' heartfelt stories. Throughout this book, I use quotations from students' interviews to illustrate each point. Students who agreed to be interviewed were told that they might be quoted. Several actively urged me to include specific stories they thought would be helpful to future students. Many of those stories are here. I have edited the quotations a bit, omitting "ums" and "ahs," reducing repetition, and, with each student's permission, occasionally tightening the prose to make a point clear.

Where did all these stories come from? All findings in this book come from in-depth interviews. Early on, my colleagues and I decided that to learn what works best for students, we should ask them. So we did. More than sixteen hundred undergraduates have been interviewed during this effort, many of them more than once. Some were interviewed by faculty members: I myself interviewed four hundred. Other interviews were conducted by undergraduates, who were carefully trained and supervised by faculty members. Interviews ranged from one to three hours.

These personal interviews paint an entirely different picture from the kind of information that comes from a large-scale, check-box style of survey questionnaire. As a statistician, I know there are many circumstances in which questionnaires with check-box categories are a superb format for gathering evidence. In fact, I teach a course on this topic. Yet for this particular research, personal interviews

offer a special depth and richness that no check-box questionnaire, however well designed, could easily tap.

One reason is that the personal interviews are loaded with details. It is one thing for a student to say that a particular class had a powerful impact on her thinking. It is far more useful to understand *why* this class had such power, how it was organized, and whether other faculty members and students can benefit in their own work from this success story. The more illustrations a student can offer to buttress a point, the better and more helpful that point is for other students.

For me, interviewing four hundred undergraduates was a special pleasure. Harvard undergraduates have strong views. They come here expecting a lot. Nearly all are enthusiastic and productive, and nearly all quickly become overcommitted. The best part is, nearly all students also have suggestions for improving both academic and nonacademic aspects of college. They constantly question what we do, what they do, how to do it better, what they are getting and giving in this demanding community. Their convictions are changing the way I, and many of my colleagues, think about teaching and advising.

### Findings and Surprises

I hope students reading this book will find many of the results useful. Advice from fellow undergraduates, based on their own experiences both good and bad, should be helpful as students think about making decisions. What to look for when choosing classes, and the faculty members who teach them? How to interact most productively with advisors and mentors? What to consider when deciding about living ar-

rangements? How to allocate time? The students we interviewed have suggestions about all these topics.

Some of what we have learned from students fits what we expected, but certain insights are surprising, at least to me. Let me preview nine of our findings here. And these are just the beginning.

First, I assumed that most important and memorable academic learning goes on inside the classroom, while outside activities provide a useful but modest supplement. The evidence shows that the opposite is true: learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital. When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside of the classroom.

Second, I expected students to prefer courses in which they could work at their own pace, courses with relatively few quizzes, exams, and papers until the end of the term. Wrong again. A large majority of students say they learn significantly more in courses that are highly structured, with relatively many quizzes and short assignments. Crucial to this preference is getting quick feedback from the professor—ideally with an opportunity to revise and make changes before receiving a final grade. In contrast, students are frustrated and disappointed with classes that require only a final paper. How can we ever improve our work, they ask, when the only feedback comes after a course is over, and when no revision is invited?

A third surprise has to do with homework. When I was in college years ago, nearly every professor announced that I should do my homework alone. Discussing problem sets or essay assignments with other students, I was told, would be considered cheating. Yet at many campuses today, profes-

sors increasingly are encouraging students to work together on homework assignments. Some faculty members are even creating small study groups in their courses, to help students work together outside of class.

A few students tell of professors who give homework assignments that are so challenging or complex that the only way to get the work done is to collaborate. To complete such assignments, students have to work cooperatively, dividing up the readings and meeting outside of class to teach one another. Many undergraduates report that such homework assignments increase both their learning and their engagement with a class. This alteration in the format of homework is a genuine cultural change, one that is happening on campuses across the country.

A fourth finding: student after student brings up the importance of class size in his or her academic development. Not surprisingly, small-group tutorials, small seminars, and one-to-one supervision are, for many, their capstone experience. Yet what I find surprising is that some undergraduates, when asked to identify a particularly critical or profound experience at college, identify a mentored internship not done for academic credit. The word "mentor" is used in many ways, and undergraduates we interviewed are very clear about what constitutes effective mentoring. A key idea here is that students get to create their own project and then implement it under the supervision of a faculty member. Instead of following a professor's plan, they face the new challenge of developing their own plan and applying it to a topic they care about.

Fifth, for most students the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on their college experience is strong. An overwhelming majority of undergraduates characterize its effects as highly positive. Students can learn much from others who

come from different backgrounds, whether ethnic, geographic, political, religious, or economic. Yet many point out that learning from people of different backgrounds does not always happen naturally. Campus atmosphere and especially residential living arrangements are crucial.

Ironically, even the happiest students are sharply critical of platitudes about the virtues of diversity. Most have experienced unpleasant moments, awkward encounters, and sometimes worse. They point out that only when certain preconditions are met does "the good stuff" actually happen. They also note the good news—that those preconditions are factors that campus leaders can do something about. Campus leaders can do much to shape an environment in which diversity strengthens learning.

A sixth finding: students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are happiest organize their time to include activities with faculty members, or with several other students, focused around accomplishing substantive academic work. For some students this is difficult. Interacting in depth with faculty members or even with fellow students around substantive work does not always come naturally. Yet most students at Harvard learn to do it with great success. Both advisors and other faculty members can help this process along.

A seventh finding: I was surprised by students' strong attitude toward writing. I would have guessed that they value good writing, but I didn't realize how deeply many of them care about it, or how strongly they hunger for specific suggestions about how to improve it.

Eighth, I would have expected a general feeling among students that good advising is important. Yet that is a platitude. It is the specifics that are striking. A large majority of undergraduates describe particular activities outside the