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## MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

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RICHARD J. LIGHT

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MAKING THE  
MOST OF COLLEGE

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STUDENTS

SPEAK

THEIR

MINDS

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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.

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# MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE

# 1

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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



classroom as profoundly affecting their academic performance. Some point to study techniques, such as working in small groups outside of class. Others tell of more personal exercises, such as formal time-logging.

Ninth, I expected many undergraduates to characterize work in foreign languages and literatures as merely a requirement to be gotten out of the way. In fact, hardly any do this. Students talk about language courses with special enthusiasm. Many rate them among the best of all their classes. Alumni agree, and strongly. When asked why, both groups point to the way these courses are organized and taught.

There is a clear lesson here. Students have thought a lot about what works well for them. We can learn much from their insights. Often their insights are far more helpful, and more subtle, than any vague conventional wisdom about what constitutes a valuable college education.

## **Do These Findings Generalize?**

This is not just a Harvard story. My visits to other campuses have convinced me that the findings in this book apply broadly. At every college I visit, whether highly selective or not, private or public, large or small, national or regional, students are eager to share their experiences, to tell what works at their place. I am struck by how much of what students on other campuses say is similar to what Harvard students say.

Wherever I go, I ask faculty, students, and administrators whether the ideas and suggestions I present about teaching, advising, maximizing students' engagement, and capitalizing on diversity apply on their campus. On more than

ninety campuses the response has been clear: “Yes, most of those ideas would work well here.”

For example, I recently shared some findings from this book at a large public university on the West Coast. When I described the positive student reaction to meeting in small groups outside of classes to go over homework, readings, and problem sets, the reaction from both faculty and students was, “If it works at Harvard, it should be even more valuable here, where faculty resources are less plentiful.” Enough other campuses have now implemented enough of the suggestions in this book that I believe it would be a shame to say, “Those findings are so Harvard.” Maybe a select few won’t generalize—for example, our findings about the importance of undergraduate residence halls apply only to residential colleges—but it is clear that most generalize quite well.

I know that enormous differences exist among American colleges. Yet at nearly all of them, administrators and faculty members share with students a wish to enhance learning, improve instruction, and organize their campuses so that racial and ethnic differences can make a positive contribution to everyone’s experience. If the findings I present here help students and leaders on many campuses take a few steps toward achieving these outcomes, I will consider this book a great success.

# 2

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## POWERFUL CONNECTIONS

When it comes to activities other than the courses they take, students are on their own. Especially on a residential campus, many tend to be active, driven, and heavily engaged with outside-of-class activities, including work to earn money many need. Few have the slightest problem finding one or two or three engagements in addition to their classes. Whether it is public service, the arts, music, athletics, a student-run newspaper or magazine, special interest groups, or religious organizations, an overwhelming majority of undergraduates are up to their ears in activities outside of class.

How do undergraduates view these extracurricular opportunities? As a chance to have fun. As a chance to learn new skills. As a chance to give something back to a community, or even a country, that has been good to them. As a chance to perform or direct or produce. As a chance to learn leadership skills. Even at a college as academically focused and intense as Harvard, most graduates have far clearer memories of their singing, or writing, or volunteer tutoring of recent immigrants, than of the details of the class on American history they took in sophomore year.

A week has 168 hours. A full-time student on most campuses, taking four courses during an academic term, spends between twelve and eighteen hours sitting in actual classrooms, taking classes. Those who major in humanities and social sciences tend to spend about twelve. Those majoring

in a physical science spend some extra hours each week in labs, which can easily bring the total to about eighteen. So the bulk of students' lives is spent outside of the classroom.

That leads to a simple but enormously powerful finding that shines through interview after interview with graduating seniors. Those students who make connections between what goes on inside and outside the classroom report a more satisfying college experience. The students who find some way to connect their interest in music, for example, either with coursework or with an extracurricular volunteer activity or both, report a qualitatively different overall experience.

Do all students succeed in doing this? Of course not. Does it come automatically, or easily, even to those who end up doing it? Sometimes. But many don't think of it at first. Sometimes they figure it out because they are exceptionally thoughtful. Sometimes it happens because they stumble into it thanks to good fortune. But now, more and more often, advisors (including me) consciously encourage students to do this. We tell first-year students that their fellow undergraduates report that making connections between what they do inside and outside of classes can have a profound and positive impact on their precious years at college.

Incoming students seem to be taking this advice extraordinarily seriously. Perhaps this illustrates the power of gathering data directly from students. Telling newcomers on campus that people just three and four years older have something to suggest catches their attention quickly.

Perhaps the idea of making connections between in-class and out-of-class activities sounds obvious. Yet without some

concrete illustrations of how to do it, and why it can be so helpful, the suggestion risks becoming an abstraction. Let's consider a few examples.

## Shall I Go to Med School?

On any campus, some students arrive thinking that after college they will go to medical school. During their four years as undergraduates, they try to figure out whether medical school is the right choice for them, or whether it really isn't what they want.

We ought to be able to advise such students constructively. Good advising can have a profound impact. A senior from Chicago got great help from the Office of Career Services. She sought advice on outside-of-classroom experiences that would help clarify her thinking about a future career in medicine. A counselor worked with her to arrange a summer internship at a large hospital in Chicago.

Working for little more than minimum wage, this twenty-year-old was asked by the hospital to get two programs up and running so they would continue after she returned to college in the fall. The first program changed the penalty for teenage smokers who incur minor legal infractions. In the past, they had generally been given a penalty of simple probation. Little or no learning took place. Their legal infractions resulted in little consequence either to themselves or to their communities.

The student created and implemented a new program. Rather than just receiving probation, each young offender was now required to perform a specific community service: the teenaged smokers were required to help older people in the community who were dying from smoking-related em-

physema. Their tasks included shopping and carrying groceries.

The second program the student initiated was aimed at people of any age who were having a difficult time managing their own health, yet who were at high risk for coronary disease. This program arranged for each person to witness actual heart surgery, and then to talk with the heart patients afterward.

The student says that this summer experience profoundly changed the way she thought about all her academic work at college. In fact, it changed her entire future. She had planned to concentrate in biology with an eye toward medical school. Now, with great enthusiasm, she shifted her focus toward public policy, public health, and an environmental science major. The activities outside of class, and their connection to her academic work, gave her new insight about the real world, about what she was good at, and about what mattered to her. The summer at the hospital gave her a new purpose, and perspective, to design and plan her academic coursework.

## Political Science or Law School?

A young man majoring in government or political science gives a second example. He took the usual introductory courses, but he was uncertain about how it all fit together, at least for him. He was pretty sure by the end of his first year that he wanted, in the future, to be a professor. After all, he was getting a lot of A's. Always had. And he was comfortable with this plan, yet he felt one, troubling caveat: he had never really considered anything else.

So he decided to work with an inner-city self-help group in Boston, to improve the dilapidated and poorly maintained

housing where they lived. The group had been started by several women who were welfare recipients and all lived in the same housing project, where the local housing authority was unable or unwilling to provide even the most basic maintenance services. Garbage piled up around their buildings, and the hallways reeked of urine. Throughout his sophomore year this young man worked with the group to develop a plan to improve their living conditions. He spent hundreds of hours lining up craftsmen of various sorts, with building skills, who were willing to volunteer their time and their labor.

The plan was for this painstakingly assembled group of volunteers to spend a spring weekend improving and refurbishing government-funded housing and working on inner-city infrastructure projects. But the plan was stopped cold. A large trade union in Boston went to court and got an injunction to stop this young man's volunteer brigade. The union cited, according to this student, laws that make it illegal for craftsmen to volunteer their labor for any part of government-funded projects to improve housing for poor people. The trade union lawyer also cited the Fair Labor Standards Act provision that prohibits workers from donating free labor for certain community projects. The student had not anticipated this. He was dismayed to learn that what he had worked so hard to put together was actually against the law.

From that moment on, courses in welfare economics and income distribution and labor policy took on a whole new meaning for him. After college he entered law school, with a deep commitment to labor law.

I find this example striking because I know plenty of talented young men and women who say they want to go to law school. But when you press them hard, most of them

can't really explain why. This young man knows why. His entire college experience was shaped by the dramatic interaction between the in-class hours and the outside-of-class hours he spent at college. That interaction changed the classes he chose. His integration of in-class and out-of-class pursuits shaped his thinking about how to be a constructive citizen—and ultimately his choice of career.

This student's critical outside-of-class experience was arranged with help from existing student groups, coordinated and run by fellow undergraduates. His story illustrates how, institutionally, a college can help an undergraduate to integrate the in-class and outside-of-class parts of his life.

## Self-Esteem and Pep Rallies

I recently taught a seminar with seven undergraduates. Each was committed to a future career in education. Several hoped to teach, others to do research, others to do policy work. It was a luxurious small seminar—the kind where disagreement among students is welcome, the kind that is sometimes followed by dinner as a group. The kind I enjoy most.

Each student was taking the full undergraduate course-load. Yet most of them also found time to volunteer in a public elementary school in the area. We talked several times about the students' experiences volunteering in public schools. It was clear these experiences had a powerful effect.

In this seminar I created a challenging reading list for the first eleven weeks of the thirteen-week term. I told the students that one of their obligations, in addition to weekly reading assignments and regular essays, would be to help create an additional reading list and writing assignments for our last two weeks. Several colleagues and I often organize



our seminars this way, and we find it remarkably effective for engaging students with classwork throughout the term.

That term, the students who were volunteering in the public school urged the entire seminar to explore readings on a certain topic they had all found troubling in their volunteer work. They wanted to read about and discuss ways of enhancing self-esteem for adolescents and preadolescents. Their interest in this topic arose from their experiences as school volunteers.

They believed that the school was working hard to help many children raise their self-esteem, and that the school's leadership meant well. Yet the way the leadership chose to do this was with lots of classroom discussion about self-esteem and self-respect. Eleven-year-old after eleven-year-old stood up and said, "I am smart. I can do anything. I am somebody." My seminar participants called these "pep rallies." They understood the purpose very well, and were not opposed to this if it was part of a broader, more substantive plan. Yet they were deeply disappointed. They could not find teachers encouraging children to tackle a hard task, and to persevere, and persevere, and persevere, with assistance and encouragement, until the children genuinely mastered that task.

My students wondered if the school leadership had it backward. They believed that true self-esteem comes from actually mastering something. The three nonwhite students in the seminar argued this case with particular passion. All drew on their own childhood experiences. The result was substantial reading for the last two weeks of our seminar on the psychology of self-esteem. The students concluded that teaching perseverance to young people is often hard, yet that what increases children's self-esteem is precisely the sustained work that is often necessary to accomplish anything

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