

Review:
Light, R.J. 2001. *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*.
Harvard University Press.

This is a beautifully written book, smooth and even (for an education book) urbane. The discussion is based on an Assessment Project at Harvard, 1600 interviews with undergraduates. And these are articulate kids.

The nine Chapter headings give a useful guide to the book, which really has three main thrusts. Briefly mentioning the first two, it is the last that faculty will find the most important and so it is this that merits a longer discussion.

First, universities are ‘universities’, i.e. social worlds, and students have to orient themselves in these worlds. The Chapter ‘Powerful Connections’ (#2) makes this point forcefully, dovetailing with the last Chapter ‘What College Leaders Can Do’ (#9).

Second, universities are places of diversity. Students not only learn about other races, religions, beliefs and values; they also learn more about their own. The Chapters ‘Diversity on Campus’ (#7) and ‘Learning from Difference’ (#8) include lengthy accounts by students of the powerful impact such learning has on their opinions of college life. These accounts – testimony to the importance of diversity – are interspersed with suggestions about encouraging such learning.

Third, effective teaching in college makes a difference, and there are some useful strategies for enhancing teaching. These ideas are discussed in the ‘Introduction’ (#1), as well as in the Chapters ‘Suggestions from Students’ (#3), ‘The Most Effective Classes’ (#4), ‘Good Mentoring and Advising’ (#5), and ‘Faculty who make a Difference’ (#6). These Chapters are rich in evidence, deliberation and advice.

A number of findings jump out. Some are about educational experiences, some about instruction.

The most important and memorable academic learning typically goes on outside the classroom, in residential settings or in extracurricular activities. Around four-fifths of students reported an event out of class as the most important experience of their college life. Relatedly, many students report that educational activities that were not done for academic credit were the most memorable and influential. These activities are often linked to more personalised engagement with other students and with faculty. In mentoring students, therefore, faculty should encourage students to think beyond studying hard for good grades. Instead, they should ‘get to know faculty’, ‘become involved in extracurricular activities’, and ‘find links between their own beliefs and their study.’ University residences play an important role in bonding all these elements together.

On instruction, students claim to learn more in courses that are highly structured, with more quizzes and short assignments. Those courses that depend only on a final paper do not produce the feedback needed for students to improve. Many students bring up the importance of smaller classes to enhancing their learning. They are critical of large lectures where faculty do not engage with students. Also, students emphasise repeatedly that it is their writing that they want to focus on. Writing is *the* skill that students want to emerge from college with proficiency at. Further, doing homework together is a ‘good thing’. Students learn a lot from each other and it encourages them to collaborate.

Light offers some important and specific suggestions here to improve teaching. One is a One-minute Paper, asking all students in a lecture to write down a few sentences to respond to: (a) what is the main idea that you got from today’s lecture? And (b) what is the one thing you did not understand? These not only tell the lecturer what the students know and do not know, they also force the students to engage with what they are learning.

Another specific suggestion relates to one of the key attributes for making the most of college: ‘effective time management’. Students who succeed at college have managed their time well, balancing the many different college activities into a schedule. Keeping a time log, or dividing the day into ‘operational’ sections, assists students in making the most of their time. Light stresses this because “there is no significant relationship between level of involvement [in other activities] and grades” but “there is a clear relationship between participation and satisfaction with college”.

The book has plenty of useful statistics. Here is one: only 8 percent of students could not name a professor who did not have a major impact on them during college. What makes a professor high-impact? The answers are several and diffuse. Such professors:

- do not tell students what to think, but rather how to think
- teach students to think like professionals in their discipline
- force students to use precise language to argue through their beliefs
- share intellectual responsibility, ‘coaching’ students and getting help from students rather than lecturing at them
- encourage students to disagree with them
- are not predictable in their own beliefs about their study
- teach on the use of evidence
- connect academic ideas with students’ lives
- integrate ideas from other disciplines

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