

Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds

By *Richard J. Light*

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“Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds” is a book with which orientation directors need to be familiar. Intended for a wide audience which includes college administrators and faculty, parents, and students, this resource has been reviewed favorably in publications as diverse as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Newsweek*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. The book also has become the basis for evaluating campus environments and services, such as academic advising at institutions across the country. At some colleges and universities, it has become required reading for freshmen and is discussed in first-year seminars.

Author Richard Light is a professor in the Graduate School of Education and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. This work is the culmination of a project begun in 1986 at the behest of then Harvard president Derek Bok. Light brought together a team of colleagues to initiate a long-term program of research and assessment which became known as the “Harvard Assessment Seminars.” The studies evaluated the effectiveness of teaching, the curriculum, and advising at Harvard, and made practical recommendations for enhancing these functions. A key purpose was to identify the conditions under which students learn best, both inside and outside the classroom, with the goal of gathering information that ultimately would help guide educational policy decisions.

Each of eight chapters discussed choices students must make at college, whether purposefully or haphazardly. A pervasive theme was the strong interactive effects of various features of campus life such as study groups and residential arrangements which promoted learning through diverse relationships.

Among Light’s findings are the following:

- Learning outside of classes (for example, in residential settings) enhances the classroom experience;
- A majority of students indicate a preference for courses that are highly structured with short assignments and frequent quizzes to maximize instructor feedback;
- Students learn more when they are encouraged by faculty to work together on homework assignments;
- Students overwhelmingly express the opinion that small classes which allow for student-faculty contact and “mentoring” are important;
- For most students, the impact of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity is strong and highly positive;
- Students who are happiest and most successful academically are those who organize their time to include activities with faculty and/or other students that focus on substantive

academic work; and

- Academic advising, especially when advisors help students evaluate the use of time and when it leads to a mentoring relationship, is vital.

Light argued that his findings about teaching, advising, and maximizing student engagement can be generalized across the higher education spectrum, whether an institution is public or private, large or small, national or regional, highly selective or not.

For readers new to higher education, including most new students, this book will be a valuable guide containing practical tips on time management, course selection, and making meaningful connections with faculty and other students. For example, his suggestion that students make it their job to get to know one faculty member each semester is sound advice which will benefit any student.

Light presented his recommendations in a readable, convincing way, often including students' stories and quotations which make his points come alive. The primary value of the book is as a handbook for the new student and parent audience.

For the more experienced consumer of higher education literature (predominantly faculty, administrators and student affairs staff), Light's work offers little that we have not already heard from the research and writings of higher education experts including Astin, Boyer, and Pascarella and Terenzini. For example, Light's call for improved academic advising and for the development of mentoring relationships between faculty and students echoes many of Boyer's recommendations. The concept of student engagement in "Making College Count" parallels Astin's theory of student involvement as explicated in his numerous works.

Those conversant with Chickering and Reisser's key influences on student development, as described in "Education and Identity," will find similarities between Light's recommendations and Chickering and Reisser's emphasis on close student-to-faculty and student-to-student interaction and on the need for a supportive campus culture in which faculty and administrators create small, supportive, personalized communities for students. Certainly those familiar with the concept of Kuh's "seamless learning environments," which connect student learning inside and outside the college classroom in a holistic way, cannot help but be reminded of his work of Kuh while reading Light's book.

Interestingly, Light cited none of the research mentioned above in and all but a handful of his references come from Harvard-related sources. The decision not to include the pioneering work of Astin, Boyer, Kuh and others makes the book an easier read for the layperson, but renders it less credible within the higher education community.

A problem with "Making College Count" is that it tries to accomplish too much, and it cannot fully meet the needs of all intended audiences. Some chapters clearly seem to be directed toward first-year students while others, particularly the chapter entitled "What College Leaders Can Do," are obviously intended for institutional policy makers.

The value of "Making the Most of College" for the orientation director lies in its ability to help translate factors involved in college success to new students and parents in

a clear and credible way. Many orientation programs already tout the benefits of residential living, one-on-one student interaction with faculty, and participation in student organizations as ways of making the college experience successful and satisfying. Light's book can add credence to these claims, and could become the basis for an orientation presentation (for students, family members, or both groups) on student success. In one particularly helpful section Light discussed factors that seemed to work against college success. Orientation directors might suggest that campus bookstores stock this book during orientation sessions for those who are interested in delving more deeply into Light's recommendations.

This book also can help orientation directors in their roles as campus advocates for new students. Light made a case for strong advising systems (a concern on many campuses) and for "getting in students' way" (pp. 209-210) to help them evaluate and reevaluate their choices, although it is up to the campus to determine how to put these recommendations in place. "Making College Count" certainly could serve as the catalyst for discussion leading to institutional change which could make campuses more effective in serving first-year students.

In most ways, Light's book succeeds as a handbook which will be of value to new students, especially those on traditional, residential campuses. But, in terms of a comprehensive, scholarly work aimed at helping faculty and administrators understand the conditions necessary for creating a campus climate that maximizes student learning, it is less effective.