

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 by Richard J. Light contains valuable information for any member of a university's faculty, staff, or administration, making this a must read book. At times, professionals in the field of higher education tend to lose touch of the changing needs of students; they become focused on how their college experience was and forget that students of the present day are the issue at hand. Light's book is not merely a Harvard assessment; instead, Light uses student interviews, personal experiences, and research gathered at many universities to convey his points. He did this assessment after hearing a senior dean comment that university administrators should admit good students and make an effort then to "get out of their way" (p. 2). The senior dean added, "Students learn mostly from one another" (p. 2). Light was inspired to determine if the senior dean was accurate, and Light's book reveals the exact opposite of what the senior dean claimed to be true.

In the introduction, Light discusses his own assumptions about the assessment project and then delivers the conflicting outcome of his research. He addresses many of his assumptions about students, including topics such as: where learning occurs; preference of course grading elements; studying alone; thoughts on class size preferences; impact of diversity and racial integration on campuses; how student growth occurs; students' attitudes towards writing; importance of an influential advisor; and student participation in foreign languages and literature.

Light discusses the powerful influences that a student experiences throughout college, placing a substantial emphasis on extracurricular activities and the vital role they play in the students' lives. When students reflect about their overall college experience, it is most frequently their extracurricular memories that are most fondly remembered. Another influence on students is the associations that advisors/mentors can make in relation to both students' personal lives and academia that can sometimes drastically impact their future. Light illustrates this with the example of a student who has ballet injuries, and, then in turn, is prompted by her advisor to do research on her injuries. The student then does research on animal bones that inspire her to switch to a biology concentration. Her hopes in the end of her interview were to become an orthopedic surgeon. Without the "powerful connection" of the advisor associating her personal life and her personal desires, this student would quite possibly have never found what makes her ultimately satisfied in her field of study.

Light addresses the thoughts and perceptions of students, zeroing in on managing

time and balancing activities. He also indicates the reasons why a student might be struggling, and highlights: poor time management skills, struggles to organize studies according to previous high school routines, selection of correct courses, and independent studying. In the past, faculty were hesitant to allow independent studying because of the concern of cheating. Today, many students state that it is more beneficial to study together because of the community learning that occurs.

In chapter four, “The Most Effective Classes,” Light points out ways that professors can keep their classes effective. Each semester, the students that professors come in contact with change dramatically. Over time, the professors’ curriculum might be in need of some fine tuning. Light uses an example of Patricia Cross, who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. Cross assigns a one-minute paper as a simple way to gather her students’ thoughts about the topics being covered. At the end of the class period, students have to write about what knowledge they gathered and what was confusing to them from that class period. This exercise promotes the enhancement of listening, discovery of special needs, gradual improvement of writing, and it can also be used as gauge of student learning.

Recurring throughout the book is Light’s focus on the importance of advising and mentoring. According to the student interviews, advising and mentoring are the most influential points in their academic experience. Light delves deep into this topic by touching on the main aspects of the strong power of advisement, including assessing successful students, mentoring, and the positive involvement in group activities.

In the following chapter, “Faculty Who Make a Difference,” one student who was interviewed said, “Frankly, if I could do it on my own, then why should I be here? Especially at these prices” (p. 119). This student’s bold comments may seem shocking, but they clearly represent the need for a challenging curriculum. Light discusses the ways that professors can engage students in learning by encouraging students to disagree with the current curriculum; changes made as a result of these discussions can benefit the students’ learning progress. Also a key to engaging students is to make them think like professionals. The last section of the chapter is about the integration of ideas into many disciplines, and this could possibly require more prep work for a faculty member, but also could ultimately lead to a greater wealth of knowledge for the students.

One chapter is dedicated solely to diversity. In the area of higher education, this is an ever present issue that professionals are working on daily as they try to integrate diversity in universities across America. The student interviews in this chapter were compelling, revealing a definite need for increased diversity. Light points out that learning that occurs due to diversity includes the incorporation and, the capitalization of diversity at a university, and the ways to actively strengthen it. Light provides students examples of how assumptions come along with diversity and how even minorities feel discriminated against by their own race. This chapter reveals a new twist on what diversity is perceived as by current students. The understanding and knowledge of diversity is becoming more prevalent, and this is an eye-opening experience.

“What College Leaders Can Do;” chapter nine, brings great closure to the text. Light discusses universities having policies of inclusion, constructing a positive campus

culture, and many additional concepts to promote a successful college environment. In the end, Light points out that there is no longer a need to admit excellent students into higher education and then allow them to roam carelessly, instead, these students need to be admitted and continually interacted with them from day they arrive at the university. Professionals working in higher education need to make every attempt to come into contact with students in ways that will show them sincerity about helping them achieve future success.

The book was motivational and is strongly encouraged for everyone in higher education, especially those working in student affairs and college faculty.