

Harvard Students Speak their Minds

BY JULIA COLYAR

Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds

Richard J. Light. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2001. 242 pp.

The hardback cover of Richard J. Light's award-winning book *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* frames two young people seated outside on a quad that looks as if it is covered in autumn's fallen leaves. A woman wearing a knit cap is speaking to an unseen circle, while a male colleague looks on, poised forward on his knees as if he might leap out of the picture. These two, and the rest of the circle, are presumably students enjoying a lively open-air class discussion. The background of the photograph is fuzzy and indistinct; it could be September in Massachusetts or late November in northern California. In some respects, this photograph stands for Light's text: Light has literally placed the students in the foreground and captured them in the act of speaking. The location is at once universal and unimportant, merely the physical background in which students meet, engage, discuss, and balance on the edge of something unseen.

Richard Light is a professor at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Over the course of several years, Light and his faculty and student colleagues interviewed 1,600 Harvard undergraduates. The central questions of the study were drawn from his thirty years of thinking about student experiences in and outside of classrooms, and the responsibilities of deans, faculty, and student advisors to improve student life.

Light was concerned with two general topics: what choices can students make to get the most out of college, and what are effective ways for faculty and campus leaders to enhance the quality of student life? From individual student stories, Light draws together common themes and offers nine findings that respond to these questions. While some of his results are useful to students as they begin searching for the right college to attend, others may be more important for faculty and administrators to understand. All, however, come directly from students themselves. Throughout, Light uses the students' voices in often lengthy quotes to underscore and highlight his findings.

It does not take anything away from the text to reveal some of Light's findings here. The reason to read *Making the Most of College* is to hear the students' distinct voices, rather than gain new understandings. Light's first finding, for example, resonates with the work of Vincent Tinto: Light reminds us that "learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital" (p. 8).

More to the point, Light suggests that students will get more out of the college experience if they make connections between what they learn in the classroom and what they experience outside of it. Light gives an example of a student who arrived at college determined to pursue a career in medicine via a biology major, but an internship led her to pursue a degree in environmental science with an eye toward public policy and public health. Her internship “gave her a new purpose, and perspective, to design and plan her academic coursework” (p. 16).

The difficulty of striking a balance between in- and out-of-class activities is another of Light’s findings. His interviews revealed that some students made the transition to college life without difficulty, while others struggled to manage their time. Most importantly, Light notes that a busy schedule does not in and of itself threaten academic achievement. In fact, a commitment to an outside activity up to twenty hours per week has little to no effect on grades; outside activities such as paid work, extracurricular activities, the arts, or volunteer work can substantially improve students’ satisfaction with college life (p. 26). Only participation in intercollegiate athletics was associated with lower grade performance (p. 29).

What happens in college classes is the context for another set of findings. Light reports that student satisfaction and (in many cases) academic achievement are positively influenced by enrollment in smaller courses. Students found these courses more engaging, demanding, and personal. In addition, Light suggests that too little emphasis is placed on the power of homework assignments, specifically those that encourage collaboration. He continues:

those students who study outside of class in small groups of four to six, even just once a week, benefit enormously. They each do the homework, independently, before they meet. Their meetings are organized around discussions of the homework. And as a result of their study group discussion they are far more engaged and far better prepared, and they learn significantly more (p. 52).

In years past, the practice of collaborative homework was likened to cheating, but Light recommends that faculty should change the way they think about the products and purposes of assignments. Students also valued courses that are highly structured and include many homework assignments, exams, and papers—in short, multiple opportunities for students to receive feedback from their professors and improve their performance.

For some of the same reasons students value small classes, they also note the importance of good advising and mentorship. Not surprisingly, Light reports that in visiting 90 college campuses of various sizes and types, the problem of advising emerged as the number one campus challenge. Good advising is time consuming and individualistic; ideally, students develop good relationships with several faculty members. After identifying a group of students who clearly succeeded at college, Light asked the

question of how advising might have influenced their success. Across the board, students noted the importance of discussing the big picture with their advisors and thinking about the ways in which their academic and personal lives intersect. In addition, students who worked with mentors outside of the classroom—and not for academic credit—reported remarkably positive experiences.

One of the most important topics Light deals with is the new diversity on campuses. In his own career at Harvard, Light has seen the changes in the student population. It is no longer a question of *if* students will be enrolled in diverse campuses, but rather *how* the college or university will capitalize on student diversity to create a positive environment for each student. Nearly all of the students in Light's study recognized the importance of interacting with diverse groups of students for the purposes of academic as well as interpersonal learning (p. 145). Students, however, did not agree on how a campus should deal with questions of diversity. While Asian American students did not feel the campus should make changes in response to their presence on campus, both African American and Latino students felt strongly that campuses should make adjustments in the curriculum and/or the allocation of space for campus groups to organize. Despite these differences, Light's point is well taken: students are aware of and thinking about campus diversity, and colleges should engage in thoughtful discussions on the topic.

Light's chapters on campus diversity also highlight a source of concern when reading his text. Remarking on why student experiences of campus diversity are different at high schools than at colleges, Light asserts: "at college, especially at a selective college, all of their fellow undergraduates, regardless of ethnic background, or geography, or political perspective, or financial circumstance, share certain core values" (p. 141). These core values are hard work, the value of being challenged in class, and the rewards of a good education. What Light seems to be describing here is not so much "core" values of the student population, but the American White middle class values associated with higher education—the values that one might find at the heart of many educational institutions. The fact that students reported these values, or that Light assumes they are "core" is not surprising or difficult to predict. However, it is troubling to read these as the reason students from different cultures "get along" on college campuses. It not only imposes an ideology on all students, but also undermines recent efforts to truly re-imagine diversity in campus communities.

This leads to a larger, more general critique of Light's text. From the introduction, Light is careful to suggest that these findings are, though drawn exclusively from interviews of Harvard students, applicable to other campuses nationwide. Clearly, many of his findings are. However, it is dangerous to imagine that, like Light's book cover, the background is indistinct and unimportant. Whether we are at a campus in Massachusetts or northern California does make a difference, and Light's book is best considered as one which brings to light the voices of Harvard students. Campuses are

distinct spaces situated in distinct places; the voices of students from a largely commuter campus in Los Angeles will reveal different issues, needs, challenges, and celebrations than those outlined here, just as the voices from a small, religiously affiliated college in a rural area will differ.

Despite these reservations, Light's book is an interesting addition to the literature of college student experiences. Light seamlessly weaves together the distinct voices of students with direct quotes and paraphrased remarks, and even sneaks in some statistics where he has data. He offers suggestions for teachers of large classes and advice to campus leaders; his comments are often practical and realistic while also hinting at dramatic change in the ways faculty and administrators work. The result is a book that will benefit students, advisors, and faculty alike. Each has much to learn about the other.

Author Information

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