

The Harvard Guide to Happiness

By Kate Zernike

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Lost in the current obsession to get into The Best U is something most adults readily admit, at least in hindsight: It doesn't matter so much where you go to college, but what you make of the experience.

So How to Make the Most of It?

In 1986, Derek Bok, then the president of Harvard, summoned a professor at the Graduate School of Education and asked him to evaluate how well the university educated its students and ways it might improve. Why, Dr. Bok wanted to know, did some students have a great experience while others did not?

The professor, Richard J. Light, a statistician by training, gathered colleagues and deans from 24 other institutions to examine the question and come up with a scientific method to find the answer.

Over 10 years researchers interviewed 1,600 Harvard students, asking a range of questions about everything from what they did in their spare time to the quality of teaching and advising. They looked for patterns - say, what made certain courses effective. They also correlated students' academic and personal choices with their grades and how happy and intellectually engaged they said they were. The goal was to determine which factors were more likely to improve learning and overall happiness. A factor always linked to success would be rated 1; one with a significant relationship to success would be 0.50; and one with no effect would be 0. (Not every factor got a rating because of inconsistencies in how questions were asked.)

Fifteen years later, Harvard has made policy changes based on the study, like assigning students homework to do in groups and scheduling some classes later in the day so discussions can continue over dinner.

"It turns out there are a whole range of concrete ways students can improve their experience," said Professor Light, who teaches at the John F. Kennedy School of Government as well as at the education school. Professor Light has gathered the best ideas in a book, "Making the Most of College" (Harvard University Press, 2001). The suggestions are often simple. Still, he said, "It's amazing how little thought people give to these decisions."

1. Meet the Faculty

Professor Light now tells each of the students he advises the same thing at the beginning of each term: "Your job is to get to know one faculty member reasonably well and get that faculty member to know you reasonably well. If you do nothing else, do that." On the most opportunistic level, this means that at the end of four years - two semesters each - the student has eight professors to write recommendations for jobs or for graduate school. But more important, the relationship makes a student feel more connected to the institution.

The most satisfied students in the Harvard interviews sought detailed feedback and asked specific questions of professors and advisers - not "Why didn't I get a better grade?" but "Point out the paragraphs in this essay where my argument faltered."

And don't try to hide academic problems. The researchers working for Professor Light interviewed a sample of 40 students who stumbled academically in their first year. The 20 who asked for help improved their grades, the 20 who did not spiraled downward - isolated, failing and unhappy.

2. Take a Mix of Courses

Nearly without exception, the students in the study who were struggling were taking nothing but large introductory courses that were needed to complete their degree. Why? To get them out of the way. Advice from well-meaning parents often goes something like this: First year, take required courses. Second year, choose a major. Third year, take advanced classes required for your major. Save fun electives, like dessert, for last.

The trouble is, introductory courses range across so much material they often fail to offer students anything to sink their teeth into. So when it comes time to choose a major, students don't know what really interests them. By senior year, when taking courses that stimulate them, they are wondering why they didn't take more courses in Japanese/medieval social history/statistics earlier. Those who treat the early years like a shopping excursion, taking not only required classes but also ones that pique their interest, feel more engaged and happier with their major.

"The less satisfied students were the ones who said, "My tack was to get all the requirements out of the way," Professor Light said. "The successful students do the exact opposite."

The corollary to this recommendation: Take small classes, which encourages faculty interaction and a feeling of connectedness. Taking classes with 15 or fewer students had a 0.52 correlation with overall engagement and a 0.24 correlation with good grades - both considered significant.

3. Study in Groups

Doing homework is important, but what really matters is doing it in a way that helps you understand the material. Students who studied on their own and then discussed the work in groups of four to six, even just once a week, understood material better and felt more engaged with their classes. This was especially true with science, which requires so much solitary work and has complicated concepts.

4. Write, Write, Write

Choose courses with many short papers instead of one or two long ones. This means additional work – more than 12 hours a week versus fewer than 9, or about 40 percent more time - but it also improves grades. In a class that requires only one 20-page paper at the end of the term, there is no chance of recovering from a poor showing. Courses with four five-page papers offer chances for a midcourse correction.

And the more writing, the better. In all of Professor Light's research, no factor was more important to engagement and good grades than the amount of writing a student did. Students in the study recommended taking courses with a lot of writing in the last two years, when you have adjusted to the challenges of being in college and are preparing to write a long senior thesis.

5. Speak Another Language

Foreign language courses are the best-kept secret on campus. Many students arrive with enough skills to test out of a college's language requirement. But language was the most commonly mentioned among "favorite classes." Sixty percent of students put them in the category of "hard work but pure pleasure"; 57 percent of those interviewed again after leaving college recommended not testing out. Why? Classes are small, instructors insist on participation, students work in groups, and assignments include lots of written work and frequent quizzes, allowing for repeated midcourse corrections. In short, foreign language courses combine all the elements that lead to more learning and more engagement.

6. Consider Time

In the Harvard interviews, there was one striking difference between those who did well in their courses and those who did not: Those who did well mentioned the word "time"; those who did not never used the word. Students reported that they did not succeed when they studied the way they had in high school, squeezing in 25 minutes in a study hall, 35 minutes after sports practice and 45 minutes after dinner. Grades and understanding improved when they set aside an uninterrupted stretch of a few hours. Professor Light even suggests keeping a time log for a few weeks and showing it to an adviser, who can help figure out the best way to allocate time.

7. Hold the Drum

Students often flounder in college because they do not have the same social or family support network they had at home. Those who get involved in outside activities, even ones not aimed at padding a resume or a graduate school application, are happiest. Professor Light tells the story of one young woman arriving unhappy in her adviser's office. When the adviser encouraged her to do something beyond her studies, she demurred. She had no talent; she could not play on a team or sing in the choir. "How about band?" her adviser prodded. She replied that she did not play an instrument. "That's O.K.," he said. "Ask them if you can hold the drum." Years later, when asked to describe why her college experience had been so positive, she repeatedly referred to the band, which got her involved at pep rallies and football games and introduced her to a diverse range of students.

Students who have worked hard to get into college, Professor Light said, tend to arrive and say, "Academic work is my priority, and doing other things will hurt that." In fact, the Harvard research found otherwise.

"What goes on in situations outside of class is just as important, and in some situations, it turns out to be a bigger deal than what happens in class," he said. "Very often an experience outside of class can have a profound effect on the courses students choose and even what they want to do with their lives."

The study found that students who worked long hours at a job had the same grades as those who worked a few hours or not at all. Students who volunteered actually had higher grades and reported being happier. The only students whose outside activities hurt their grades were intercollegiate athletes. Still, Professor Light said, they are the happiest students on campus.