



STRENGTHENING COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The Harvard Assessment Seminars

The Harvard Assessment Seminars project, begun in the late 1980s, aims to help students make the most of their few undergraduate years. Its work centers on how faculty members can most effectively help students learn, and on encouraging and assessing innovations in the classroom. Over the course of nearly two decades, the project has involved about 70 faculty members and more than 120 student interviewers; 24 colleges and universities in addition to Harvard have actively participated. Richard Light, Walter H. Gale Professor of Education at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and its Graduate School of Education, spearheads the Assessment Seminars. Of the many findings resulting from his work, Light emphasizes one overarching principle: students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are the happiest organize their time to include interpersonal activities with faculty members or fellow students built around substantive academic work. Light's goal is to translate this and other findings into policies and action.



MISSION CONTROL

- ✘ Students have thought a lot about what works well for them. We can learn much from their insights, which often are more helpful than the vague “common wisdom” about how faculty can help students make good decisions at college.
- ✘ Findings based on in-depth, one-on-one two- to three-hour interviews with more than 2,000 Harvard undergraduates include the following:
 - Interactive relationships organized around academic work are vital to students’ happiness and academic success.
 - Students value strong writing skills and benefit enormously from a few specific suggestions.
 - Advisors can help students make a few key decisions that will shape their entire college experience.
- ✘ The ideas and practices stemming from the Harvard Assessment Seminars are remarkably simple and low cost, and can be readily implemented at colleges and universities nationwide.



The Harvard Assessment Seminars

The Harvard Assessment Seminars project was conceived in 1986 by Harvard's then president, Derek Bok, who first posed the fundamental questions to address: What are we at Harvard doing well for our undergraduates, and what are we not doing so well? And, once we learn the answers to these questions, how can we tweak or change what we do now to strengthen the undergraduate college experience?

Following initial conversations with Bok, a broad group of faculty colleagues was formed and met once each month for several years. Additionally, several administrators, including the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, the dean of freshmen, the dean of students, and the director of residence hall life, joined the group, as well as a dozen undergraduates. We quickly agreed on several broad areas to examine with regard to the quality of student life at Harvard.

Our working format was one that any campus could implement easily. Our monthly meetings were driven by a free market of ideas and supported by good staff. Anyone could suggest a project, and if anyone wanted to work on it, the idea moved forward; if not, it was dropped. All projects were pursued by small, self-selected working groups. Working groups were formed to focus on the sciences, writing, advising, classroom teaching, and gender differences in learning. Each group carried out a precisely defined project using top-notch science and research design, with constructive help from all our other colleagues involved in the broader effort.

This model eventually was extended to 24 other colleges and universities and has involved more than 70 faculty members from all the institutions and 120 student interviewers at Harvard alone. All told, more than 2,000 Harvard students have participated in in-depth, one-on-one interviews for two to three hours.



Key Findings

Students have thought a lot about what works well for them. We can learn much from their insights, which are often more helpful than the vague “common wisdom” about how faculty can help students make good decisions at college. Our biggest challenge was to figure out what the myriad details added up to. Did these many long conversations with undergraduates drive toward any broad, overarching principle? The answer is an emphatic “yes,” as described in our first finding.

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Interactive relationships organized around academic work are vital.

The common wisdom at many colleges is that the best advice for students, in addition to just attending classes and doing homework, is to “get involved.” Get involved in campus activities of all sorts: writing, singing, drama, music, politics, athletics, community service, and so on. This is excellent advice, but there is a different kind of involvement, a more subtle kind, and the undergraduates who are both happiest and academically most successful stress its importance. Almost without exception, these students have at least one (and often more) intense relationship built around academic work with other people. Some have it with a professor, some with an advisor, and others build it around a group of fellow students outside the classroom.

The critical point is that the relationships are not merely social. They are organized to accomplish some work—a substantive exploration that students describe as “stretching” themselves. And almost without exception, students who feel they have not yet found themselves, or fully hit their stride, report that they have not developed such relationships.

Students in the sciences found collaborative work and discussion of material between classes especially rewarding. As a result, many science courses at Harvard now use study groups created by the instructor. Rarely today does a professor tell students that they must do their homework alone (the key, of course, is that exams are indeed taken alone). Any college or university can implement this straightforward policy, which simply requires a shift in what instructors encourage and discourage. This shift has another benefit that was brought to light by the interview process. That is, Harvard freshmen who entered with a strong background and plans to emphasize the sciences in their coursework but who switched to other fields rarely had joined a study group—in contrast to those who stuck with and chose to major in the sciences.

Students value strong writing skills and many benefit enormously from a few specific suggestions.

Of all the skills students say they want to strengthen, writing is mentioned three times more than any other. In light of this finding, Harvard's entire expository writing faculty met and agreed upon systematic ways to help students revise their papers more effectively, and incorporated these methods into their teaching. The key is that rather than simply telling students to “revise” their papers, they are being instructed as to how best to do so—skills

that are all the more important and likely to be used now that technology makes revisions easily possible. As a result of these efforts, writing is now taught differently to Harvard freshmen than in the past.

Echoing the first finding above, when asked how they in fact work on their writing, students who improved the most over the course of their undergraduate years (based on a multiyear study) describe an intense process: they worked with a professor, a writing teacher, or a small study group of fellow students who met regularly to critique one another's writing. The longer this work engagement lasted, the greater the improvement in writing. Further, throughout the course of our interviews, when asked what they considered "the most effective, important course they had taken in their four years at college," student after student spoke of classes structured such that writing for fellow students was an integral part of the course, which turns out to be an extraordinarily new and profound experience for some students.

As a result, Harvard professors are increasingly asking students to distribute their papers to their classmates. The key idea is that when students know their classmates will be reading their papers, they approach the project with an entirely different level of seriousness and commitment. Students work harder on developing their thoughts and on writing good papers. They don't want to be embarrassed. They want to be proud of their work in front of their classmates, and they want their ideas to become an integral part of class discussions. In turn, each student benefits from the insights that his or her fellow students bring to class. We hear much talk about the value of diversity on campus. This simple idea of sharing papers presents a low-cost way for students to be exposed to the way other students—perhaps from quite different religious, economic, and political backgrounds—approach problems and write about them. It certainly makes for stimulating class discussions.

Advisors can help students make a few key decisions that will shape their entire college experience.

Young men and women arriving at college immediately confront a set of decisions. Which courses to choose. What subject to specialize in. What activities to join. How much to study. How to study. Such decisions are intensely personal, and often they are made with little information. Yet their consequences are enormous: a subject that is bypassed, or study habits that are mismatched for certain classes, for example, can result in limited options, reduced opportunities, or closed doors. Advisors can play a critical role in helping students in their decision making. They can ask a few questions and make a few suggestions that will affect students in a profound and continuing way.

Fortunately, there is much to learn from the students. For example, our research has highlighted the relationship of class size to the quality of students' experiences. Harvard students who took at least two smaller classes each semester were far more engaged in and satisfied with their academic experience than those who took only large classes. Advisors can encourage students to consider class size (which our data show that many do not) and to choose at least one small class each semester.

While good advice on choosing classes is at the top of most lists, advice on how to study and how to allocate time is also crucial. Simply making advisees aware of the correlation between interpersonal relationships organized around academic work and happiness and academic success, as discussed above, is a straightforward, high-return practice. With regard to time management, the data show quite clearly that students who made the transition from high school to college most smoothly and enjoyably were those who quickly figured out that *time* was their most precious resource. Meanwhile, students who had a difficult adjustment to college simply tended to continue all their old habits from high school (which, after all, got them this far). As a result of these findings, in their welcoming remarks to Harvard students when they arrive on campus at the beginning of their freshman year, a series of deans and proctors point out the importance of careful time management. Additionally, a group of upperclassmen (who have served as student interviewers on the project) now speak to Harvard's newly arriving students. They take the approach that "every day has three halves. If I can get some good productive work done in any one of the three halves, that day is a success."

Faculty can make mid-course adjustments to improve their teaching by implementing the "one-minute paper" idea.

The one-minute paper idea simply involves each faculty member wrapping up his or her class one minute early, at which point each student is invited to take out a blank sheet of paper and anonymously answer two short questions with very brief answers. Question one is, "What was the big idea you learned in class today?" Question two is, "What is the unclear point in class today?" As he or she leaves the room after class, each student drops the paper into a large cardboard box. The professor can read all the responses in about five minutes and gain immediate feedback about how the class "went." Then the professor can

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choose to begin his or her next class based upon the responses from the most recent one-minute papers, including, of course, clarifying any unclear points from the last class.

More than 200 courses throughout Harvard University are using this simple idea; at the Kennedy School, nearly all faculty members routinely use it. The questions needn't always be the same. One colleague of mine, for example, changed the questions to, "How much time did you spend preparing for today's class?" And, "Is the pace that I am teaching this class too fast, too slow, or about right?"

Clearly, the one-minute paper presents an easy, low-tech, no-cost way for any professor to improve his or her class during the semester. The idea could be readily implemented on nearly every campus across America.

Conclusion

Each of these findings stems from the results of a large number of one-on-one student interviews, and each has led to a change in how we advise, teach, and encourage students to make the most of their undergraduate experience. The Harvard Assessment Seminars project is data driven; we strongly believe that a little bit of data goes a long way. A group of middle-aged faculty members could speculate and wonder for a long time what teaching methods are especially effective for engaging undergraduates; instead, by conducting these remarkably straightforward inter-

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views, we now have concrete data to undergird our faculty discussions about how to do our jobs well.

Any campus could conduct student interviews. What better way to honor students than to ask them in a thoughtful

and carefully planned way what works well for them and what isn't working so well for them, and then to take what they say very seriously and work on steady improvements—both in teaching patterns and in the way classes are structured?

Throughout any effort such as this, it is important to be encouraged by slow but consistent improvements. Treasure small changes. They are like compound interest, and they grow and accumulate over time. If an instructor in any subject, whether biology or history or chemistry or a foreign language, can enhance students' learning by just 3 or 4 percent each year, over a period of years those improvements accumulate into dramatic increases in learning. We routinely adopt this mindset in business and other realms of life. It would be wonderful to see more colleges and universities take this straightforward approach and apply these simple ideas to help their students succeed.

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