



How College Works

Chambliss, Daniel F.; and Takacs, Christopher G.
Harvard University Press, 2014

Book Review

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College students respond to my enthusiasm for old-fashioned dorms – long hallways, shared rooms, communal bathrooms – with the same eye-rolling disdain I once brought to my mother’s valorization of a three-mile walk to school. So when I heard that authors Chambliss and Takacs extol dorm life in *How College Works*, I was curious. Would they affirm other staples of college life from a bygone era? Book in hand, I discovered that the authors’ massive database, compiled by mining Hamilton College resources (including graduating student surveys, one thousand student papers collected over five years, and campus focus groups) and following a hundred Hamilton College students from their first year to ten years past graduation, supports research findings that confirm the value of several longstanding practices at liberal arts colleges. Although the authors acknowledge that Hamilton College is not representative of American higher education (it ranks fifteenth on *US News & World Report’s* list of national liberal arts colleges), they suggest that their exclusive focus on Hamilton has enabled them to uncover, beneath the kinds of statistical correlations that both define and constrain large-scale studies, experiences crucial to a good college education anywhere. I agree. On my reading, their findings and recommendations (evidence-based, resource neutral, and free of red tape) are relevant for schools with profiles far different than Hamilton’s.

Although the authors do advocate traditional dorms because they correlate with enhanced student engagement, most of their recommendations focus on the faculty. (1)*Put your best teachers in your first-year classes.* First-year students tend to choose their courses based on their time and location, not their subject matter. Students follow a compelling professor into a second or third course, often becoming de facto majors before they become declared majors. Because students perceive that a professor *is* the discipline she teaches, students dismiss an

entire field after one bad course. (2) *Frontload writing-intensive classes*: students experience the biggest gains during their first two years, and the weakest students gain the most. (3) *Engage students outside the classroom*. Graduating seniors report that dinner at a professor's home had a profound impact. Crunching the numbers from two thousand senior surveys and controlling for GPA, major, gender, race, and so forth, the authors were startled to discover that students who were a guest in a professor's home even once have an 11 percent higher college satisfaction score than students who were never a guest. (4) *Don't equate college success only with assessable skills*. Yes, alumni do comment on the difference that their writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills make in the workplace. But alumni who are highly satisfied with their college experience also report "confidence" and "relationships" as key outcomes. Alumni repeatedly attest to a sense of efficacy they attribute to four years of taking on and successfully meeting challenges, and they strongly affirm not only friendships forged in college but also their membership in a community that, over four years, shaped their identities and their values. Evidence, not nostalgia, supports the authors' case that three factors – skills, confidence, and relationships – comprise an index of satisfaction that shows how college works, now as in the past.

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