

Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs
How College Works. Cambridge, MA: Harvard
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How can colleges improve outcomes without spending more money? Chambliss and Takacs provide practical answers in their pleasing and persuasive book based on research conducted at a liberal arts college. Rather than trying to cover all things college, their book focuses on how college can be more effective at engaging, integrating, and motivating students. By treating the student experience as the unit of analysis, the authors provide a fresh approach to improving outcomes—both academic and personal development—without extra money. Overall, the book is sequenced nicely; it develops theoretical concepts while also taking the reader from year to year in the college experience—from meeting new people for the first time to graduation and beyond—showing how earlier connections and experiences shape later outcomes. The book’s argument can be summed up in a single sentence: “[W]hat really matters in college is who meets whom, and when” (p. 16).

The extensive research for this book was conducted at Hamilton College, a small, rural, and elite liberal arts college in New York. Funded by the Mellon Assessment Project, the long (14 years) and quite comprehensive study used both quantitative and qualitative methods, from panel interviews to network analysis. Although the underlying research was extensive and complex, Chambliss and Takacs’s presentation of it is clear and understandable, not requiring prior knowledge of the research methods. Any generally educated person could appreciate and enjoy this book. This book could be used by high school students (or their parents) in preparation for college, assigned in freshman seminars meant to help students get the most from their college experience, and incorporated into graduate pedagogy courses.

The book’s points are clearly presented and well supported. Relationships, both with other students and with professors, matter. Entering students need

to make connections to integrate and persist—socially, emotionally, and academically—in college. Regular proximity to a large but manageable social group facilitates integration, as does repeated contact with the same people. This proximity can be facilitated in crowded dorms—often less desirable to incoming students than private apartment-type living—and college groups focused on shared interests, such as sports teams, music ensembles, or the school newspaper staff. Early experiences and connections are important because they influence seemingly small choices early in the college process that shape larger decisions in the future—such as major—and impact overall outcomes.

Chambliss and Takacs argue that intro classes—as others have noted—are an important on-ramp for students selecting a major, highlighting the importance of meaningful connections of students with likeable professors. When a student takes an intro course, the professor stands in for her or his discipline. Relatively small amounts of personal interaction with a professor (in any course)—after class, during office hours, or, most influentially, through an invitation to a professor’s home—have some of the biggest impacts on students. In fact, students who have a meaningful connection with a professor are more likely to go beyond the class’s minimum requirements. College at its most effective is not about programs or technology but meaningful human interaction that can shape student choices, increase motivation, and lead to more overall satisfaction with the college experience.

Toward the end of their book, Chambliss and Takacs provide a helpful overview of what works, and what does not, to improve college outcomes. What works for administration, which seems to be the book’s primary audience, are the following: (1) Use the best teachers in ways that can make the most impact, such as giving them large classes. (2) Use space, such as dorms with roommates and shared bathrooms, to help students meet. (3) Use the schedule to increase the odds for learning; schedule classes you want students to take at good times and give bad teachers small classes at inconvenient times. (As an aside, colleges often do the reverse, giving large classes as punishments and using course releases as rewards.) (4) Help motivated students meet each other by fostering

physical and social spaces around shared interests. (5) Focus interventions early in students' careers because early experiences have disproportionate effects. (6) Leverage good teachers, courses, departments, and programs to impact as many students as possible because a student's experience of college follows a rather narrow path; students do not see all parts of the institution, only the parts they use. (7) Rethink assessment: Use individual students as the unit of analysis, be open to considering positive nonacademic outcomes, and keep assessment simple, aiming for the least work for the most information gained. For example, 10 years after a cohort enters the institution, draw a random sample of everyone (including dropouts) and ask those students what they thought of the college—what was the best, what was the worst, and what could have been done better. Ten years after being incoming freshman, these now full-fledged adults will have some perspective on whether college was worth it for them and what would have made it better.

Chambliss and Takacs offer a shorter list for what students can do to improve their experience: (1) Start meeting people and making a variety of friends right away. (2) Choose good teachers over course topics. (3) Be intentional in where you live and use your time for maximum social connectedness. (4) Get involved with high-contact activities and groups. (5) Keep social and academic options open by avoiding isolating exclusive groups and relationships and by not committing to a major prematurely. Overall, the main advice for students is to diversify their experiences and remember that happiness and success are highly dependent on the people they spend time with.

In conjunction with their discussion of what works, Chambliss and Takacs speak briefly about what does not work. First is strategic planning. Popular with governing boards, strategic planning is typically unrealistic and a waste of time because the plans are often impracticable and rarely implemented. The authors argue that simpler interventions, such as those they suggest, would be more likely to make a difference. Second is pedagogical innovation. Chambliss and Takacs assert that, though it cannot hurt, pedagogical innovation typically does not make as much of a difference as administrators and instructors might hope. Therefore, instead of trying to implement cutting-edge teaching techniques, administration will get a better effort-to-improvement ratio by putting good teachers in contact with more students and bad teachers in contact with fewer. Teachers will likely get a better effort-to-benefit ratio through intentional personal connections with students—starting

with learning and using students' names—which can motivate them to be more engaged in class. Finally, the authors say that MOOCs (massive open online courses) do not work. MOOCs might have some facility for highly motivated students with a solid educational foundation, just as the same students in theory would be able to learn calculus from a well-written book. Chambliss and Takacs argue, however, that MOOCs will not work for their proposed audience. The printing press already brought knowledge to the people. What is needed is meaningful human interaction leading to engagement and motivation, not more technologically advanced media to deliver knowledge that will likely go unconsumed.

This book could be used as a well-supported argument for tenured faculty and residential—or at least physical—campuses and against solely online education. Classes are not the only component of the college experience. Relationships with other students and interactions with faculty may be more important than classes in determining whether students will integrate, thrive, complete their degree, and be successful after college.

Chambliss and Takacs acknowledge that the book is specific to small liberal arts colleges and that the discussion might not match other schools, such as large universities or denominational schools, but argue that the findings have relevance for these other settings. This is certainly true of my own experience at a small, residential, denominational school that had about the same number of students as Hamilton and was, like Hamilton, rurally located. Also similar was the school's composition of primarily white American-born traditional students. Full dorms packed with a relatively homogenous group of students and almost endless opportunities to run into the same people provided both a small group of close friends and a large network of acquaintances. Having a primarily full-time faculty who regularly invited students into their homes provided memorable experiences and did motivate me to impress my instructors.

Much of the book's advice can be translated into other settings, but what is suggested would work best at residential schools with tenured faculty members who have time to invest personally in students. This is because, as Chambliss and Takacs argue, students will get the best experience if they are in close proximity with other motivated students and have numerous opportunities for meaningful interaction with faculty.

The location of the study—an elite college with a relatively privileged and homogenous student body—drives what may be the book's most

important limitation: a lack of attention to race and class. The authors could and did speak to gender at various points, but race and class were almost absent apart from an admission at the beginning of chapter eight that the research could not speak to these issues. This does not mean that the book is flawed, but it does mean that it has serious limitations for addressing some of the most important issues in higher education. In some ways, this book, like the prestigious liberal arts college where the research took place, provides ways to further benefit the already privileged. A critical application of the book's key idea—that opportunities for developing relationships and networks matter—could point to how debilitating it is to have limited cultural capital, and thus be less prepared for networking and developing personal relationships with professors, or to experience social marginalization.

In a time of shrinking budgets and public discussions about improving college outcomes, *How College Works* provides practical advice for administrators who want better outcomes without spending more money. This book is a must-read for the administration of residential teaching colleges and would be quite useful for administrators at any institution of higher learning. Teachers can gain from it as well, though there is less teaching-specific advice than there is guidance for administration. The main point for teachers is that meaningful interaction—from simply calling on students by name to having them over to one's home—benefits student motivation and satisfaction. Though this research was specific to an elite liberal arts college in the United States, many principles should apply to some extent in almost any context; the only teaching setting for which this book has nothing to offer is the MOOC. This is because, as the authors demonstrated throughout the book, college works when people committed to learning come together.

Michelle Jackson, Editor.

Determined to Succeed? Performance versus Choice in Educational Attainment. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. 347 pp.

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Determined to Succeed? Performance versus Choice in Educational Attainment is a strongly written comparative analysis that offers a unique

perspective in explaining the factors that lead to differences in students' educational trajectories. This text seeks to challenge the commonly accepted discourse that good grades and hard work are the most important elements in obtaining higher educational attainment, suggesting that there are a number of variables known as "secondary effects" that social scientists and educators must also consider. As such, readers are able to better understand why students with similar levels of school performance might drastically diverge in their educational goals and realizations. Why, for example, given two hypothetical students with identical grades and courses in school might one graduate from high school and go on to pursue tertiary education at an impressive institution while the other chooses to leave high school prematurely and enter a manual labor field? The answer, coming from editor Michelle Jackson and a team of researchers, lies in inequalities related to social and economic status.

Drawing on national survey data from countries in western Europe and the United States, this book analyzes data on transition points in students' academic careers in order to dissect the social factors that lead to unequal educational attainment—what Jackson calls *inequality in educational opportunity* (IEO). Much of the literature to this point has attempted to account for IEO on the basis of students' grades and test scores. This text, however, encourages readers to delve further and also consider the choices that students and their families make related to their social class that are independent of academic performance. Jackson and others examine the interactions between student performance, labeled "primary effects," and social class-driven choices, labeled "secondary effects" on educational attainment. Jackson's well-supported argument addresses a significant gap in the literature by finding that secondary effects, which consist of choices derived from such indicators as parents' levels of education and careers, are incredibly important in explaining educational inequalities. In this, readers see a certain likeness to cultural capital and recognize that families better endowed in social status and with greater exposure to the uppermost rungs of academia are generally more likely to encourage high educational attainment from their children.

Taking the Netherlands as one example, researchers find that secondary effects become increasingly impactful throughout the course of a pupil's education. Dutch schools have a high level of stratification, which, in terms of educational inequality, is taken to mean that students fall into distinct tracks early on. Dutch students make their