

How to Ace College

In a new book, a Harvard professor reveals secrets from his 10-year study of successful students

THERE'S SO MUCH FOCUS ON HOW to get into college these days, and not much advice about what to do once you get there. Back in the 1980s, the then Harvard president Derek Bok asked Richard J. Light, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to study students on campus. The result of this 10-year survey is the new book "Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds" (242 pages. Harvard University Press. \$24.95), which offers practical advice to school administrators, parents and, most importantly, to the students themselves. In an interview with NEWSWEEK's Alisha Davis, Light discusses how to translate good intentions into practice.

DAVIS: What was the most surprising thing you discovered?

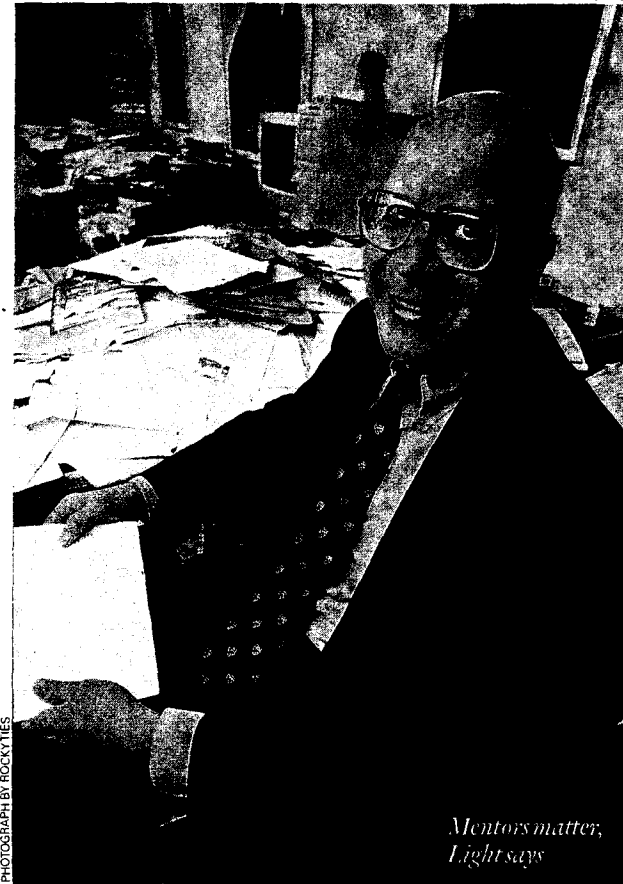
LIGHT: I had originally anticipated that most students would want the leaders of the college or the leaders of the school to treat them as grown-ups and get out of their way. The surprise is that student after student, 70 to 75 percent, said, "We need advice. We don't know what to do. How do we know which is the right history course to choose? How do we know how much time to spend on extracurriculars or homework?"

You talk a lot about the importance of finding a faculty mentor or a teacher. How should students do that?

It takes some initiative. If you don't have a reason to go talk to a teacher, invent one. I am a student adviser, and the first thing I ask my freshman is, "What is your job this semester?" Students always say, "My job is to work really really hard." And I say, "Excellent, but that's not enough. Your job is to get to know at least one faculty member this semester. Just think, you're going to be here for eight semesters. Even if you succeed only half the time, four years later, you will now have four faculty members who can write a job recommendation or serve as a reference." Kids almost always say they never thought about it that way.

What mistakes do parents make?

Although parents obviously mean well,



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROCKY TIES

Mentors matter, Light says

they generally give lousy advice when it comes to picking courses. In terms of academics, the students who were least happy tended to get the requirements out of the way before getting to the "good stuff." They took big courses, and then they said they felt their first years were too anonymous. The happiest students took a mix of courses that included small seminars. When I asked the unhappy students why they took so many requirements, almost all of them said that's what their parents suggested. It's counterintuitive for parents, but students should be taking small, specialized courses from the start.

What was one of the concrete differences between those students who prospered and those who struggled?

The one word that most sharply differentiated the two groups was the word "time."

For a bunch of middle-aged professors like me, the idea of time management is a no-brainer, but for students sometimes it's not as obvious. Students really have to keep an eye on how they spend their time, and I have two suggestions for them. The first is to make a thorough evaluation of their schedule. I tell students to keep track of how they spend their time every day for

a week. The most important change students need to make is often not how much they study, but when. Studying in a long uninterrupted block is much more effective than studying in short bursts. All students are pressed for time and they need to be with their friends and participating in extracurriculars. It's how you divide up that time that makes the difference. One busy undergraduate told me, "Every day has three halves: morning, afternoon and evening. And if I can devote any one of those blocks of time to getting my academic work done, I consider that day a success." Other students can learn from that.

Why do you emphasize extracurricular activities in your book?

Students who are involved in extracurriculars

are the happiest students on campus and also tend to be the most successful in the classroom. They find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives. For example, I spoke to a young woman who was a ballet dancer in high school. She joined the college ballet company, but she kept getting stress fractures, and noticed that many of the other dancers were having the same problem. She began to wonder why and she decided to explore that in her coursework. That decision changed her life. She took science classes. She applied for a research grant. When she graduated, she applied to medical school to become an orthopedic surgeon. Her whole education was so much more meaningful because it connected to her life. If students can apply what they are learning to their real life, they are more engaged and tend to get more out of it. ■