

Book Review / Compte rendu

Chambliss, Daniel F. & Takacs, Christopher G. (2014). *How College Works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pages: 224. Price: 29.95 USD (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-674-04902-4

Reviewed by Chad C. Nuttall, Director, Student Housing and Residence Life, University of Toronto Mississauga.

How College Works. Perhaps I can suggest an alternative title to authors Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs: *How College Works Very Well*. Chambliss is a professor of sociology at Hamilton College, with research interests in social theory, organizations, and research methods. Takacs is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Chicago, although he studied previously at Hamilton College and was a research assistant in the study that gave rise to this book. *How College Works* describes life at this small liberal arts college in upstate New York. Although idyllic in setting, selective, and elite in stature, Hamilton College does not appear to be particular extraordinary. Aside from the nine-to-one student–faculty ratio, life on campus is depicted as being what one would expect at many small, liberal arts colleges. The book focuses on the phases in students' paths through their years in college: Entering, Choosing, Engagement, Belonging, Learning, and Finishing.

The central argument of the book is reflected perfectly in the closing sentence of the book's introduction: "What really matters in college is who meets whom, and when" (p. 16). Faculty who think they are at the centre of students' success at university, or a student affairs professional who has been developing a suite of skills workshops, will be equally dismayed at the authors' findings. What matters most to students transitioning to higher education is developing friendships. To those familiar with students, this should not be a surprise. However, the impact is the simplicity of the book's argument. Colleges are not simply about programs, but more importantly are a gathering of people. The authors assert that, "good people, brought together in the right ways, we suspect are both necessary and perhaps even sufficient to create a good college" (p. 5). Underlying the authors' argument is that integration into the community is crucial to students being retained by the university. The authors provide plenty of evidence from their project to show just how important relationships are to student success.

The authors continually emphasize how important it is for students to find friendships—particularly in the first few weeks of their first term. Ultimately, the authors argue that students need relationships with two to three good friends and one to two professors.

While the findings may seem simple common sense, this is a rigorous case study with multiple and mixed methodologies. Although a single-institution case study, this project spanned more than a decade and included alumni interviews, repeated longitudinal interviews over a 10-year period, a survey, a student writing study (using over 1,000 student essays), focus groups, and more!

The authors put particular stock in initiatives that are high impact with relatively few resources. They also found that the most successful way for students to engage with the campus community is through groups of 40–80 students who have regular meetings that are semi-mandatory. A wide variety of activities meet these criteria and still allow for individual student interest. Examples the authors present include a choir, a sports team, a fraternity, or a floor in residence. To remain and thrive at college, students need to make friends quickly. Meeting fellow students and developing relationships is central to the winning strategy at Hamilton College. Also important is having terrific teachers, particularly those whom students view as exciting, knowledgeable, accessible, and—most importantly—engaging. The researchers found that successful students, with high GPAs, all had at least one faculty relationship.

In a time of enforcing standards and education reforms, the authors present an interesting argument in Chapter 4, “The Arithmetic of Engagement.” Although initiatives and programs may seem like a good idea, these may be counterproductive and expensive. The example from this case study is an initiative to ensure small class sizes. Not only did the authors find no benefits to engagement, but while the initiative did result in some smaller classes, more students ended up in larger classes.

Not surprisingly, belonging was closely linked to relationships on campus and to success. Chapter 5, “Belonging,” uses Randall Collins’s framework on emotionally bonded groups. The authors connect the experience at Hamilton College to the four points in the framework: (i) physical co-presence, (ii) shared focus of attention (e.g., a common book, cheering together at sports events, singing in a choir), (iii) ritualized common activities, and (iv) exclusivity. Perhaps the boldest outcome of the research is the finding that relationships are actually a requirement for learning. Also important to note is that not all students are looking for a career or marketable skills. The research findings indicate that friendships were the most frequently mentioned positive result of attending college.

My sense is that this book has a broad audience and appeal. It is a relatively short read and presents interesting findings from a rigorous research project. If you are familiar with research on students, then some evidence and arguments will not be new information. I still encountered very useful nuggets and have found myself sharing information from this book with colleagues. It also provides evidence for some of us who have been arguing, for some time, for a focus on people and relationships. I would say that it is possible to connect with the central argument quickly (in the introduction) and yet continue to be presented with the same argument in various forms throughout the chapters.

It is my view that the drinking culture described in the “Belonging” chapter needs some critique. I have no doubt that the authors were presented with data about the drinking culture on campus. However the on-campus alcohol culture of today is not the same as it was 10, 20, or 30 years ago. What is more problematic is that the authors unwisely claim that drinking alcohol is an important part of fitting in. Researchers of social norms, such as H. W. Perkins, continue to provide evidence to the contrary. Most students con-

sume relatively few drinks and do so occasionally. Many students do not drink at all. The number of high-volume or problem drinkers is extremely small but viewed as the norm. Since norms impact behaviour, we need to continue to dispel these outdated perceptions.

At higher education conferences, context often trumps almost anything. If you present a creative or innovative idea, it won't be long before someone says, "That won't work at my institution because we are small/big/urban/rural/rich/poor" and so forth. It would be too easy to say that what works at Hamilton College cannot work at my institution. Although this book is a case study of one small, elite liberal arts institution in the United States, and the authors acknowledge the limitations, I think Chambliss and Takacs have done a great job of focusing on very broad findings. I am not at all surprised by how important people, relationships, and friendships are in the success of a student at this college. I would argue these findings are likely to be true on my campus and yours, too.

In conclusion, *How College Works* argues that students face a chronological sequence of phases. Relationships and friendships are central and are more important than any program or pedagogical innovations. Again, I think the authors' aim is to market this book to the broadest of audiences. If you work in higher education, it would be wise to read this book. Researchers who focus on the student experience, or practitioners in student affairs, won't likely be surprised by the thesis. However, I would recommend that they, too, read the book.✱

References

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