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| September 25, 1997  | http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/images/dot.gifHarvard University Gazette |

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|   |   | **In Classroom, Small Changes Can Make Big Differences** ***Professor Richard Light prepares to release third report of Harvard Assessment Seminars*** For nearly a decade Professor Richard Light has been searching the minds of students looking for the best lessons Harvard has to offer so he can share them with the rest of the University and educators elsewhere. Through a project known as the Harvard Assessment Seminars, Light has sifted through hours of interviews with seniors to glean successful strategies that can enhance studentsÕ college experience. Next year, he plans to release the findings from the third part of the project, which was launched in 1986. "Some of the findings in this report, as in the first two, tend to sound simple and obvious," he said. "They may be obvious, but not everyone is using them." According to his latest findings, students have a better college experience when they: ¥ find a way to meld outside activities with what they are doing in class; ¥ take smaller classes; ¥ study with other students outside of the classroom; and ¥ have several assignments throughout the semester rather than only one final project. The new report will be incorporated with the previous two into a book that can be used by Harvard and other universities to help students get the most out of their education. It will outline strategies for students as well faculty members, resident tutors, and other advisers. The project began under former President Derek Bok as a way to discover Harvard's strengths and weaknesses. It also won support from President Neil L. Rudenstine, who encouraged Light to turn the findings into a book. "We're learning by turning up what seems to be working and sharing it with everyone," Light said. The lessons are appropriate not only for Harvard but other universities as well. So far, more than 17,000 copies of the previous two reports have been sent out and Light has been invited to speak about his project at dozens of other campuses. ÒIt has been tremendously enjoyable,Ó said Light, a statistics professor who splits his time between the Graduate School of Education and the Kennedy School of Government. "One of my big pleasures is taking statistical ideas and applying them to real-world, practical problems. My special interest is looking at institutions and organizations and asking how well they are doing and what changes around the edges could help them do better," he said. "I'm excited that I can take that interest and apply it to Harvard." Light has taught at Harvard since the late 1960s. His latest findings are the results of hundreds of interviews conducted over 10 years by Light and the undergraduates he supervises. **Making Connections** One of the most significant findings is that what students do outside of class can have a huge impact on what they do in class and how they structure their college careers. The average student spends only 12 hours a week in class, which means students are spending most of their time outside of class. Those who can relate what they do outside of class with what they do in class have a much more powerful college experience, Light said. One student Light interviewed decided to go into labor law because of a charity project he worked on that went terribly wrong. He had worked with underprivileged families in a housing project to arrange for volunteer contractors to do work on their apartments. One week before the work was to start, two labor unions went to court to prevent the work from being done. "It changed this student's life," Light said. "Having this experience completely shaped and formed what courses he would take and it enhanced his passion for economics." Advisers should encourage students to consider outside projects that can help them decide what they want to do after college, Light said. Students themselves should also seek such activities. **Smaller Classes** Another finding is that students who take smaller classes have a completely different experience from those who don't, Light said. "They feel that they get more involved and learn more," he said. Those small classes are particularly effective when the professor builds conflict into the experience, according to interviews conducted by one of Light's students, Anne Clark. In a class of eight, the professor split the class in two and asked them to prepare detailed arguments on opposite sides of rent control. The professor later asked them to write papers arguing the other side. "It's a wonderful way to teach because it helps each student see all sides of a conflict," Light said. "Professors should consider whether this makes sense for their class. It may not always be appropriate, but it can be very effective.Ó **Learning Together** In a previous report, Light found that students studying science did well when they worked together outside of class. His latest report shows that this strategy works with other classes as well. "I think that students do well when they work together because they enjoy it," he said. "It also lets them take advantage of the diversity of students who come to Harvard. They get to know and learn from students from all over the world." Group projects work well for science classes because students learn more than just the material, said Professor Dudley R. Herschbach. "In science, much is done by collaboration and your success depends on your people skills," he said. "But our science classes don't always foster that." Herschbach said that since reading Light's last report, he has put more emphasis on team projects. A growing number of nonscience classes also now use group projects, Light said. In one class, the professor intentionally gave an assignment so difficult that the students had to work on it together. The professor encouraged them to collaborate. They were asked to compare the new Russian Constitution with the old one as well as with the U.S. Constitution. "The student who told me about it said that his group divided up the reading and then got together to discuss it. By the end, everyone had a pretty good general understanding of the differences among the three," Light said. Although students work together on projects, in the end they must prove individually that they learned the material as they take exams and quizzes in class. **Structuring Classes** Students said they generally learn least in classes where their grade depends mostly or entirely on a single final paper, Light said. They prefer getting feedback throughout the semester so they can make changes and constructive adjustments if they are doing something wrong. Students said they appreciate those classes in which they have to turn in short papers answering specific questions about reading assignments. It pushes them to do the reading, they said. Another effective strategy is to let the students help plan the class. Some professors allow students to shape the curriculum for the final two weeks of their class. "Students took that responsibility very seriously,Ó Light said. "It changed how they looked at things knowing they would shape the lessons not only for themselves but also for their classmates." **SIDEBAR** Professor Richard Light recently completed the third portion of the Harvard Assessment Seminars and plans to release his finding along with the previous two reports in a book to be published next year. Light, along with other professors and students he supervised, interviewed hundreds of students to find ways of improving the college experience. Previous findings include: ¥ Contrary to what had been a common notion that undergraduates were uninterested in sciences, students reported a stronger interest in mathematics, the physical sciences, and engineering as a group than in any other course area. ¥ Students said they grew significantly in foreign language and literature classes. ¥ Undergraduates said they believed they had adequate formal access to faculty, but wanted more informal interactions. ¥ Students reported that they did better in classes that stressed active participation. ¥ Men generally want an adviser who knows facts while women look for advisers who will take more time to get to know them. ¥ Small group instruction is particularly helpful in science, mathematics, and languages. When classes formally divide students into small working groups to meet outside of class, the students reported they learn more, their test scores are slightly higher, and they become far more intensely involved in their academic work.  Copyright 1998 President and Fellows of Harvard College |