Lost in the current obsession to get into The Best U is something most adults readily admit, at least in hindsight: It doesn’t matter so much where you go to college, but what you make of the experience. So how to make the most of it?

In 1986, Derek Bok, then the president of Harvard, summoned a professor at the Graduate School of Education and asked him to evaluate how well the university educated its students and ways it might improve. Why, Dr. Bok wanted to know, did some students have a great experience while others did not?

The professor, Richard J. Light, a statistician by training, gathered colleagues and deans from 24 other institutions to examine the question and come up with a scientific method to find the answer.

Over ten years researchers interviewed 1600 Harvard students, asking a range of questions about everything from what they did in their spare time to the quality of teaching and advising. They looked for patterns—say, what made certain courses effective. They also correlated student’s academic and personal choices with their grades and how happy and intellectually engaged they said they were. The goal was to determine which factors were more likely to improve learning and overall happiness. A factor always linked to success would be rated 1.00; one with a significant relationship to success would be 0.50; and one with no effect would be 0.00. (Not every factor got a rating because of inconsistencies in how questions were asked.)

Fifteen years later, Harvard has made policy changes based on the study, like assigning students homework to do in groups and scheduling some classes later in the day so discussion can continue over dinner.

“It turns out there are a whole range of concrete ways students can improve their experience,” said Professor Light, who teaches at the John F. Kennedy School of Government as well as at the education school. Professor Light has gathered the best ideas in a book, “Making the Most of College” (Harvard University Press, 2001). The suggestions are often simple. Still, he said, “it’s amazing how little thought people give to these decisions.”

1. Meet the Faculty. Professor Light now tells each of the students he advises the same thing at the beginning of each term: “you’re job is to get to know one faculty member reasonably well and get that faculty member to know you reasonably well. If you do nothing else, do that.” On the most opportunistic level, this means that at the end of four years – two semesters each – the student has eight professors to write recommendations for jobs or for graduate school. But more important, the relationship makes a student feel more connected to the institution.

The most satisfied students in the Harvard interviews sought detailed feedback and asked specific questions of professors and advisors – not “Why didn’t I get a better grade?” but “Point out the paragraphs in this essay where my argument faltered.”

And don’t try to hide academic problems. The researchers working for Professor Light interviewed a sample of 40 students who stumbled academically in their first year. The 20 who asked for help improved their grades, the 20 who did not spiraled downward – isolated, failing, and unhappy.

2. Take a mix of courses. Nearly without exception, the students in the study who were struggling were taking nothing but large introductory courses that were needed to complete their degree. Why? To get them out of the way. Advise from well-meaning parents often goes something like this: First year, take required courses. Second year, choose a major. Third year, take advanced classes required for your major. Save fun electives, like dessert, for last.

The trouble is, introductory courses range across so much material they often fail to offer students anything to sink their teeth into. So when it comes time to choose a major, students don’t know what really interests them. By senior year, when taking courses that stimulate them, they are wondering why they didn’t take more courses in Japanese or medieval social history or statistics earlier. Those who treat the early years like a shopping excursion, taking not only required classes but also ones that pique their interests, feel more engaged and happier with their major.
“The less satisfied students were the ones who said, "My tack was to get all the
requirements out of the way,"” Professor Light said. "The successful student does the exact
opposite."

The corollary to the recommendation: Take small
classes, which encourages faculty interaction and a feeling of
connectedness. Taking classes
with 15 or fewer students had a
0.52 correlation with overall
engagement and a 0.24
correlation with good grades —
both considered significant.

3. **Studying in groups.** Doing
homework is important, but
what really matters is doing it in
a way that helps you understand
the material. Students, who
studied on their own and then
discussed the work in groups of
four to six, even just once a
week, understood material
better and felt more engaged
with their classes. This was
especially true with science,
which requires so much solitary
work and has complicated
concepts.

4. **Write, write, write.** Choose
courses with many short papers
instead of one or two long ones.
This means additional work —
more than 12 hours a week
versus fewer than 9, or about
forty percent more time — but it
also improves grades. Any class
that requires only one 20-page
paper at the end of the term,
there is no chance of recovering
from a poor showing. Courses
with four five-page papers offer
chances for mid-course
revisions.

And the more writing, the better. In all of Professor
Light's research, no factor was
more important to engagement
and good grades than the amount
of writing a student did. Students
in the study recommended taking
courses with a lot of writing in
the last two years, when you
have adjusted to the challenges of
being in college and are preparing
to write a long senior thesis.

5. **Speak another language.**
Foreign language courses are the
best-kept secret on campus.
Many students arrive with
enough skills to test out of a
college's language requirement.
But language was the most
commonly mentioned among
"favorite classes." Sixty percent
of students put them in the
category of "hard work but pure
pleasure"; 57 percent of those
interviewed again after leaving
college recommended not testing
out. Why? Classes are small,
instructors insist on participation,
students work in groups, and
assignments include a lot of
written work and frequent
quizzes, allowing for repeated
mid-course corrections. In short,
foreign language courses combine
all the elements that lead to
more learning and more
engagement.

6. **Consider time.** In the
Harvard interviews, there was
one striking difference between
those who did well in their
course and those who did not:
Those who did well mentioned
the word "time"; those who did
not never use the word. Students
reported that they did not
succeed when they studied the
way they had in high school,
squeezing 25 minutes in a study
hall, 35 minutes after sports
practice and 45 minutes after
dinner. Grades and
understanding improved when
they set aside and uninterrupted
stretch of a few hours. Professor
Light even suggests keeping a
time log for a few weeks and
showing it to an advisor, who can
help figure out the best way to
allocate time.

7. **Hold the drum.** Students
often flounder in college because
they do not have the same social
or family support network they
had at home. Those who get
involved in outside activities,
even ones not aimed at padding a
resume or a graduate school
application, are happiest.
Professor Light tells the story of
one young woman arriving
unhappy in her advisor's office.
When the advisor encouraged
her to do something beyond her
studies, she demurred. She had
no talent; she could not play on a
team or sing in the choir. "How
about band?" her advisor prodded.
She replied that she did
not play an instrument. "That's
okay," he said. "Ask them if you
can hold the drum." Years later,
when asked to describe why her
college experience had been so
positive, she repeatedly referred
to the band, which got her
involved at pep rallies and
football games and introduced
her to a diverse range of
students. Students who have
worked hard to get into college,
Professor Light said, tend to
arrive and say, "Academic work
is my priority, and doing other
things will hurt that." In fact, the
Harvard research found
otherwise.

"What goes on in
situations outside of class is just
important and in some situations,
it turns out to be a bigger deal
than what happens in class," he
said. "Very often an experience
outside a class can have a
profound effect on the courses
students choose and even what
they want to do with their lives."
The study found that
students who worked long hours
at a job had the same grades as
those who worked a few hours
or not at all. Students who
volunteered actually had higher
grades and reported being
happier. The only students
whose outside activity hurt their
grades were intercollegiate
athletes. Still, Professor Light
said, they are the happiest
students on campus."