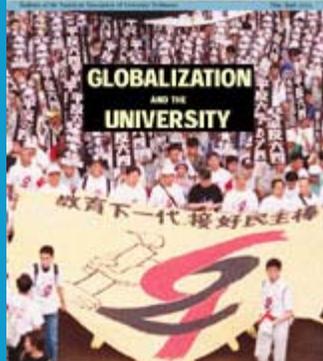


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Cover: About 1,000 demonstrators march through a Hong Kong street in May 2001 to commemorate the Chinese government's June 4, 1989, crackdown on a student-led prodemocracy movement in Tiananmen Square. The banner exhorts viewers to "educate the next generation" about the military crackdown. Photo courtesy of AP Wide World.

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Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds

Richard J. Light. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001

Reviewed by MARY W. GRAY

It is a pleasure these days to find a book about teaching and learning that makes no reference to technology and does not suggest that face-to-face contact with students is best avoided in favor of some version of distance learning. Richard Light's *Making the Most of College* uses the words of students themselves to advise other students, faculty, and administrators how to "make the most of college." Much of what is said is familiar to experienced faculty members—small classes, study groups, one-on-one contacts for research projects, student participation in and outside of the classroom help students learn. What is new is that many of the insights are backed up by in-depth interviews with some 1,600 students, many at Harvard University, but some from institutions of all types.

The essence of Light's message to students and faculty is that what students need is to make links between the academic and the personal, but above all, they need to get involved. For an undergraduate contemplating medical school, such a link could be experience working in a hospital; for a political science student, it could be organizing a renovation effort for a housing project, only to see it fail through union opposition. Light argues that engaging in extracurricular activities can lead to better academic performance and a more satisfactory college experience even if the activities are not connected to the student's academic interests. He cites the experience of a shy Pacific Islander who became the drum carrier (a nonplaying role) in the Harvard band, and points out that there are 168 hours in a week, none of which needs to be devoted to being a couch potato. But there are limits to how much time can be devoted to nonacademic pursuits, as he acknowledges in reference to intercollegiate athletes. Moreover, his subject population appears to consist almost entirely of students going directly from high school to full-time collegiate study. Not for him the single mother balancing a full-time job, child care, and a near full-time academic load!

The immediate reaction to what Light says is to assume that what works in the rarified atmosphere of Harvard may have little universal relevance. He repeats, more often than necessary, that the advice given by the students he interviewed has broad application in higher education. That is true of much of what they say, but the fact remains that for sheer ability and commitment to

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intellectual exploration, most students are not equal to those with whom Light has worked most closely. And most faculty do not have as much time as they would like to put into practice his proposed means of helping students make the most of their time at their institutions. For example, he speaks of meeting one on one with students at the beginning of each year to explore in depth their backgrounds and aspirations. But what if twenty or more students were depending on him each term for advice and guidance? And what about the faculty member who has two or three classes of more than a hundred students each semester, plus maybe, just maybe, the treasured small seminar so productive for student learning? And who at the same time must publish or perish?

These reservations aside, much can be learned from what students tell us and from what Light passes on from master teachers. For example, many faculty have found the one-minute essay useful. For those who may not have encountered the technique, it involves asking students to answer three questions anonymously at the end of each class session: what is the big point, the main idea, that you learned in class today? What is the main unanswered question you leave class with today? What is the muddiest point?

Light's advice on teaching from an interdisciplinary perspective in a discipline-based course is especially welcome in an era in which there is much talk of interdisciplinary study but also much difficulty in negotiating its introduction with administrations obsessed with "revenue-centered management" or other accounting devices. He also dispels some myths about students' attitudes to the study of science and languages, providing guidance along the way regarding how to make courses in these areas more enriching.

Light devotes several chapters to the hot topic of diversity—what does it mean, what does it accomplish? Two features of his approach are new. First, he concentrates not on diversity itself, but on what students from a variety of different backgrounds can bring to the study of literature, music, history, politics, or science. Second, he discusses religious diversity, a topic somewhat neglected in conventional discourse. Light's advice to administrators concentrates heavily on diversity, to the neglect of some issues that are actually much more difficult to resolve. For example, given the limited resources that most institutions have, how can students be assured of the small seminars and personal attention that suit them best?

Light includes an appendix on the issue of assessment. The surveys reported in the book grew out of an attempt to examine the conditions under which students learn best, both in and outside of classrooms. Light wanted to determine how professors, advisers, staff members, and students could do their work better in order to facilitate student learning. His idea was to gather information that would help guide educational policy decisions; hence, the advice to faculty to engage with students more closely, to students to be active participants in learning in and outside the classroom, and to administrators to facilitate diversity.

Light's approach seems more worthwhile than the usual assessment procedures that confine themselves to asking what students know. The heart of the advice he gives to students who want to make the most of college is something easy to aspire to, but hard to achieve: get to know one faculty member a year reasonably well. Implicit in this advice is a message to faculty: get to know as many students as you can reasonably well.

Mary Gray is professor of mathematics and statistics at American University.
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The Student Body: Short Stories About College Students

and Professors

John McNally, ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001

Reviewed by ROGER PLATIZKY

The Student Body is comprised of seventeen campus short stories written mostly in the past ten years by well-known authors and several talented graduate students. In his introduction to the collection, John McNally notes his intention: to introduce readers to what he calls "the offspring—or perhaps, the lesser-known cousin"—to the campus novel. Though widely varied in narrative point of view and degree of verisimilitude, most of these stories do have a "family resemblance" that will be recognized, embraced, or resisted by academics. A few of the stories refer only obliquely to campus life (Stephen King's "Strawberry Spring," for example), but most are at least loosely connected by conflicts that allegedly take place on campuses nationwide. Divided almost evenly into two parts—student stories and faculty stories—*The Student Body* concerns such problems as student plagiarism, bonding and disloyalty within the Greek system, alcoholism, student underachievement, the alienation of middle-aged faculty, and the infatuation between students and their professors, both heterosexual and gay.

Although the stories in the anthology are not equal in quality—some are more nuanced, thematically complex, and gracefully worded than others—the majority will be interesting to college teachers and especially useful for students in creative writing or education classes. For example, the lead story, Richard Russo's "The Whore's Child," takes place in a creative writing class in which both the graduate students and the teacher become baffled when an alternative student, Sister Ursula (an embittered nun), decides to write her memoirs. The students, who have been trained to write fictionally rather than autobiographically, have problems critiquing her confessionals, the first installment of which they approach "the way you would an alien spaceship." The unwanted daughter of a Belgian prostitute, Sister Ursula is described as finding herself "at the very bottom of the ecclesiastical food chain," and most of her readers, while respecting her, cannot connect with her experience. The only element really missing from this story is that the nun is never given the opportunity to critique the stories of her younger classmates. In fact, if reader reaction questions were supplied at the end of this story (or any of the others in the collection), students might be asked how the story would change if the nun were not only the object of investigation but also the agent.

A poignantly written story that will resonate with anyone who has ever been, known, or wanted to date a lonely scholar is Ron Carson's "Hartwell." Recalling the psychological doubling in Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and the rude awakening in James Joyce's "Araby," "Hartwell" concerns a middle-aged professor who is stunned when his most introverted colleague begins to date a popular sorority girl who wears a red plaid kilt. The story culminates in an epiphany when the bewildered professor sneaks into the Tri Delta sorority and discovers that the five typed romantic poems his friend has sent to his sorority girlfriend have been defaced by the "red-ink marginalia" and "loopy scrawlings" of her roommates. The sororal comments are described as "filthy, puerile, and inane." Suddenly feeling "quite old, quite heavy, and very out of place," the alienated narrator retreats from this littered room of youth and "obscene ridicule."

For anyone who has ever witnessed an affirmative action policy debased by someone pretending to be a minority, Lucia Perillo's dark comedy "The Wife of the Indian" will strike a familiar chord. In this story, an Italian art teacher and abusive spouse, Tony Domenici, pretends he is Native American ("Tony Drowningcreek") to land a plum job and other associated perks at a liberal college. Mocking the social pretensions that politically correct teachers sometimes unwittingly promote, the narrator describes the way that Tony, at least at first, easily manipulates the system:

Best of all, Tony has an excuse to wear his black hair long and ratty

without someone breathing down his neck. They get invited to parties where people show up wearing interesting ethnic clothes, bearing hand-thrown clay pots full of interesting ethnic food, and when she [Tony's wife] and Tony get loaded on the free booze their behavior is chalked up as merely interesting and ethnic.

If Perillo's story mocks campus liberality, Gillian Kendall's "In Loco Parentis" balances the other side of the academic equation. In this story concerning homophobia on American campuses, an out lesbian, falsely accused of having had a relationship with a top female student who has recently died in a car accident, imagines the reasons she would be far happier teaching at a top-ranked and more liberal college in Chicago. Any uprooted gay or lesbian who has taught in a small, conservative school can easily identify with her unfulfilled fantasy:

I had been visualizing the move to Chicago so bad I could taste snow and real scholarship. I was ready for wind and winter and a respected women's studies department. I wanted to live where queers outnumbered Baptists. I sent resumes out to any city with decent gay bars . . . and [without] landlords who sent part of my rent to the radical right.

While *The Student Body* mainly offers interesting stories, some academics may be put off by the degree of cynicism that permeates the anthology. A's are readily given to students for drugs or sexual favors; fraternities and sororities seem far more important than classrooms or libraries. Hardly any college students seem to take their studies seriously, and if they do, they are fated to resent their parents who teach at the same school ("Free Writing"), to plagiarize fascist theories ("The Banks of Vistula"), or to die intoxicated in a car wreck ("In Loco Parentis"). More problematically, there are stories such as Joe Schraufnagel's "Like Whiskey for Christmas" that, while witty, seem more than a little self-indulgent. Schraufnagel's nineteen-page, five-chapter satire concerns a gay male who is infatuated with a Spanish teacher who fails him on a language competency test. Occasionally scatological, the story, despite its innovative plot, reads like an unedited routine by stand-up comedian John Leguizamo, famous for his sexual explicitness. Do we really need to know how many eliminations the narrator had in his dormitory bathroom? I think not.

Perhaps in an attempt to explain or justify the Dionysian elements in the volume, McNally writes in his introduction that "one would be hard pressed to find anything more mind-numbing than reading a realistic portrayal of a department meeting where colleagues, using the often tiresome jargon of their own particular discipline, play games of petty one-upmanship." I am not sure whether *The Student Body* provides the antidote to such provincialism. In fact, while the anthology shows much concern for the physical aspects of the student body, this otherwise solid collection might benefit from including a few stories that focused on the intellectual, scholarly, and spirit-affirming dramas that are also part of campus life.

Roger Platizky is professor of English at Austin College. [Back to top.](#)

The States and Public Higher Education Policy: Affordability, Access, and Accountability

Donald E. Heller, ed. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001
Reviewed by MELVIN T. STEELY

Donald Heller and the other thirteen contributors to this study propose that affordability, access, and accountability are the three key issues in higher

education today, and they are certainly on the right trail. National interest has been focused on affordability and access since the creation of the G.I. Bill and the President's Commission on Higher Education after World War II. The commission, established by President Truman in 1947, correctly assumed that it had public support for its recommendations for affordable and accessible higher education, primarily as a preventive against the further development of class divisions. In the 1940s and 1950s, the public trusted that higher education would serve the interests of students and the nation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, however, some of that public trust was lost. As costs grew, public officials and taxpayers began to wonder if they were getting their money's worth from education. Account-ability joined affordability and access as a key concern.

Of these three concerns, affordability is the most easily and reliably measured, and the book's chapters dealing with that subject are thorough. The problems of state funding are outlined clearly and fully. One contributor, David Breneman, asks how merit-based programs (for example, federal tuition tax credits or Georgia's HOPE scholarship program) may restrict access for minorities and low-income families by favoring middle- and upper-income families. The book presents a series of possible solutions to this problem of affordable access. Unfortunately, all of them focus on policy makers, who tend to be bureaucrats, and not on politicians, who tend to reflect public opinion and are also crucial in the change-making process.

In his essay, contributor Michael Mumper, in the second chapter, asks why both costs and enrollment are rising. In search of answers, he interviewed policy makers from eleven states. Mumper notes that his research findings are tentative and confusing and concludes, in proper educationese, that "each participant in the tuition-setting process must construct for him- or herself an operational understanding of the contested dynamics that drive college costs and prices." In this and other chapters, the reader is presented with inconclusive information.

Assessing access is even more difficult, since little reliable data exists, and some of the chapters on these topics, such as the one by Sylvia Hurtado and Heather Cade and the one by Brian Pusser, fall victim to the problem of unexamined assumptions. The authors note that the 1980s and 1990s were periods of narrowing access for minorities, primarily due to restrictions on affirmative action, quotas, and positions set aside to be filled by members of specific minority groups. Their conclusions are similar to those of participants at a 2001 meeting in Atlanta of the Education Leaders Council, who charged that bad education policy was responsible for failing schools and identified the culprits as political leaders, policy makers, education bureaucrats, teachers' unions, and politically or ideologically motivated research studies. But it is not clear that such conclusions are warranted. For example, is access denied if minority enrollment drops at flagship institutions but increases at other schools in the same system, as has happened in Texas and California?

Other chapters are more balanced, describing how colleges and universities must juggle the need for increased access on the one hand and equity and opportunity on the other.

The book further probes accessibility through technology, along with the problem of accountability that accompanies it, discussing Western Governors University, California's and Kentucky's virtual universities, Maine's UNET, the Open University of Great Britain, and similar programs in North Carolina and Georgia. These programs raise as many questions as they answer, but are viewed by educators and the public as an important force in education because they offer flexibility to users. They are also favored by politicians and budget analysts, as well as by some education policy makers, who see them as cheaper than traditional education programs on established campuses.

The section on accountability leaves the reader frustrated since, as the writers acknowledge, accountability is impossible to measure in any responsible or meaningful way. The economics (cost, price, and production) of education is messy and muddled by the different priorities of policy makers, educators, and the public. In many cases, outcomes are not measurable, because goals are not defined clearly, and measurement instruments are of dubious reliability.

One area of accountability that the book neglects is that of higher education to the public for what is being taught. Time and again, the charge is made that American professors and universities are out of touch with the American people. Critics complain of fad and fringe courses, of radical indoctrination of students, and of classes and programs designed to dismantle basic values. Academics have not been able to persuade the public that many academic programs are meaningful and worthwhile, and they often retreat to an academic freedom defense when challenged. In the book's forward, Breneman takes note of this fact, expressing the hope that the essays in this volume might point the way toward a national discussion, leading to a reestablishment of trust among families, politicians, and schools of higher education.

This book is useful as a tool to begin a discussion of the issues of affordability, access, and accountability. It does, however, bog down at times in data only an accountant could appreciate. Those interested in higher education policy might do as well by regularly reading *Academe*.

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