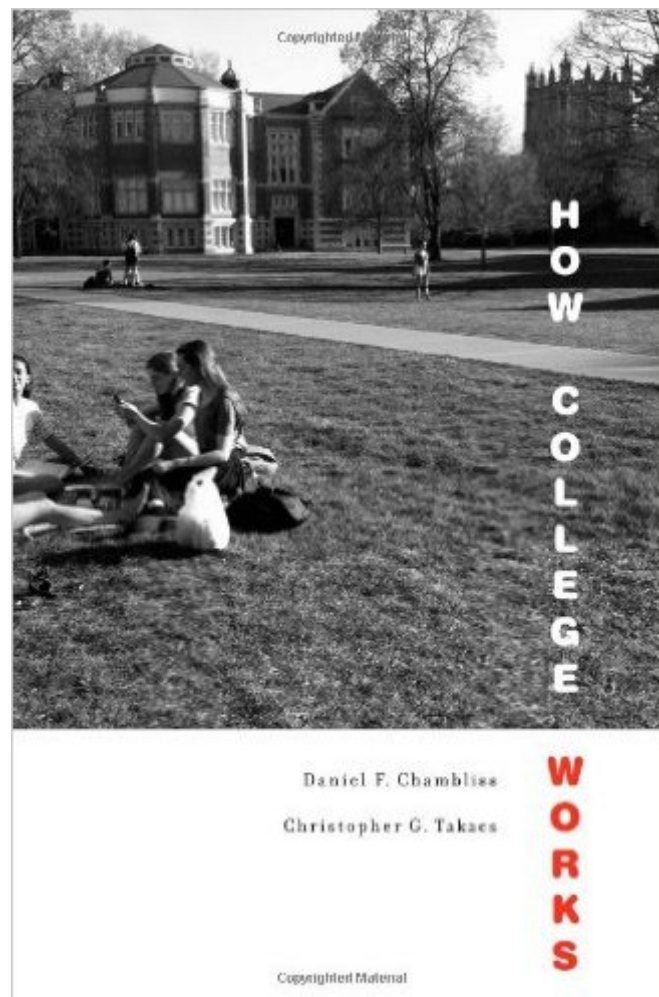


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# How College Works



## Synopsis

Constrained by shrinking budgets, can colleges do more to improve the quality of education? And can students get more out of college without paying higher tuition? Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs conclude that the limited resources of colleges and students need not diminish the undergraduate experience. *How College Works* reveals the surprisingly decisive role that personal relationships play in determining a student's collegiate success, and puts forward a set of small, inexpensive interventions that yield substantial improvements in educational outcomes. At a liberal arts college in New York, the authors followed a cluster of nearly one hundred students over a span of eight years. The curricular and technological innovations beloved by administrators mattered much less than the professors and peers whom students met, especially early on. At every turning point in students' undergraduate lives, it was the people, not the programs, that proved critical. Great teachers were more important than the topics studied, and even a small number of good friendships--two or three--made a significant difference academically as well as socially. For most students, college works best when it provides the daily motivation to learn, not just access to information. Improving higher education means focusing on the quality of a student's relationships with mentors and classmates, for when students form the right bonds, they make the most of their education.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There is nothing earthshaking about the findings of this decade-long, social science study of student

experience at Hamilton College in upstate New York; but I am gratified that so many of the authors' assessments line up with common-sense notions that I've reached on my own during more than forty years of college teaching. One reason I think the authors have it right is that I teach at a conservative religious college with open admissions, seemingly at opposite poles from the authors' own secular, highly selective institution. The authors elaborate the following basic ideas in remarkably lucid prose:

1. crucial student decisions are often shaped by minor contingencies of scheduling, availability, and happenstance. • (156)
2. early college experiences are often the most decisive.
3. students need to find friends among their peers quickly, and old-fashioned, long-halled dormitories are one way to encourage them to do just that.
4. students need to encounter good teachers early in their college career.
5. most students need to find a faculty mentor "not to be confused with their academic advisor, who is often just a cipher.
6. small gestures on the part of faculty (even simply learning student names) can have a profound impact on student development.
7. a few professors often have a vastly disproportionate influence over a large numbers of students.
8. the benefits of a residential college include learning how to engage in appropriate social relationships and how to develop sound habits of work and thought.
9. because education demands personal relationships, people themselves are more important than strategic planning, student learning assessments, or technological innovation.

"How College Works" is a surprisingly readable and thorough work of social science. The authors exhaustively collected data from students at Hamilton College, an elite liberal arts college in New York State. What makes their work important is that they keep their eyes carefully on the students themselves, rather than institutional assessment, programs, or career outcomes. They want to learn what students' actual experiences are. Importantly, they also ask alumni many years later to reflect back on their experience, so the analysis is not just about what students think is going on in the moment, but also what they make of their college experience with the wisdom of a few years of maturity and experience. Their central conclusion is that the most important factors in student experience are not programs, nice dormitory spaces, good food or fancy gyms, but rather individual personal interactions. The relationships that students create with peers and with faculty and staff are often pivotal in their development and tend to make the difference between good and poor outcomes. As the authors proceed, they challenge a few assumptions in higher education. Small classes are not necessarily better overall. Old-fashioned dormitories are preferable to "apartment-style" housing. Just one intimate faculty mentor can make a huge difference for a student. Data show even just being invited to dinner with a faculty member can have a huge impact

on the student's experience. As a professor in a similar setting, the author's analysis certainly resonates with my own experience. The book itself is a quick read. There is a fair amount of repetition of ideas, which some might find a bit too much.

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