My outside commitment to ballet gave my academic work a kind of focus and purpose that ended up meaning a lot to me. And I got to know three professors well while doing this. And of course I feel I really know why I want to go to medical school, why doing a certain kind of surgery has special meaning for me.

Whichever medical school I end up attending, I will be incredibly well prepared. And maybe even more important, that decision is based both on lots of information and on real experiences as an undergraduate. I know most people don't find pigs' bones and turkey legs particularly exciting, but for me it was an unbeatable experience.

In short, students who are able to integrate the in-class and outside-of-class parts of their lives can reap great benefits. Those of us who run or teach at colleges routinely talk about financial aid packages for students. It should be possible to help every student to build an "educational package." Rather than saying "Let's admit good students and not get in their way," we should admit our students and then get in their way, in the most constructive sense, to help them make these powerful connections.

3

SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS

Much of what students tell us in interviews can be helpful to others who are wondering about choices they may face in college. Will study habits that worked in high school also work in college? With heavy academic demands, will I have time for activities other than studying? Won't such outside activities hurt my grades? What if I don't do well in my courses—can I get some help? What if my roommates are very different from me? Students have much to say about all these topics, based on their own experiences both good and bad.

Managing Time

Things that worked for me in high school, I discovered, don't work for me in college. I really was unprepared for the amount of material that is presented here and the speed at which it is presented. It was a bit of a shock.

Things I picked up quickly in high school I couldn't pick up so easily any more.

Here at college I wasn't being checked every day. I did not get off to a great start because I had never really learned to study this enormous amount of material in a systematic way. I tended to do one subject for a big span of time and then neglect it for a week. Then I moved on to another subject, and forgot about that for a week. So
there was no continuity within each course. That had a
lot to do with it. Finally I figured it out. This year, I'm
pushing myself to spend a little bit of time every day on
each subject.

Why is it that some undergraduates make the transition
from high school to college smoothly, while others have
much more trouble? Do certain behavior patterns tend to
differentiate students who succeed quickly, making superb
academic and personal adjustments to college, from seem-
ingly similar students who do not adjust as well?

To pursue this idea, Constance Buchanan and a group of
colleagues from four universities devised a detailed protocol
to interview two groups of sophomores in depth. (The quo-
tation that opens this section is from one of their interviews.)
One group had had an outstanding first year in all ways, both
academic and social, while the other group struggled. The inter-
viewers' goal was to explore how each of the students, as a
newly arrived freshman, had thought about making the transi-
tion from high school to college. They hoped to find a few
important differences between the two groups of sopho-
more. They quickly discovered that one difference, indeed a
single word, was a key factor. Sophomores who had made the
most successful transitions repeatedly brought up this word
on their own. Sophomores who had experienced difficulty
hardly ever mentioned the word, even when prompted.

The critical word is time. Sophomores who had a great
first year typically talked about realizing, when they got to
college, that they had to think about how to spend their
time. They mentioned time management, and time alloca-
tion, and time as a scarce resource. In contrast, sophomores
who struggled during their first year rarely referred to time
in any way.

Several advisors have told me that some first-year stu-
dents find it a real challenge to allocate their time so they
are both happy personally and effective in their academic
work. Students who learn to manage their time well are
often those who work hard on this topic when they first ar-
rive. It isn't easy for every student. It requires systemsatic
effort. But the heavy demands of most college courses, com-
pared with what students faced in high school, reinforce the
value of making such an effort. It certainly beats the alter-
native of feeling overwhelmed when suddenly facing the
amount of reading assigned in college courses. When se-
niors are asked what advice they would offer new arrivals,
is this idea of learning to manage time is a common response.
I think it is a wise one. The distinction in attitudes toward
managing time translates into a distinction between new
students who prosper and those who struggle.

Balancing Academics and Other Activities

A sophomore told Buchanan and her colleagues:

Everything here is so fast paced. I forget sometimes, but
what I do here in a day is what an exciting month
would have been for me back home. It's really intense.
And I think I don't realize it until I go home for vaca-
tions and sleep until one o'clock in the afternoon. I for-
get how in high school I used to go to bed at 10:30 P.M.
and wake up at 8:00 A.M. Here you're going to bed at
1:00 A.M. and waking up at 8:30—I have a class at nine
every morning. And you're going from class, to study
group, to my part-time job in the library, to meals, to
friends, to performance. It's been a big adjustment.

Each year when new students come to me for advice, I
pass on some of what I have learned from their predecessors: I encourage them to take full advantage of the university community. Above all, I urge them to get involved in depth in at least one activity other than courses. It can be paid employment if they need to earn money. It can be an activity with other students, or perhaps athletics or volunteer work. Many of my advisees understand this, but a few need convincing. New students want to do well, and some are nervous when they first arrive. For a few students, their idea of life at college is to sit in classes for twelve to fifteen hours each week and spend the rest of their time studying alone in their rooms.

Some of these students are not very happy. There is a risk they will spend too much time alone. Whenever I see this pattern developing, I raise the issue. Their response is nearly always the same: "My academic work is my priority, and doing other things will hurt my academic work."

Thanks to findings from an extensive survey of Harvard undergraduates directed by Thomas Angelo, I and other advisors now know how to answer such students. We now have concrete data on how outside-of-class activities relate to academic success. The big finding is that a substantial commitment to one or two activities other than coursework—for as much as twenty hours per week—has little or no relationship to grades. But such commitments do have a strong relationship to overall satisfaction with college life. More involvement is strongly correlated with higher satisfaction.

Here is a brief overview of students' outside-of-class commitments. These are findings for just one campus. The situation on other campuses may differ somewhat, yet I expect the main relationships, which point to a strong conclusion, will hold up.

First let's consider paid work. More than half of all Harvard undergraduates work part time for money, regardless of their academic focus at college. More women work than men. Older students work more than younger students.

They work at an enormous variety of jobs. The most common by far is administrative/clerical, followed by research/data analysis. Women are more likely to have clerical jobs than men. Men are more likely to have custodial jobs than women. The most common time commitment for students who work is between seven and twelve hours per week.

A steadily increasing number of undergraduates work in computing and technology. Many do this for their own learning, separate from paid employment. And for a growing number (now approaching 55 percent), their task on the job is either to help develop new technologies or new applications of existing technologies or to help others on campus apply technology to their work.

There is no significant relationship between paid work and grades. Students who work a lot, a little, or not at all show similar patterns of grades. The grade distributions of students whose jobs have flexible schedules are almost identical to those with less flexible schedules.

Students who work and those who don't work express identical levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience. Workers' ratings of the "overall quality of their courses" are similar to those of nonworkers. Workers' ratings of "overall satisfaction with the challenge level of courses," are similar to those of nonworkers. Responses are also similar for "overall satisfaction with relationships with friends," and "satisfaction with romances."

Two striking findings pop up when students are asked to describe their satisfaction with work experiences. First, on
average, the more hours per week a student works, the happier he or she is with work experience as an integral part of college. Second, three-fourths of all working students say that working has a positive effect on their overall satisfaction with college. Only 6 percent think work has a negative effect. Women are even more likely than men to report that work has a positive effect.

What about extracurricular activities—outside-of-class commitments not including paid work or intercollegiate athletics? For these the participation rate is 80 percent: 86 percent of women and 76 percent of men. Part of this gender difference is due to men’s heavier commitments to intercollegiate athletic teams. This gap has shrunk dramatically in the last ten years as women increasingly participate in intercollegiate sports.

Seventy percent of all students are involved in two or more activities, and 14 percent are involved in four or five. Of those participating in any extracurricular activities, 68 percent invest more than six hours per week on average, and 34 percent spend more than twelve hours per week.

As with paid work, there is no significant relationship between participating in extracurricular activities and academic performance. Students who participate and those who don’t have similar grade distributions. Even students with heavy involvement do not have significantly lower grades than those who are less involved.

Another type of out-of-class involvement is volunteer work. In any one semester, 25 percent of all undergraduates are involved in volunteering. More than 65 percent of all students do volunteer work at some point during college. Women volunteer somewhat more than men, and upperclassmen are significantly more likely to volunteer than first-year students. Students who work for money somehow find time to do volunteer work more often than those who don’t work for money.

Volunteers typically spend between three and six hours per week at their activity. The average is just over five hours. Of the volunteers, 46 percent work with children and teens, 13 percent with the homeless and the poor, 9 percent with handicapped people, and 10 percent with senior citizens.

Why do students volunteer? They report that they “enjoy helping others,” or they “want to give something back,” or they “want to make the world a better place.” Of students now volunteering, 96 percent plan to continue doing so in the future.

As with paid work and extracurricular activities, there is no significant relationship between volunteering and grades. On average, students who do volunteer work have slightly higher grades than those who don’t. When asked how volunteering affects their grades, students report no negative impact whatever. When asked how volunteering affects their social life and overall satisfaction with college, students report that on balance it has a positive effect on both.

With the exception of intercollegiate athletics, no extracurricular activity is associated with lower grades. Intercollegiate athletes at our campus have slightly lower grades on average than non-athletes. From explorations on other campuses, I believe this finding is widely true. Among athletes, there is also a modest but clear negative relationship between hours spent on sports and grades. It is important to mention one fascinating trade-off here. While varsity athletes have slightly lower grades than average, they also are, as a group, among the happiest students on campus. They have many friends and feel closely bonded to the college.

To summarize, two main findings stand out. If we aggr-
gate all the non-academic commitments of students, adding up total hours spent on paid employment, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and athletics, there is no significant relationship between level of involvement and grades. Yet there is a clear relationship between participation and satisfaction with college. Students involved in some outside-of-classroom activities are far happier with their college experience than the few who are not involved.

Participating in the Arts

My engagement with the theater, not on the acting side, but on the technical side and choreography, has had an impact on me that I wouldn’t have predicted when I arrived as a freshman. It has helped me to establish unexpected connections between what I do at the Dramatic Society, or the Experimental Theater, and academic work. I am a History and Literature concentrator. One example came up when we discussed two recent plays by Edward Albee, and how their organizational structure is so different from plays written in the nineteenth century. I had worked hard on producing an Albee play at the Experimental, and it was such a pleasure to share insights about that play with my class.

I don’t want this to sound too arrogant, but I think because of my work with drama here I might have actually known more about Albee’s writing structure than my instructor, good as she is. After all, I lived it, brooded about it, and had to actually produce it on stage. I think this is what some people mean when they talk about different activities “dovetailing.” For me, it all came together thanks to my theater work.

Not every band member became my friend. In fact, I don’t especially love many of them. But within a week, since we practiced several times, I found myself making about half a dozen friends. We have stayed close throughout our years here. Between those friends and unexpectedly feeling part of this community the moment I put on my band uniform, it changed my entire sense of well-being.

Many students make a substantial commitment to one or more activities in the arts. Artistic activities are enormously popular at many colleges. Students engage with the arts even more, in sheer numbers, than with athletics and with politics. This is true at nearly every college I have visited. Second to volunteer work, it is the most popular area for students’ outside-of-class activities.

If we define the arts broadly to include music, singing groups, orchestra, chamber music, dance, and dramatic productions, nearly half of all undergraduates at Harvard participate at some time during their college years. If we include writing, directing, producing, and doing tech work for programs of music, theater, and dance, the proportion rises to over half. When undergraduates track how they spend their time, about 35 percent find that engagement with the arts is the activity that takes the biggest hunk of their outside-of-class time. This includes planning, tryouts, rehearsals, and actual performances.

Students are enthusiastic about “the incredibly active arts scene” on campus—and I have found similar enthusiasm on many campuses. They characterize the arts as an important source of both pleasure and learning. Since certain kinds of involvement in the arts offer any student at any college the opportunity to build connections between academic work
and extracurricular interests, it is worth discussing why students find engagement with arts activities so special.

First, for many students they serve the classic function of sheer pleasure. This pleasure has nothing to do with connecting, say, music outside of class with the formal study of music in classes. It is done for its own sake. Something that takes an undergraduates’s mind away from intense academic work. Hundreds of students report that singing or acting or directing or dancing or playing a musical instrument is simply fulfilling, a joy, a release, a “very different kind of creative activity from writing a research paper.”

A second reason given by students builds more specifically on how the arts can help to make connections between in-class academic work and outside-of-class activities. A remarkably large number of interviewees mention connections between their own pleasure in the arts and their formal classroom work. Directing, or acting in, or “tech-ing for” a play by Anton Chekhov or Arthur Miller helps students develop insights that transfer to academic work. Their experience with drama leads them to think more deeply about writing, about history, about psychology, about physical environments, about literature in specific contexts, than some might from just reading a play for a class. Similarly, understanding the context and background of music that a member of the orchestra is performing, complete with the context of the composer’s life and perhaps the composer’s culture, gives many students insights to enrich their academic work. Connections emerge, sometimes unexpectedly. Not for all students, but for some.

A third finding is that a significant fraction of students who participate in the arts report learning certain things about themselves. Sometimes what they learn is unexpected. And sometimes what they learn shapes what classes they choose, their excitement about these classes, and occasionally even what careers they decide to pursue after they graduate. More than a few students report in their interviews that a combination of engagement with the arts and formal academic work shaped their “next steps” in life.

This idea of the arts connecting to classwork is a recurring theme. Some students report that a certain kind of performing, such as drama or singing, opened their eyes to new possibilities for their own future work—possibilities they simply had not thought of before. One example is a young man who tried out for and joined one of the a capella singing groups in his first year. He knew he had a good singing voice, yet he was hesitant to perform publicly. By participating in the singing group, he not only overcame his hesitancy, he came to genuinely relish this public performance. He stayed with the group for the next three years, and senior year he became its president. In his senior year he applied to graduate schools of public policy and public administration. He was now considering a career in elective politics. It was performing with the singing group that had given him new personal confidence.

A fourth reason students find arts activities so engaging is that such activities offer special opportunities to interact with, and ideally to learn from, fellow students who come from backgrounds unlike their own. Some of the best interactions, and the most powerful learning experiences, occur when students work together to achieve a common goal. Often at college this happens around a common academic pursuit. But activities in the arts offer a remarkably similar opportunity—a chance to work with people who may be different in countless ways, including academic interests, yet share a commitment to producing a superb play, concert, or ballet performance.
A number of students bring up this point with special enthusiasm. They say that working with others in the arts, more than any other specific activity, has enabled them to benefit from, and learn from, their extraordinarily diverse and talented fellow students. The result is that these students report a high level of engagement, and satisfaction, with their overall college experience.

Even more impressive numbers of students say that by participating in arts groups, especially in the performing arts, they learn about themselves—their strengths, their weaknesses, their interests. And especially how to integrate active commitment to the arts with the college's intense academic demands. In coursework, the task is to do a professor's readings and assignments. You work hard, and you learn a lot about physics, or history, or economics, or literature, but not necessarily so much about yourself. If learning about yourself is an integral part of education, engaging with the arts offers a critical and unique opportunity.

Getting Help When Needed

I can't expect the faculty to read my mind, so in the end it really is up to me to take charge of this. My message to other students is simple. Unending help is available, but you have to ask for it. I learned an important lesson. Don't keep academic problems a secret. Unfortunately, it took me far too long to learn it. I hope others with my dilemma figure this out more quickly.

Why do some students perform significantly less well than expected? Reflecting on three questions may help students understand their own situation, and may help their advisors know how to help them. First, are there certain problems that are not unique to any one student, but that are shared by others who are also having academic trouble? Second, what can advisors do to help students who are struggling? Third, what can the students do to help themselves?

While interviewing students, we searched for patterns of adjusting to college, and choices students make, that lead talented people to struggle. We turned up two symptoms of students in trouble and four possible explanations for that trouble. I am confident they characterize many campuses across the country.

SYMPTOMS OF TROUBLE

It is easy enough to identify certain students about whom faculty and advisors should be concerned—those with distressingly low grades. But they are just the tip of the iceberg. There are two other symptoms that, while less easy to identify, may well be predictive of troubling outcomes.

One symptom, a warning flag, is that a student feels a sense of isolation from the rest of the college community. A handful of undergraduates may relish such isolation, but only a handful. With a bit of effort, an advisor can spot isolated students. They are not involved in any extracurricular activities. They are not members of a study group in any of their courses. And they deal with their low grades by going from classroom to dorm room, closing their door, and studying, studying, and then studying some more, nearly always alone. If their grades don't improve as the year progresses, they don't change their behavior pattern. They just do more of the same, stay up later and later at night, or, in a few cases, simply give up on their coursework.

The second symptom is unwillingness to seek help. Many students show little hesitancy in seeking help from a profes-
SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS

SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS

Sor, a departmental advisor, a teaching fellow, or a residence hall advisor. Most universities and colleges have their own organizations designed to provide help.

Yet more than a few students are hesitant to ask for help. And if a student who is having trouble does not seek help and avoids sharing problems with an advisor or professor or teaching fellow, it's hard to give help. Our interviews with forty sophomores who were struggling drove home this point sharply. Of the twenty students who were struggling yet were able to share their problems and to seek help from one of these many sources, all, without exception, were able to work at developing strategies to improve their academic performance.

But most of the twenty who were unable to share their problems remained distressingly isolated. They became caught in a downward spiral of poor grades and lack of engagement with other people at the college. It was far harder for them, struggling alone, to turn their situation around.

As the interviews revealed this repeated pattern, my colleagues began to work on concrete suggestions for reaching out to students, even to those students who might be initially resistant to getting help. We met with some success. Four particular sources of potential trouble, and suggestions for helping students to help themselves, emerged from this work.

REASONS FOR ACADEMIC TROUBLE

One source of trouble is poor management of time. Several of the sophomores with poor grades were studying so inefficiently that they themselves were taken aback when they described their study habits to our interviewers. The single biggest trouble with time use for nearly all students who struggle is their pattern of studying in a series of short bursts. Instead of spending sustained periods of time engaging with their coursework, they squeeze in twenty-five minutes between two classes. They stop by the library to read for thirty minutes on the way to dinner. They begin writing long essays, or working on problem sets, for the next day's classes after coming home from a full evening with a drama group, or sports practice, or singing rehearsal. They are tired before they start, and a long night lies ahead.

This failure to dig in and engage with one piece of work in depth for hours at a time is hurting these students enormously. But the way they organize their time never seems to include longer stetches for serious engagement. Anyone who does much writing knows how difficult it is to do effective and serious writing when the hard work is forced into ten minutes here and fifteen minutes there. This sort of time allocation simply does not enable most people to produce excellent written material. And while this may be obvious to most faculty members, interviewers reveal that for a large proportion of students in academic trouble, it is not so obvious at all.

A second source of trouble is that many students who struggle continue to organize their work in college the same way they did in high school. For the lucky ones, this works. For others, especially those who were academic stars in high school but at schools that made only modest demands upon them, this strategy can lead to big problems.

Some students have great difficulty developing new study skills. It is just too easy to continue, locked in, using old patterns. One crucial skill that students must constantly refine is “critical thinking”: the ability to synthesize arguments and evidence from multiple sources, sources that often disagree. Nearly all of the students who were having academic difficulty pointed out that their high schools
did not demand much of this type of thinking, but that at college it is a crucial skill.

Compounding the problem for students who are struggling academically is their observation that most of their fellow students make the adjustment from high school to college without much difficulty. Watching their friends and classmates and roommates develop certain skills that elude them is maddening. A first-year student described the frustration:

All four of us in my rooming group are taking economics. I would say we are all about equally smart, I know we have similar SAT scores, and we discuss the material sometimes in the evening. Yet they were getting A's and I kept getting C's. I just couldn't figure out why.

Finally, it was driving me nuts, so I went for help. My resident advisor asked if she could see my notes from that class. She looked them over carefully, and then asked me a few questions based on those notes. She helped me to realize that I was great on "giving back the facts," but not so good at all at extending those facts to new situations. Yet here at college, all the questions on exams are about new situations. This is unlike my high school, where all the questions involved simply spitting back the basics.

There is no point in blaming the high school. It just took someone here to help me refocus how I study. Now I understand what the goal of the whole enterprise here actually is. I still am not getting A's, but at least solid B+'s. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't asked for help and had just continued using that old high school style.

A third source of trouble for some students is their selection of courses. Nearly without exception, students who are struggling, or who are dissatisfied with their academic performance, are taking nothing but large, introductory courses. When asked why they made these choices, nearly every student offers the same response: "to get my requirements out of the way." Clearly, a few students arrive at college each year with the belief that making the most of their experience here involves a sequence of steps. Step one: get all the requirements out of the way. Step two: choose a concentration or major. Step three: take advanced courses in the concentration, while saving electives, the "good stuff," for junior and senior year.

Adopting a strategy of getting the required courses out of the way may work fine for some students. But nearly all students who were in trouble reported that they had chosen this strategy. Since many of the basic required courses have large enrollments, they make it possible for any student to become distressingly anonymous. No professor with a class of hundreds of students pretends to be able to get to know each student well. This is a special dilemma at any large university. Students who choose their courses in this way may rarely engage seriously with a faculty member throughout their first year at college. It is important to stress that this characterization applies to only a small number of students. Yet for this small number, even if it is just 5 to 10 percent of all students, the quality of their academic experience is diminished.

Another disadvantage of using freshman year to simply "get the requirements out of the way" is that students may not find courses that truly engage them, that excite them. The result is that by the end of freshman year (or by sopho-
more year at many colleges), when it is time to choose a concentration, a student may not yet have been "turned on" by any discipline. The majority of students who followed this strategy of "getting the requirements out of the way" when choosing courses in freshman year regretted having done so.

A fourth source of trouble is a particular study habit shared by almost all students who are struggling academically; they always study alone. Students point out that those who always study alone are isolating themselves from a key benefit of college—the opportunity to learn from fellow students. Fortunately, studying with other students is a suggestion that is relatively easy for a faculty member or advisor to make to any student. I hope students who read this will decide for themselves to work cooperatively, at least some of the time.

This idea of working cooperatively outside of classes may be new to many students. Indeed, it is new to many faculty members, who went to college when students' working together outside of classes was forbidden, was considered cheating. Chapters 4 and 6, on especially effective classes and especially effective professors, expand on this suggestion and give specific examples.

Choosing Living Arrangements

With whom should I live? On a residential campus, nearly every student must answer this question. And the decisions students make play a critical part in how they experience college. Thinking through this decision in a careful, systematic way will be an investment that yields high dividends.

A South Asian senior talked about this issue with interviewer Anna Fincke:

Freshman year we had a big mixture. We were six people: Jewish from New York, Jewish from Boston, WASP from Orange County, California, another Indian from Florida, Chinese from California, and me. It was a real mixture in terms of racial background, economic background, and interests. We had all different concentrations: engineering, economics, biology, biochemistry, physics, and social studies. We all wanted to become different things: aerospace engineer, lawyer, doctor, businessman.

We became such a family. That's been one of my most valuable experiences here. I got sick in March and they treated me like my mother would. One guy woke me up every two hours to give me medicine. They were running all over the place, talking to my teachers. And they didn't think twice.

We were really a family. We had a big common room, and we would spend a lot of time with each other, laughing, making jokes. We still have reunions. It was a very meaningful experience. Diversity was central to it all.

The guy from Orange County was conservative, traditional, came from a WASPy family. We butted heads, so to speak. Politically, we'd be battling. He had some religious right leanings. I'm pretty liberal. We would argue or debate. I really like him as a person. It's good to consider someone my good friend who has such divergent views. Enlightenment about other cultures doesn't often come in an epiphany like that.

The first people new students meet, the first day on campus, are their roommates or suitemates. These roommates are assigned by the college; students do not choose their own
roommates for first year. At Harvard, first-year students usually live in groups of between two and four. Often, because of the architecture of the first-year dormitories, two groups of suitemates push open a door, keep it open, and informally become a larger “living group” of four or six or eight.

The next group of people new students meet, while they are moving in, are other first-year students who are simultaneously arriving and moving into their entry. At Harvard each student lives in an entry. An entry consists of a dormitory door that leads to a group of rooms and suites, which typically house a total of between fifteen and twenty-five students. This group of students in an entry is assigned to a proctor, usually a graduate student who lives in that entry. This proctor, when all goes as it should, invites all students in the entry to gatherings. These gatherings may focus on simply getting acquainted, or sharing general information, or holiday and birthday celebrations. Sometimes they focus on discussion of academic topics, such as helping students think about how to choose academic majors and concentrations.

Harvard has had such living arrangements for many years. Almost without exception, students describe their first-year rooming experiences as setting a tone for their interactions with other students from backgrounds different from their own. A majority of rooming groups include some ethnic diversity. And every undergraduate lives in an entry that has substantial ethnic diversity. As a result, from the moment a student arrives and puts down the suitcases, the abstraction of a “diverse undergraduate community” comes alive as he or she immediately sees, interacts with, and begins to go to meals with students from a broad range of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The tone has been set. And this immediate exposure of
every newcomer to people from different backgrounds—from that moment of arrival, to the first meals together, to the first dormitory entry meeting, to all the Freshman Week activities—is what nearly all students characterize as the single most critical, positive first step. It is critical for helping each student feel part of a community. A community with fellow first-year students who look different, and bring different interests and perspectives to campus, and with whom the student will be living, day in and day out, for an entire year. This tone and spirit inevitably become a natural part of college life.

Why do students bring this up over and over as such a big deal? For two reasons. First, they believe the college is sending a message, loud and clear: the message that living with a diverse group of classmates, day and night, weekdays and weekends, *from the outset*, is a standard, important, and, we all hope, enjoyable aspect of coming to this college.

The second reason so many students consider this first-year roommate planning so important is that whether or not any particular undergraduate chooses to continue to live with his or her first-year roommates in ensuing years, an overwhelming majority describe the first-year living experience as a positive one. And the learning that flows from ethnic diversity is repeatedly characterized as an important component of that experience.

As a result, the most frequent suggestion from students is to continue to embed diversity, in a planned, purposeful way, into first-year living arrangements. Doing so sends a message about an idea the college leadership considers important. It leads to surprises. Sometimes it leads to stresses, but usually those stresses are worked through and result in significant learning. In some cases, it leads to lasting friendships that students might never have made otherwise.
Evidence that students respond positively to this policy of embedding diversity into first-year living arrangements comes from their choices of roommates for future years. Interviewer Shu-Ling Chen has found that after freshman year, when they have entirely free choice of roommates, students often decide to live with a remarkable array of friends. For example, several students described to Chen, in late spring of their first year, the living groups they had chosen for sophomore year:

A white man planned to live with another white man, a man from Russia, a Haitian man, two Asian-American women, a black woman, and a Lebanese woman.

A Hispanic man planned to live with “two blacks, six whites, a Pakistani from London, and me.”

Another Hispanic man was going to live with one other Latino, three whites, two blacks, and an Asian-American.

A Chinese-American woman planned to live with fourteen others: one other Asian-American, one black, one Hawaiian, one deeply religious Jew, and ten other whites.

A conclusion seems clear. When given an opportunity to choose whom to live with as an upperclassman, a large fraction of undergraduates choose a diverse set of friends and roommates. They report that their choices are influenced in large measure by first-year experiences with their roommates and dormitory neighbors. The assignment of first-year roommates and neighbors shapes whom they meet and whom they come to know. Their strong suggestion to those who design first-year living patterns—it is close to unanimous—is to keep in mind that initial living arrangements can and do shape all future social interactions, especially inter-ethnic social interactions.

Choosing courses each semester is a decision that inevitably shapes a student’s academic experience. Two correlations consistently turn up as strong and positive. First, the correlation between the number of small classes any student takes and his or her self-reported personal satisfaction with the overall academic experience is about .52. That indicates a very strong relationship. Second, the correlation between the number of small classes taken and a student’s actual grades is .24. This is a lower number, yet it still sends a clear message—that most of the time smaller is better, with stronger student engagement.

When I ask undergraduates what they view as “small,” the most common answer is fifteen or fewer people. Two special circumstances deserve a quick mention. One is an independent study or reading course, one-to-one, with a professor. Many colleges and universities offer some version of this luxury. The other is the small seminar.

For many undergraduates, an individually supervised reading or research writing class is the capstone of their academic work at college. A research paper must be written. Supervision is personal and intense. The student gets to play a major role in shaping a project. These are all great strengths for learning, for engagement, for pleasure.

As students tell it, one-to-one supervised research courses are the most intense of all academic experiences. There are