What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited

Alexander Astin
Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993
482 pages, $30.95

Review by David A. McKelfresh

What Matters in College extends the research about how students change in college and why they change as they do. Alexander Astin, founding director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP), provides a major contribution to the literature on college-effects. While What Matters in College is organized in a similar fashion to Astin's earlier work, Four Critical Years (1977) this book is an entirely new study.

In his latest book, Astin studies the effects of college on 24,847 freshmen in 1985 who completed a follow-up questionnaire in 1989. What Matters in College provides 192 measures of the college environment which comprise five categories, three relating to the institution and its faculty (Institutional characteristics, Curricular characteristics, and Faculty environment) and two pertaining to the student body (Student environment and Individual involvement). Although this book runs the risk of subjecting the reader to information overload, Astin's latest study reports what Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded in their review of approximately 3,000 studies — college has strong effects on students. Students develop a greater sense of interpersonal and intellectual competence and a greater commitment to developing a meaningful philosophy of life. They report substantial increases in knowledge and skills, with the exception of mathematical or quantitative ability. College students tend to become less materialistic and more idealistic during the college years.

Astin found that the faculty also have a strong impact on students. Campuses on which faculty have a strong orientation toward students have important effects. Students on such campuses are more satisfied with the institution, the curriculum, and

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other aspects of the educational experience and are more likely to develop academically.

Astin especially notes the following three items: 1) That being in a particular type of institution does not necessarily limit the effectiveness of undergraduate education, and that what really matters is the environment created by the faculty and students; 2) The kinds of colleges and college experiences that favorably affect the student’s performance on standardized tests are quite different from those that enhance retention and other cognitive and affective outcomes; and 3) The single most important environmental influence on student development is the peer group.

As in previous studies, Astin shows that students are the most important influence on other students’ affective development. Students values, beliefs, and aspirations change in the direction of the dominant values, beliefs, and aspirations of other students. Astin suggests that a college’s judicious and imaginative use of peer groups can substantially strengthen its impact on student learning and personal development.

Astin makes no pretense that What Matters in College is a comprehensive review of the literature on college impact. He notes that his book focuses almost exclusively on the traditional-age college undergraduate who enters college soon after completing high school. Astin further concedes his study is limited to students who begin their college studies on a full-time basis (even though many will become part-timers).

As Four Critical Years has been the single most frequently cited work in the higher education literature (Budd, 1990), What Matters in College seems destined for similar appeal and influence with educators. Administrators and policy makers will find considerable interest in the effects of different kinds of institutions, patterns of resource utilization, and the campus “climate” on students. Astin (1992) contends that “in choosing a college, students and their parents may find many of the results useful, especially those having to do with type of college attended and patterns of student involvement” (p. xii). For the faculty or staff member interested in how students change and develop in college and what can be done to enhance that development, What Matters in College will undoubtedly be popular for years to come.

References