Berry, Elizabeth, Bettina J. Huber, and Cynthia Z. Rawitch. *Learning from the Learners: Successful College Students Share Their Effective Learning Habits.* **Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. 292 pp. ISBN: 978-1-44227-861-5.**

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In light of increased calls for accountability in higher education and pressure from state and federal officials to address concerns about the quality of higher education (Kelchen), over the last several years the landscape of higher education has evolved into one where colleges and universities have shifted their focus onto student success (Ascione). National conferences that focus on student success abound, and research and reports on this topic are only growing (NASPA). Conversations about student success have surfaced across higher education and across all media. These conversations are taking place on college campuses among those who are tasked with effecting change and fostering student success. It is indeed a common occurrence at colleges and universities: Faculty and administrators discuss the challenges faced by at-risk students who struggle to succeed at their institution. Then, a few months later, they discuss the accomplishments of students who persisted to graduation. One such place where these types of conversations were taking place was California State University, Northridge (CSUN). It was these types of discussions that sparked the development of CSUN's Learning Habits Project, a longitudinal research study for which findings are presented in Elizabeth Berry et al.'s book *Learning from the Learners: Successful College Students Share Their Effective Learning Habits*.

On the heels of Richard Light's *Making the Most of College*, which explored undergraduate students' experience from their own voices, the Learning Habits Project's goals were "to track, over four to six years, several groups of newly enrolled first-year students who were most likely to succeed at the university, . . . to gain insight into their characteristics and academic approaches, . . . to find out about their *learning habits* and, most especially, how and why they

work" (p. xv). This project was different in that, unlike research that has focused on at-risk students or on large sets of quantitative data, the project "focuse[d] on student strengths, not their struggles" (p. xv). In other words, the research project approached learning about student success from an asset-based rather than a deficit-based perspective, meaning that they focused on practices and habits that were characteristic of successful students, rather than investigating the negative factors that may have hindered unsuccessful students from achieving academic success. In examining these successful strategies, Berry and colleagues present in their book findings from multiple interviews conducted with over seven-hundred students, thus centering the voices of students themselves.

The book is divided into five parts, each including one to four chapters written by various members of the twenty-person project team, which included faculty and administrators across academic disciplines and across the university. The book presents the origins and overview of the research project, provides insights into the project's findings and key themes, and concludes with recommendations for faculty and administrators. In Part 1, "Project Parameters," Bettina Huber provides an overview of the Learning Habits Project, including a thorough description of the research approach which consisted of administering open-ended surveys at the end of each academic term as well as conducting multiple face-to-face interviews with each student participant over the course of their undergraduate careers. The project invited incoming students whom the researchers predicted would be successful on a variety of academic success metrics. Specifically, eligibility for the study included having a high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.50 or higher and/or meeting testing requirements for direct entry into college-level work in writing and mathematics. The research team tracked four cohorts of first-year students who entered CSUN in 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2011, totaling more than seven-hundred students, and they combined qualitative data with student-records data as part of their analyses. In presenting information about the student participants, Huber provides a detailed comparison between students who participated in the project and students who were invited to

participate but declined the researchers' invitation, focusing on entry and background characteristics (e.g., high school GPA, parental educational attainment), persistence and academic success measures (e.g., one-year continuation rate, GPA at end of first year), and racial and ethnic background.

Part 2 of the book, "Differing Patterns of Engagement within Major Student Subgroups," highlights findings from the research project related to various subgroups within the study. First, Steven Graves presents a surprising finding regarding the experiences of first-generation college-going students (i.e., students whose parents do not hold a bachelor's degree). Graves found that, "overall, first-generation students perform as well, and occasionally better, on several metrics of college success than their peers from bachelor's degree families" (59). Graves then elaborates on findings, indicating the significant role that family background plays on students' motivation to succeed in college. Similar research has centered familial relationships as a form of capital that helps students succeed in college (Yosso 79). Next, Huber explores gender differences (although limited to a binary definition of gender as "men" and "women") in learning habits that contribute to women's higher persistence rates, compared to men. In short, Huber argues that women developed study skills and social-interaction skills in high school, coupled with a more realistic understanding of the challenges of college-level work, that allowed them to develop learning habits that lead to success in college. Finally, Huber explores the perception of a campus's student diversity and its perceived impact on learning, finding that gender, combined with academic major, affected students' views regarding whether or not a campus's diversity has an effect on learning.

Although Part 2 of the book provided interesting and detailed analyses of student characteristics and their relationships with student learning, the heart of the book—indeed, the aim of the Learning Habits Project—focuses on the learning habits described by the student participants and the ways that these habits contributed to their success in college. Part 3, "Key Themes in Teaching and Learning," offers readers an in-depth look at the

study's findings related to students' learning habits and what students shared about classroom teaching. Specifically, through the presentation of direct quotations gleaned from hundreds of interviews, the authors present students' perspectives on effective teaching practices, including those related to mastering college-level reading, developing writing proficiency, and using technology in the classroom. In Chapter 6, "Reading with Understanding: What Do College Students Say?," Linda Bowen and Elizabeth Berry address the challenge of promoting college-level reading and comprehension, noting that most students are ill-prepared for the quantity and level of challenge characteristic of academic reading assignments. They argue that mastering college-level reading advances writing proficiency, yet they acknowledge that most universities do not provide specific courses or curricula to address the "reading problem" (145). They discovered that most student participants in the Learning Habits Project developed their own strategies to manage the volume of reading required of students. They close the chapter with describing the Reading Matters Initiative at CSUN, a university-wide effort to enhance reading skills, and offer teaching strategies that assist students in engaging with academic texts.

In Chapter 7, "Gains in Written Communication between the Freshman and Junior Years," Irene Clark and Bettina Huber present findings from a smaller study that was part of the larger Learning Habits Project. This "writing study" involved the review of writing samples from a subset (10 percent) of the student participants. The researchers collected writing samples in the form of an argumentative, thesis-driven essay from each student's first year and junior year. They then utilized a locally-developed rubric to measure change within six writing dimensions: context and purpose for writing and critical thinking, organization and cohesion, content development and coherence, genre and disciplinary conventions, appropriate reliance on sources and evidence, and control of syntax and mechanics. Their findings indicate that most students improved in their ability to write argumentative, thesis-driven essays, most notably in the area of "appropriate reliance on sources and evidence." Clarke and Huber also suggest that the improvement of

writing from first year to junior year was influenced by factors including a first-year writing course's focus on process and genre awareness as well as the types of writing prompts instructors assigned.

Finally, in Chapter 8, "Students and Technology: PowerPoint Fatigue and the Rabbit Hole of Internet Stuff," Donal O'Sullivan explores the use of technology in the classroom, and, in Chapter 9, "Sliding into Learning: The Power of Webnotes," Carrie Rothstein-Fisch and Sharon Klein discuss the use of electronic lecture notes in aiding students' learning. As O'Sullivan notes, the Learning Habits Project took place over a nine-year period, beginning in 2007, when the adoption of technology use in the classroom expanded significantly, from learning management systems and PowerPoint to the use of smart tablets and "clickers." The researchers' findings suggest that the student participants welcomed instructors' use of technology, but only if used well and if its purpose was to help them succeed. In particular, students shared that the availability of online lecture notes or "webnotes," which are electronic lecture notes made available to students while an instructor delivers a lecture, is beneficial to their engagement in the learning process.

Part 4, "Fostering Student Initiative," delves into co-curricular activities that influence students' engagement with learning processes. These include the utilization of libraries or tutoring and learning resource centers, as well as joining campus organizations and study groups. Mark Stevens and Peter Mora present findings on academic help-seeking behaviors among participants, and Daisy Lemus and Mary-Pat Stein describe self-regulated learning strategies such as time management, organization, and planning. Finally, Huber discusses how participation in the Learning Habits Project may have contributed to student participants' success in college. Specifically, Huber argues that the process of reflecting on one's learning made them conscious of how they were engaging in their learning activities. In other words, the process of *thinking* about their learning habits contributed to their engagement with their learning habits that led to academic success.

Finally, Part 5 of the book offers conclusions as well as recommendations for faculty and administrators who seek to

implement policies and practices that support students' success. While each chapter in the book includes recommendations related to the chapter's specific content, the final section in the volume provides broad recommendations related to teaching and learning, as well as faculty development activities.

As a whole, *Learning from the Learners* provides a thorough presentation of a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) research project that explores learning habits of contemporary college students from the perspective of students themselves. Indeed, with such an approach, there are strengths and weaknesses. First, the volume's focus is on students' voices, rather than on researchers' understandings of what constitutes student success or effective learning strategies. While highlighting students' own perspectives on effective learning strategies is a significant contribution of this volume, this approach is, at the same time, limited by the inability to demonstrate the extent to which students' self-reported learning strategies, as opposed to other factors (e.g., background characteristics, academic engagement, and campus environments) contributed to their persistence through graduation. Still, by learning about successful college students' learning habits, the authors are able to inform policies and practices that could be applied to all students. The detailed presentation of the study's research approach and procedures as well as the collection of excerpts from student participants' interviews provides tangible examples that instructors can share with their students in support of their success.

Next, while the Learning Habits Project was specific in time, place, and context to a diverse, urban, comprehensive university in Southern California, the authors argue that few studies have examined students' learning habits within this type of institution. These findings may be helpful to faculty and administrators at colleges and universities with similar institutional profiles and resources where attention to persistence and student success is of growing importance in the current higher-education context. In particular, the chapter on college-level reading challenges notions of whether such a skill needs to be formally addressed in the curriculum explicitly (i.e., through specific course work or across

disciplines), and the chapter on writing proficiency adds to the conversation on the challenges of teaching writing as a stand-alone course, as opposed to teaching writing within disciplines or across the curriculum.

Finally, the project's involvement of students who were predicted to be successful (i.e., entering college with a 3.50 high-school grade point average and/or having satisfied entry requirements to begin college-level work in writing and mathematics) reflects a shift in studies, from one that attempts to identify factors that hinder student success to one that explores strategies employed by successful students. This asset-based approach to understanding student success focuses on existing strategies for successful students, foundations on which educators can build to further foster students' persistence through higher education. The alternative is a deficit-based approach that seeks to identify gaps or problems with students' learning strategies. While the latter may reinforce notions that resources and attention must focus on gaps in learning, the former takes the approach of understanding effective learning strategies that may be applied to all students in an effort to foster greater student success.

Through this volume, instructors, curriculum designers, and student development educators alike would gain valuable insights into the learning habits of successful college students. The authors' recommendations, based on their insights learned from the Learning Habits Project, focus on enhancing faculty development opportunities for improving classroom-teaching techniques and on incorporating opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning. With a focus on students' descriptions of their own learning habits, the volume provides insights into how students learn, information that would be useful to instructors across disciplines.

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