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What the Best College Students Do

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What the Best College Students Do.

Bain, K. (2012). Cambridge, MA:
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Reviewed by Heidi W. Morris



Ken Bain is widely known for his best-selling book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Written primarily for the educator in institutions of higher education, this book spotlights the best practices of college professors. Continuing down this similar direction, but now with a bent toward the college student population, Bain's 2012 book, *What the Best College Students Do*, tells the inspiring stories of some of the most successful college students who went on to impact the world.

Conventional wisdom asserts that in order to be one of the best college students, one should focus on making good grades. What if, however, the profile of a successful college student entails something bigger than a grade point average? The pursuit to go beyond the grades is the fundamental aim of Bain's new book. It is not that grades do not have meaning, but as Bain indicates, they "often tell us little about a student's learning" (p. 8). Through the use of interviews, Bain and his fellow interviewer, Marsha Bain, sought to understand the lived experiences of successful individuals after leaving college and how they continued to demonstrate the life-long love of learning as well as their passion and motivation to make significant contributions in their communities and larger social world.

In order to better understand the characteristics of successful college students, Bain utilized two main sources. First, over thirty years of academic research on good students was examined. The literature encompassed studies that measured successful students by grade point average as well as studies that focused on students who were deeply engaged in learning. The latter group of studies became the ones that Bain incorporated into his book. The second source entailed several dozen interviews with "physicians, lawyers, business and political leaders, computer scientists and artists, musicians, mothers, fathers, neighbors, Nobel Laureates, MacArthur 'Genius Grant' recipients, Emmy winners, and a few current college students" (p. 11). The book brings to life some of their stories in the hopes of capturing the characteristics of some of this nation's best and brightest college students.

What the Best College Students Do is not written as a how-to guide but is best explained as a book filled with insights and challenging notions of what it means to be successful in college and how people cultivate a life-long pursuit of learning. The crux of the book is not experienced within a specific chapter or detailed list. But readers need to be prepared to go on a journey of discovery, where along the way they pick up prized revelations that encompass what Bain deems are the essences of life-long learners. The book appears to unfold slowly, which at times could be experienced by readers as a tedious task, but as the stories unfold and insights are gleaned, momentum surges and Bain delivers an impressive compilation of narratives coupled with meaningful analysis.

Throughout the eight chapters of the book, Bain brings to life the stories of the participants through biographical accounts, spotlighting their unique journeys of achievement and how they reflect certain characteristics that led to their success. Each story shares an important insight. But there are major themes that Bain echoes throughout the chapters. A fundamental and overarching theme of the book centers on the attitudes of each participant. Drawing from the literature and his participants' voices, Bain's analysis reveals that the best college students engage in a deep level of learning that is intrinsically motivated. Yes, many of his participants made good grades, but as one participant, Neil deGrasse Tyson, stated about himself, the motivation to learn stems from "curiosity, interest, and fascination, not by making the highest scores on a test" (p. 45). Bain's work challenges the customary pursuit of grades as the end all and allows the stories and research findings to reveal the inward drive of students in the pursuit of learning.

Another significant theme that emerges from Bain's analysis is a set of three traits that almost all of the participants shared. The first trait entails what Bain describes as a childlike quality of curiosity. These individuals are deeply inquisitive and intentionally involved in discovery. The second characteristic Bain discovered is that these best students "found great pleasure in learning how to be creative" and foster personal growth (p. 47). The final factor reveals that students of this caliber not only recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of humanity in its many forms but realize that people can profit from the work and contributions of other individuals. By honoring the works of others, the best students integrate learning from many sources.

Each of the above mentioned traits may not be automatically considered characteristics of high achieving students, but that is what makes Bain's work distinctive. While his research may not reveal novel notions of college student success, it does offer a significant contribution to the literature by combining a qualitative design intermixed with academic

research to demonstrate the unconventional ideas of being a successful college student. The style and structure in which Bain tells the stories not only inspires readers but encourages them to think critically about how a collegiate experience can be used to help facilitate learning over the course of a lifetime.

For Christian student development professionals, Bain's work can be a useful source to help create campus conversations that challenge the traditional grade point average mindset of success and open up critical examinations of how the collegiate environment can help foster deeper levels of learning in students. This intentional look at more intense levels of learning can lead to the cultivation of a campus culture that helps students invest in learning, not just for the sake of grades and notoriety while in college, but for the transferable life skills that can be utilized in their professional and personal lives after college.

Many Christian institutions of higher education intentionally seek to challenge students to fulfill a calling. This calling is not inherently based on grades but rather on going forth and making a difference through one's education. Bain's work capitalizes on college student success beyond the four year degree and challenges readers through research and personal accounts that the best and brightest college students are the ones who push beyond the goal of making the grade to using their many forms of intelligence to positively impact their families, communities, and larger social world. 