

This webinar was given on Friday, February 12, 2021 by Professor Richard Light, Carl H. Pforzheimer, Jr. Professor of Teaching and Learning at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and M-RCB affiliate. It was given as part of M-RCBG's weekly Business & Government Seminar Series.

John Haigh:

Can we go ahead and get started? Welcome everybody. I am John Haigh and I am the co-director of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government. We are incredibly fortunate today. We have Dick Light with us and just so you know Dick has been a long affiliate of the Center for Business and Government here at the Kennedy School. He is also at the graduate school of education. Formally, he is the Carl H. Pforzheimer professor of teaching and learning at the Harvard graduate school of education and at the Kennedy School. I also have to confess, I am a Kennedy School graduate 1982 and PP. In my first year here as a graduate student, I had Dick Light teach me about decision sciences, in particular, we did a case on LNG tankers in Boston.

John Haigh:

I still remember the case and I still remember the superb teaching job that Dick did. His actual PhD is in statistics from Harvard. After years of teaching statistics, he basically shifted gears and focused on higher ed, bringing that rigorous analytic and scientific mindset to addressing some of the issues in higher ed. He's been here through four Harvard presidents, Derek Bok, Neil Rudenstine, Larry Summers and Drew Faust. He's seen everything probably at Harvard. He's leading a number of projects right now and we'll talk about one of them today, more generally, but one is the exploration with leaders from Duke, Brown, Georgetown and Harvard on how to help first-generation college students to succeed. The second is a collaboration with a colleague Howard Gardner, to explore and reinvent the new liberal arts for the 21st century.

John Haigh:

And the third just as an example is to tackle controversy, is higher education. He is at the American Academy of arts and sciences as an elected fellow. There he chaired a project on diversity and changing demographics at colleges, so very timely. His book making the most of college, won the Stone award for the best book about education and society. He's won a number of other awards for being such a great teacher, and I can speak firsthand that they're all true. With that, I'm going to hand it over to Dick. No slides today. This is a nice reprieve to some extent, he's just going to talk. He's going to talk for 10 or 15 minutes and then we'll open it up to Q&A, and then he's going to come back and talk for another 10 or 15 minutes, and then we'll open up for customers for Q&A again. If you have a question, you can put it into the Q&A part of the zoom application and we will track them and try to make sure we raise them with Dick.

John Haigh:

With that, Dick, the floor is yours. I can't wait to hear, the title of his discussion today is how can a university move from good to great.

Dick Light:

Thank you. John Haigh, you're the best. Thank you for the gracious introduction. By the way, can everyone hear me loud and clear, just before I start? Okay, good. Anyway, I am indeed Richard Light. That light. It's a pleasure to be here. What I will say is, this topic is something that I actually just finished putting practically the final steps on a manuscript for my next book. In a way, this is a trial run for me. I hope you'll find this useful. As John said in the introduction, I'm not going to use slides. That's intentional. That's purposeful. Rather, I'm going to share with you a whole lot of very short anecdotes, every anecdote, I'm not making it up as I'm going along, this is carefully prepared. Everyone is designed to make a point.

Dick Light:

If you find half the points I make helpful, everyone wins. Here goes. First, if you think about American colleges and universities, I know we could talk about the Sorbonne and the University of Copenhagen and so on and so on. We need to start somewhere, focus on American colleges and universities. I think most all of you who are logged on listening, you know very well, there are hundreds that most of us, reasonable people would consider really quite good, but there are far fewer that most of us realistically would say are truly great. I will go so far as to say, Harvard in my judgment is obviously great. We could easily mention 20 or 30, or maybe even a few more other names, but the point is, I'd like to focus on the difference between a pretty good versus a very good college.

Dick Light:

One of the things I've done in my own work, a quick word about myself in addition to what John said, I try to visit. You have no way to know this, one campus a month. Obviously COVID has screwed that up, I have not visited in a year. But for the 20 years before that, I visited one university a month. Now, 20 years, 12 months a year, you all can do the arithmetic. 12 times 20 equals 240 campuses. Maybe it was 230, maybe it was 250, but that's the ballpark. The result is, having visited, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Williams, and other such places, but also Columbus State University, Southwest Georgia State University, places very different from Harvard. What I'm now going to share with you comes from the cumulative learning that I have as a takeaway. My last introductory comment is this is going to be evidence oriented, not Richard Light's opinion.

Dick Light:

Here goes, I want to start three big themes. If you need to take away, I hope you find this helpful. It'll take two minutes. Three big differentiators between great universities and the many that are pretty good, pretty good, nothing bad. One, this is a big deal for me and I sometimes struggle a bit to get to understand what I'm referring to. It's the importance of a university having a certain culture. Culture for me is a big deal. It's an important word. I'll use another word, innovative culture. Some universities are constantly working in a sustained way to try new ideas, new ways of teaching, new ways of advising, new ways of testing students, new ways of assigning homework, new opportunities for what you all, you students, if you are students, can do outside the classroom. New ways to help students who come to a demanding place like a Harvard or a Duke or a Georgetown or a Brown, you know the list.

Dick Light:

They come up to such a university and they may be a bit under prepared, because they did not go to a very good in high school. They're smart as can be. That's why they're admitted. And they come to Brown or Duke or with Georgetown. And then the question is, how do you help them succeed? Well, that's

what I mean by innovative culture. I'm going to share my first personal anecdote, is personal, but I think it drives things home better than any way I can think of. A year ago, before the COVID virus, I have two grandchildren, two very small grandchildren. They live in Philadelphia. I took them to the US open squash finals, the number one and two ranked men played against each other in the whole world. And the number one in two ranked women played against each other. I've never set foot on a squash court in my life, just to be clear, but I love watching the games.

Dick Light:

Here's the point. I'm looking with my grandchildren at the names of the finalists, the two men, finalists, Ali Farag. I actually met him because he's Harvard class of 14. He graduated seven years ago. I knew him a little bit. Anyway, and then Mohamed El Shorbagy. The two women finalists, Nour El Tayeb and Nouran Gohar. Both of my grandchildren looked at me and said, those are slightly unusual names. Where do they come from? Where did they grow up? And so we looked it up. Ali Farag grew up in Cairo. Mohamed El Shorbagy grew up in Alexandria, as in Alexandria, Egypt. Nour El Tayeb, woman player, Cairo, Egypt and Nouran Gohar grew up in Alexandria, Egypt. We had four finalists, all four were Egyptian. My grandson, very young, looked at me and said, "Grandpa, how can this be? How many people are there in Egypt? I see nothing but Egyptians here."

Dick Light:

I said, "Gee, I really am not sure of the population, let's Google it." We found there are 100 million people, approximately. 100.4 million people as of last year in Egypt. That's about 1% of the world's population, a little more. My grandson just said, "Well, I'm not a mathematician, but 1% and all four of them are here. That's impossible. The math is impossible. I'm done." The point of that example is, I said to my grandchildren, it's about culture. The Egyptian culture obviously encourages squash. The kids are playing in tournaments when they're seven or eight or nine years old. That's true of all these four. All right, that's my simple example. Culture matters. Peter Drucker, the late management consultant was famous for saying, culture tops strategy every time, in fact culture eats strategy for lunch.

Dick Light:

Okay. The second big idea, the differentiator is, to engage students in the process of innovation for any college or university, ask them questions, survey them. If you're at the university of Michigan, which is a great university, you don't have to ask all 32,000 undergraduates about their individual experiences. Choose a sample of 50, only 50. Remember I'm a statistician, my training is in statistics, my background. That's a decent size sample. You'll get the big picture from asking only 50. What's going well? What's going not so well? You just finished your first year, your freshman year here. What's one thing the university of Michigan could do better? Whether it's teaching, whether it's advising, whether it's campus life. Anyway, students have no shortage of ideas. Great universities ask and capitalize on the suggestions.

Dick Light:

The third differentiator, again, this is a very big deal to me, emphasizing personal relationships. In other words, I'm always stunned when I teaching at graduate schools at Harvard, the Kennedy School or the grad school of education, I'm frankly taken aback. When I meet a student who comes, often it's from a large public university, and I just say, I'm curious, did you have close relationships with your advisors, with any faculty member? I've had many students say something like, I never even knew the name of an academic advisor, and most of my classes were large, therefore, I never got to know any faculty

member. I don't want to be critical of any particular place. It's rather just say, that's obviously a bit of a shame and that's the difference between a great versus a less than great colleague.

Dick Light:

Okay. That all said, are there some questions that will distinguish between a great university and a not so great university? After multiple visits to different campuses, I have come up with one question, that seems to be the best predictor of where you might want to send your children. How's that? I have my kids and grandkids. I think of this. When I'm sitting with a president, I will sometimes with a provost or a dean, someone in charge at some college or university, I will often simply ask, I say, I have a question. I'm curious. Besides doing their academic research, what in your judgment as the leader, or as a leader of this campus should be the main goal of faculty, of instructors, of professors on this campus? Roughly half of the people I asked that question, the campus leaders say, well, of course our faculty should be teaching their subjects, chemistry, history, economics, philosophy, whatever the heck it is, they should be teaching it and they should do it very, very well.

Dick Light:

That's it. The other half say, of course it's obvious our faculty are teaching their students. In other words, one group uses the words they're teaching their subjects. The historians are teaching history. The economists are teaching economics. The other group at the strong, at the great colleges describe the faculty's mission as teaching students, basically you're teaching human beings. That drives a lot. Faculty at great universities understand, they understand that their goal in the end, they're teaching individuals with all the idiosyncrasies and so on. Okay. Here goes. John, can you hear me all right? John, I want to ask you a individual question, it'll pay, it's just two sentences. Can you hear me okay? You're you're actually muted. If you unmute yourself, John. [inaudible 00:13:27].

John Haigh:

I can hear you.

Dick Light:

Great. You're on the screen. I'm just going to ask you a question. Big quickie. Here goes. I vaguely remember you went to Grinnell College some years ago because we've known each other for a while. Do I have that right?

John Haigh:

You have that correct.

Dick Light:

Right. All right. Grinnell College, in the middle of the country, is it an Iowa? Do I have that right?

John Haigh:

It is in Iowa and I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa.

Dick Light:

All right. This is great. I have a simple question, John. Some years ago, when you arrived as a brand new first year student, how did you assemble your board of advisors at Grinnell?

John Haigh:

To be perfectly frank and honest, I did not.

Dick Light:

Okay. [crosstalk 00:14:11]. I'm glad you said that, because most everyone, at any campus, including our beloved Harvard would say the same thing. Here's an example of something that we, by we, I mean, there are a whole bunch of us who are meeting regularly at the Kennedy School or the grad school of education. We're going to suggest that more campuses try, and that's invite every student who assemble a board of advisors. Now, not the first day they arrive on campus, because they're trying to figure out where's the bathroom, where are the restrooms here anyway or get to know their roommate. Imagine six or eight months into the first year, every new student is invited to assemble a board of advisors and the way I have described it, which my colleagues, the dean seemed to find appealing. I just said, some students need an advisor for a reason.

Dick Light:

Others want an advisor for a season, and yet others would like to find an advisor forever. I'll explain that in one second. I just want to say with attribution, that suggestion came from a senior fellow at the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, Robert Steele. He and I were talking and he came up with that and I thought, God, that's a great idea. I didn't think of that. I want to give him the credit. Okay. His idea, but I shared it with a bunch of deans, is very interesting. The deans of the top notch places all said, that's complicated, but it's worth our trying, even on a small pilot study basis. The leaders of the less good universities just said, no, it's too complicated. It's too complicated.

Dick Light:

Just to be clear, an advisor for a reason means help me make one decision. Which classes should I take? I just arrived on campus. I just arrived at Grinnell. I need to choose four classes this fall, which ones, help me choose. That's a reason. It's very focused. Then there's an advisor for a season. That might be the economics major at any college or university at Michigan State or Swarthmore or whatever it may be. There's a student and they're going to write a thesis, a major paper in economics. They need a supervisor for more than just a couple of meetings. And then there's the forever, and that might be, how do you think about the rest of your life? How do you plan a productive career? How do you think about your social life and so on? Okay. I'm going to try to cover a lot, because then I'm going to stop and invite questions, but I want to get a few more ideas out.

Dick Light:

The board of advisors is an example of something that I think, I'll just say, I think student advising is probably the most under appreciated feature of a great college education, a great university education. Sometimes advising from the perspective of advisors like me is hard. It's often easy, but sometimes it's hard. I have a very specific example. About three years ago, I was teaching a class here, graduate students, masters students. One of the strongest students in the class was a fellow named Steve. I won't use his last name. He was African American, he handed in his first two homework assignments. Both of them got a B minus. Both of them were exploding with great ideas. Both of them were just horribly written. I invited him to come to the office and he immediately happily accepted, we got along wonderfully well. I just said, Steve, I have a delicate question to ask you.

Dick Light:

What I'm trying to convey is, it's not easy always for an advisor to do this. Here I am, an older white guy and I'm talking to a 26 year old black guy. I just said, Steve, I love your papers. They're an A plus on the ideas, but they don't have a beginning, a middle and an end and they're full of grammatical mistakes. Are you willing to accept some assistance to improve your writing? You can be spectacular. He looked stunned for about 10 seconds. And then he said, "Professor Light, you are the first person in my entire college career and graduate school career who's had the courage to tell me the truth and what I needed to hear. I felt very awkward for a few seconds, but I'll be grateful for the rest of my life. Yes, I will go to the writing center. Can you tell me where I should go?" And I did.

Dick Light:

The end of the story is, he ended up with an A minus in the course and I closed the semester by saying, which PhD program are you applying to Steve? He stared at me and said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "You're really good. Why haven't you applied?" The end of the story is, he is as we speak, this minute, a PhD student at USC, University of Southern California. I volunteered to write him a recommendation. He's good. But you all can understand, young black graduate student, old white professor, I'm criticizing, your writing's lousy. It takes a bit of courage. You can imagine if it's a young woman, it's even a little bit more. There we are. Okay. One more example from advising and then I think what I'm going to do is invite a couple of questions.

Dick Light:

One of the things that I would suggest for any of you who are interested in advising in particular, since I'm selling advising as something that differentiates great universities from not so great, it's that every advisor should convey to their advisees, meaning the students. They could be first year undergraduates, age 18 or 19, or they could be like some of the folks here tuned in right now, 23, 27, 30 years old or much older. The goal is get to know one or two or three faculty members. Ideally have them get to know you, at least a little during your time here. That's the whole point of your being here and that's one of the reasons you come to a great university. But here is where there's a big difference, we learned, the several of us at Brown, Duke, Georgetown and Harvard.

Dick Light:

I assembled together with colleagues, 14 deans. We met twice a year basically. We did a project exploring how to help first generation college students succeed. These young men and women, undergraduates, have been accepted to demanding colleges. They're smart as a whip. They're very smart, which is why they're admitted. They've taken advantage of everything they can in their often not so great high schools. Some were great. Most were not great. The question is, how do you help them succeed? We advisors learn something. Example, tell your advisees, get to know a faculty member. Second, don't just drift in and poke your nose in a professor's office. Professor Light, got a few minutes? Well, no, actually, I teach in six minutes, I don't have a few minutes old. I will be happy to make an appointment. That's the third point, make an appointment.

Dick Light:

And then the final point. Okay. See a faculty, get to know a faculty, make an appointment. And then the final thing is, do your homework. Some students come in and they know why they're there, to see a professor. Other students come in, professor, I'll use myself, professor Light, I understand that you do research and education, I'd love to hear about it. I'm just thinking, how do I summarize a lifetime of work in the next 11 minutes? I can't do that. The idea just is little tips like that can be terrific. There are

also some challenges, I won't go in, I'll just final example here, really. And that just is my most awkward moment came with a young woman, advisee, I thought she was a pleasure. I think she enjoyed me too, but she always came dressed inappropriately, dressed inappropriately, I won't give more detail than that.

Dick Light:

I'll simply say, I was thinking, I asked my wife, who's in the counseling service at Harvard Business School. I'm trying to think, I'll do her a big favor if I say, you shouldn't dress that way. But the truth is, God help me if she's offended. I ended up not doing it, whereas I was willing to do it with a young man. It's delicate from the point of view of both parties in that transaction. John, maybe I should stop now if you're getting a couple of questions. I can keep going if we're not, and then I can stop in seven minutes from now, you choose.

John Haigh:

There are a couple of questions that we can circle around here. One that came up in the chat, in the Q&A app, is a question about international students.

Dick Light:

Sure.

John Haigh:

For international students whom English is not a first language. You gave a couple of examples, but how do you think about that if at all differently? What would you propose from an advising perspective in terms of, potentially for example, the type of advisor that would be most effective for that student?

Dick Light:

That's a very good question. I'm not just being polite. It really is a great question. Just to be clear, since this is a Kennedy School event, I simply want to observe the Kennedy School has, John is my number right? At least 40% of our students or 38%, some big fraction are international. Is that right?

John Haigh:

It's actually, at least when I was executive dean, we were almost slightly below 50% of the students were from countries other than the United States.

Dick Light:

Wow. I assume many of the international students, if there are some, I assume there were some right now on this discussion. You're half the Kennedy School. I can tell you among undergraduate places at Harvard college, it's about 13%. I don't know if you think that's high or low, but we could argue. The point just is, there are plenty, there are plenty. Harvard has about 6,800 undergraduates, 13%. That's about 800 students. That's a lot of human beings. To answer the question that you pose when it comes to advising, I would actually be very blunt and direct, of course, very kind, respectful, but in the end, very direct. Let me give a couple of examples, because I have advised several international students. The first comment is, I don't know if any of these will surprise you.

Dick Light:

The first is, I'm not an expert on every country. Therefore, would I advise a student from South Korea differently from a student from Uganda? I'm not sure, from Kazakhstan. I'm genuinely not sure. What I can say is though, I tell all my advisees and that includes several international students, a few key points. Key point number one is get to know the professor. I would tell them exactly what I just said to everyone. Second, make an appointment. I don't know what the customs are in Korea or Kazakhstan. I assume an appointment is sensible, but here are specific. First I would just say, because I don't know your background, because how could I, the details, I encourage you to speak up in class. Instructors really value students who move the discussion forward.

Dick Light:

Even if you're taking a bit of a risk, even if you're unsure of your answer, take the risk, move the discussion forward, it'll be appreciated. Your classmates will appreciate it. And you'll feel good that you're helping your class as well as learning something. The second suggestion I would make is, don't feel afraid to disagree, respectfully with your instructor. Literally say, I respectfully disagree. In Bulgaria we do things all differently. I've actually seen that happen. I've had it happen in one of my classes. I loved it. I couldn't get enough of it. Someone's giving a different perspective. Everyone else in the room is learning from that perspective. And then comes the slightly delicate point that I do and I've learned, I've screwed up my courage.

Dick Light:

I say to my international advisees, and then also say, so many countries have delicate relationships with other countries. You have a choice. You can bring all those delicate, awkward, sometimes relationships into the Harvard classroom or any other classroom at any other university. Or you can view your time here as the maybe one time in your whole life where you will have a chance to go and have lunch. Where if you're the Turks and the Greeks and the Palestinians and the Israelis and the group, this group, and that group, this is a great chance and become good buddies. The great news is that, at great universities, it doesn't always happen, but it often happens. Okay. In the spirit of time, that's my not too long answer.

John Haigh:

The one thing I would comment, is that, I found that some international students or students from countries other than the United States sometimes don't understand the differences in the cultural norms. To your point earlier about culture, just as an advisor to help them understand what the norms are for classroom behavior. For example, raising your hand, commenting in class, is quite useful. We have a number of questions in the chat. This one I find pretty interesting. How can university support faculty to balance the pressures to publish in order to receive tenure, the time and effort needed for advising, how should the tenure process be revisited?

Dick Light:

Well, this is a question that has no easy answer. For years, I was at the university of Texas a year ago. I'm sitting with the president in his office, we had 10 extra minutes and I just said, Greg, what keeps you up at night? He looks at me with a big smile and he just says, "Dick, it's not obvious to you?" I said, "No, I'm asking a straightforward question. Now really, what keeps you up at night?" I had no idea what he's going to say, John, he posed your question. He just said, "I as president of the University of Texas," Which I view as one of America's great public universities, and I should add, I agree with him. It is one of the great America's great public universities.

Dick Light:

He just said, "I'm trying to figure out how do I get my faculty to do their research so they can advance academically, to care about their teaching." For all the obvious, good reasons, "And on top of it to take advising seriously." I remember saying, "Do you have any suggestions?" He asked me. I said, the only thing I can think of, which I suspect you've thought of already, is to say to your faculty, advising is part of your paycheck. The deal is, literally the deal is, you must spend a certain amount of your time advising. It may be three hours a week, but you've got to take it seriously. Be well prepared, get to know a few advisees. At the smaller campuses, private or public, but I'll use private as an example, because there tend to be so many excellent, small, private, liberal arts colleges.

Dick Light:

Most people don't attend them, but they exist and they're excellent. It's very clear that the mission of a faculty member is partly excellent advising. What I guess is, if I were the president of such a college, what I would do is, I would assign every faculty member say six advisee students or eight, when the students is a first year. I would just say, you will be rewarded. You will be promoted. Your salary will depend upon those students succeeding. It's a little bit like rewarding a dentist, not for fixing the patient's cavity. It's rewarding the dentist to try to get the patients to have no cavities and take good preventive care. It's a funny kind of reward, but that's the best answer I can come up with.

John Haigh:

We're going to go back to the question about advising and this one is, what techniques have great schools found most successful in getting students to take responsibility for making use of advisors for a reason for a season and forever?

Dick Light:

John, did you say great schools, G-R-E-A-T or G-R-A-D-E schools? I think you said G-R-E-A-T. Yes?

John Haigh:

Great. What techniques have great schools found most successful in getting students to take responsibility, getting students-

Dick Light:

For advising.

John Haigh:

... for making use of advisors.

Dick Light:

Let me give two concrete examples. I think in the description of this webinar session, it said, Richard Light will give two case studies. Here they are, as promised, two case studies. First, it's going to answer, John, this question? How many of you have heard of a campus, I suspect not many called Towson, T like Thomas, O-W-S-O-N like Nancy, Towson university? It's in Maryland, used to be called Towson state. It's no one's idea of Yale. No one will confuse. I'm being just very direct and blunt and unawkward about it. The point is, the students tend to be a bit less prepared and so on and so on. I think they're a great school in a particular way.

Dick Light:

They decided what they would do, is make a special effort to take students who came from weaker backgrounds or low income families or poor high schools and help those, I'll use the word kids, because we're talking about undergraduates now. Help those undergraduates to succeed. They accomplished an astonishing thing that very few universities accomplish. Here are the precise numbers to the second decimal place. The overall six year graduation rate at Towson University in Towson, Maryland is 77%. At Harvard it's 98%. At Stanford it's 98%. At Yale it's 98%. It shouldn't be a surprise. What fraction of the students admitted? Almost all of them. Anyway, at Towson it's 77. Now, suppose I ask, among the entering African American students, many of whom come from lower income families, not a surprise, many of whom come from imperfect high schools, not a surprise.

Dick Light:

There's no awkwardness about saying it. What's the graduation rate? 79%, 2% points higher. They're one of the few campuses in the whole nation able to do that. The way they do it, John, to answer the question you posed about great universities, is, they just lay personal attention onto those students like no one would believe. Constant meetings. They're described as open meetings, but it quickly becomes fairly clear it's targeted to low income students, other places to students of color, but they're always open meetings. They're never just special subgroups where no one else is allowed to attend. They handle it beautifully, and the students love it. They've got a happy group of students. It's a happy situation. And now let me go to a more selective campus. Second case study is Georgetown.

Dick Light:

Georgetown has a six year graduation rate of 92%. The national average is 54. So Georgetown 92, it's pretty spectacular. Suppose you ask, of the first generation college students at Georgetown, what's their graduation rate in six years from the day they enter? What production graduated? 97%. That's the only other place besides Towson University that I have found, in all my travels, that can do that. How do they do it? There's a woman there named Melissa Foy, F-O-Y. Anybody is interested. Get in touch with Missy Foy. She's just spectacular. She single handedly rounds up the first generation students for extra meetings, extra sessions. Here's an example of taking advantage of advising. The Question you read, John, is can you get students to take advantage? Imagine here's an example of what actually happens at Georgetown. It's worth a minute.

Dick Light:

I'm a first generation, first year student and I'm finding my way. I come from very modest circumstances. My phone rings in the middle of my first year. It's an alumnus calling, at 24 [inaudible 00:35:08] graduated three years ago. Let's say it's a man, this man says, Richard, are you first gen student? I think you are. And I say, yes, I am. I'm a first gen college student. And the caller says, well, I am too, and I'm a very proud graduate of Georgetown. I have a question for you. Are you thinking this coming summer of maybe interviewing for a job or even an internship somewhere? Well, either, I'll say yes or no. Suppose I say yes, then the caller, again, this really happens all the time now, for last few years. The caller says, I have a question. Are you actually going for an interview?

Dick Light:

Not just applying, but going for an interview, supposedly I say, yes, I'm applying to fidelity investments, make it up and they're going to interview me in-person pre COVID. In-person. And then the caller says, I have a question. I apologize if it's awkward, I intended to be unawkward, do you have a tie and jacket to

wear to the interview? Or if it's a woman, do you have appealing, straightforward, appropriate dress to wear to that interview, outfit? About half of the students say, of course, yes. But then other half say, well, actually, and the answer is, they don't. To which the caller says, one of the alumni initiatives we first gen students have taken is, she said, look, I'm 24 years old. I just graduated two years ago.

Dick Light:

I can't write a check for \$10 million to Georgetown. What I can do is write a check for \$250. Many of us have done that. Georgetown has a program where they will score a group of first gen students to JoS. A. Bank right across the street from campus and help you pick out a sport coat and tie to wear to your interview. That's it, there is no more. Second step. Melissa Foy who runs the Georgetown program invites every first gen student who's applying for a job or anything else, would you like a practice interview? We will interview you. We're going to pretend we're Fidelity. We're interviewing you. You're going to get to be better as an interviewee. Of course the students love it. They're so grateful. A few decline, most say, this is great. Okay. End of story.

Dick Light:

What is the point? The graduation rate is astonishing. The kids, the undergraduates are grateful forever and they pay it forward, when they graduate, they then offer to help the next generation. It's a happy situation. I define Georgetown as a great university, if that reason for no other.

John Haigh:

We have other questions in the queue, some of them I know we'll come back to because I think you're going to touch base on some of these issues. There's one that I'm going to just read real quickly, because I think basically have answered it, but just to keep it in the back of your mind. The question is professor Light, what advancements have you seen specifically with academic advising practices for first generation and underrepresented students like me with the institutions and research you have conducted? What recommendations do you have? I think you've answered that question maybe pretty extensively, but just keeping in the back of your mind, if there are other things that come up.

John Haigh:

I'm going to turn it back to you to let you talk for a little bit more, and then we're going to open up in another 10 minutes to more questions.

Dick Light:

This is great. I'm feeling top of the world, because I'm getting a few love notes here on the bottom of the screen. It's a pleasure. This is great. Let me keep going. You know what I mean, kind notes from a couple of folks. Okay, here it goes. Let me continue then. Another difference between great universities and the many that are just pretty good. I interview 40 undergraduates a year at Harvard college. For some of you who might say, that's a lot, it's one a week. That's easy. I can find 45 minutes. I sit one-on-one in-person, in my office and literally ask them a series of, we have 55 questions. Let me just share with you one of the big takeaways. I've done this at Duke.

Dick Light:

I've done this at the university of Texas. I've done it at St. Cloud State University, an hours drive North of Minneapolis. My point is, look, St. Cloud State and Harvard quite different, but what's really interesting is, it's very obvious that great universities encourage students to do something that the pretty good

ones don't always remember to encourage. That is, my words, I'm making these up now, investing versus harvesting, you should all feel free to use those words as you wish. I put them in the book that I just submitted to Princeton press. Here it goes. Imagine you're a new student at college, at a great university advisor after advisor, dean after dean repeatedly drums into you, bangs into you. You need to do a bit of a trade-off a juggling act, continue to build on your strengths, but also try a few new things.

Dick Light:

You just arrived here at university, at college, you're a brand new first year student. It's nuts if you don't try anything new. Let me just be clear. The word investing means, take a risk, try something new. You may or may not be good at it. Harvesting means reaping the fruits of your earlier work. Let me start, I'll start with harvesting. Suppose you were a runner, a cross country runner before you came to college and you're darn good at it. Well, my reaction is, continue that in college, build on it. Great. It'll give you pleasure. If you were editor of your high school newspaper, right? Continue that in college, that's harvesting, it's paying off the hard work, even if you're just quite young, 19 years old. Then there's investing. That's trying a new thing. Suppose the editor of the high school newspaper arrives at Georgetown or Duke, or pick your place, at Grinnell college.

Dick Light:

That person then says, I think I want to join a singing group. I'm going to try a new thing. The idea is that, I think it's great. They ought to try a new thing. They may be accepted. They may not, they may be a singer, and then they want to try to be the newspaper writer in college. All I'm saying is, students report. When I said, I interview a student a week, over a number of years, we have over 2000 interviews accumulated. One of the big findings is, the most successful, the happiest students, and this can be the first-generation student all the way to a ninth generation legacy student, who came here on the Mayflower. The idea, both of them, the trick is to try to get a good trade off and try a little bit of each.

Dick Light:

I often have advisees, my own advisees, they say what they're going to do. And then I just said, what did you do in the past? And they list the exact same activities. I just say, you've got to try one new thing. I don't have the secret answer. Maybe join the mountain climbing club if that's what appeals to you. But anyway, I think you will get the idea. So it's investing versus harvesting. Next point. I'm just trying to cover a lot. What differentiates pretty good from great universities? The great universities unawkwardly, unselfconsciously are constantly experimenting with new ways to teach, different ways to teach. I would love to give my single favorite example of that. It has nothing to do with me. About three years ago, let me give credit here to my colleagues at the Kennedy School, Dan Levy and Richard Zach Houser, here goes, several years ago, several of us were at a meeting with a man named Carl Wieman.

Dick Light:

W-I-E-M-A-N. Who you ask is Carl Wieman? I suspect most of you never heard of him. The secret truth is before I met him. I never heard of him either. Well, he happens to be a Nobel prize winning physicist. He taught out at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He's now moved on to Stanford, but the point is, at the time he was at Boulder and he came in and gave a talk here on the Harvard campus. And he said, "Isn't it crazy? We all who teach. I teach you teach. We give exams, the students, we have a final exam. Students come, they sit there for two or three hours. They take the exam, they get a grade. They go home. That's the end of it. What did they learn from taking the exam? Well, they studied for the exam.

That's good. But basically the exam was not a learning experience. Let's convert the process of all exams at any college or university in the world to make it a learning experience."

Dick Light:

I remember one of my colleagues, it may have been Dan Levy saying, "Well, what exactly do you propose?" And he said, "It costs zero." You don't have to be a rich campus to do it. He said, Instead of a three hour exam, where everyone sits alone on their own, behind, all by themselves, in their chair, answering questions, and then you leave and you go home and say done. And the only point seems to be, to get a grade. You hope you got a good grade, but that's the only point. Instead suppose you give an exam and it's two hours instead of three, you do it the usual way. Everybody sits alone on their own. But the new thing is, then for the final hour, after a three minute break. For the final hour, the students are divided into groups of four and there they go to different places in a room and they get their chairs so they can face each other and they discuss the exam.

Dick Light:

They discuss all the questions on the exam. They have a whole hour to do it. And then the students each have, it's at the end of that hour to write up revised and improved versions of their answer. So suppose I were a student and question six on the economics final exam, I had written something, but I realized when I discussed, we all discussed what would make sense. I could improve my answer. I wrote the wrong thing, I get a chance to change it. And the point then is that might count, say of the a hundred points on a final exam. You can make up your own number. I'll make up the number. It could count maybe as much as 10 points, but it's worth something. It could be the difference between an A and an A minus or an A minus and a B plus.

Dick Light:

The point is, the students, we tried that, Dan Levy tried it, Richard Zach Houser tried it. Several others have tried it. The university of British Columbia in Canada obviously has tried it. The university of Colorado, Stanford tried it and Harvard's tried it. The point just is the students all say the same thing. I actually learned something. I'm walking out of here, that three hour experience, I've got four new insights. That's not the way most students think about a final exam. There's one example. I want to give a couple of others, because I hope they'll ring a bell for people. First, I'm going to use an example from the Kennedy School, since this is a Kennedy School webinar. Again, I mentioned Dan Levy, he tried in one of his introductory, I think it was statistics classes. He basically tried an experiment and that is, he asked, will students learn more if they're asked to post responses online?

Dick Light:

Let's say they get a homework on Monday and the next class is Thursday, by midnight, the night before or 4:00 AM that morning, whatever his time deadline, let's say midnight, Wednesday night, students should post a brief response to a question, thereby number one, showing they did their homework. Number two, it forces them to do their preparation. That's good for the class and classmates have access. It's all posted on a blog, so everyone can learn from everyone else's insights. The question is, by doing that with half the class, not doing it with the other half, Dan levy did a wonderful randomized controlled experiment and he did it twice. The question is, are students learning more? All my faculty friends predicted, of course they'll learn more. Most of the students said, I think I'll learn more.

Dick Light:

Guess what? We learned posting does not change learning one bit, at least measurably. It doesn't hurt, and in fact increases the preparation time, which you could say is a good thing if you want your students to spend more preparation time. Anyway, there's an example. My final example, it has a personal meaning to me. The several of you who were my students this past fall. I taught two classes. Several of you I know are logged in. I'll just say, as you all know, I'm a big fan of cold calling, meaning I don't only call on students who raised their hand. I start that way, but then I'll cold call, meaning I'll say, Sally, Sally, you haven't spoken up today. I'd love to hear what you think. The point is. I want Sally to get her one minute of airtime and with smallest classes, 20, 25, you can do that.

Dick Light:

You can't do it with 100. What's the punchline? Several experiments on cold calling done by Dan Levy with a few other folks, Josh Goodman, here at the Kennedy School, have found that also hardly, hardly improves learning. It was to my surprise. I didn't expect that. I'm going to see if I can get one more finding in here. Okay. Let's see. I want to give one more finding and that's, I said at the very beginning, great universities ask the students for feedback and ideas. Let me tell you my favorite question when we interview students at Harvard at the end of their first year. I'm sitting one-on-one with some young woman, some young man, it could be black, white, who knows from what country, it could be American, it could be an international student.

Dick Light:

I ask questions. Then I get to my favorite question. Pretend you're dean for a day, what is one constructive change you would implement? Even if you love this place, you're so happy and successful to make it even better, but say something constructive. Don't tell us we need to add tomatoes to the salad bar. A little bit better than that. To which we've got great ideas from students. I want to just give one example, because it changed something at Harvard. It's a Harvard example. After asking some undergraduates that question, dean for a day, what would you change? Many of them, not millions, but say, well, a few dozen said, there's something crazy here. Harvard has 1,000 professors. I take four classes a semester, times four years as an undergraduate, two semesters, that's eight semesters. I will meet 32 professors, but Harvard has 1,000.

Dick Light:

That means, 97% of the professors, I'll never hear them say a word and they're great. That's one of the reasons I came to Harvard, for the faculty. Here's the bottom line. Following the students repeated observations, I actually shared this with some student leaders and they said, great, we'll do something. This was not my idea. I credit to students several years ago. They made up a program. They literally made it up, based on their own suggestions. I had to give them the feedback, but then they get all the credit. They called their program, 10 big ideas, 10 professors, 10 minutes each. What they did, they asked 10 very popular and really outstanding professors each to talk for no more than 10 minutes, 10 different people, and just share the one big idea from their field.

Dick Light:

They held it in an auditorium called Sanders Theatre, which seats 1,100 students. The first time they did this several years ago, they had no idea. It was in the evening on a random Tuesday evening in the winter, on a cold night, they had no idea how many students would show up. The lines snaked around the block. It was not only standing room only, but they had, there were two, what is the word? Telecasts basically to other large rooms. There were nearly 3000 undergraduates. They loved it. What's the point?

Every one who showed up, heard 10 different professors each for their few minutes, they got one big new idea from each professor.

Dick Light:

How much did it cost Harvard? If you're the treasurer of Harvard, how much did it cost? Zero. Just using Sanders hall, Sanders Theater for the evening, that's what it costs. The professors were not paid anything. They were honored to be asked. They love to talk. So they got their chance to talk in front of a big audience. The students were thrilled, everyone was happy. So even the least rich college or university in America or in Uruguay, could implement that idea. John, with my eye on it, I could go forever, with my eye on [inaudible 00:52:26] be respectful. May I turn it back to you, if you have two or three more questions.

John Haigh:

There are a few questions in the queue and I'm going to pull them up. Some of them you've addressed, but I'm going to give you the opportunity if you want to expand a little bit. The first one is, do you see common characteristics or trends amongst great universities that have an innovative culture, to go back to your first point about the importance of culture and what you were just talking about now. Are there specific systems, practices or processes that can be studied, examined or scaled across institutions to promote innovation?

Dick Light:

To promote innovation. Sure. The answer is yes. My honest response to that very good question. I love the question, but I'm going to be blunt and that's why we're all here. My answer is every campus needs a cheerleader, a leader, someone who will do what exactly, whoever wrote this question or the several folks who wrote some version of this, every campus needs a leader to try to do it. I want to give a very specific example, again, forgive me if I'm a bit Harvard centric today, but you're all connected. You're logged into Harvard. I come to work every day at Harvard, because of the pandemic, I unfortunately have been setting at nowhere but Harvard. The point is, I want to give an example from Harvard, but I think it will answer, John, the question you just post. One of my favorite questions asking undergraduates is, these are now graduating seniors.

Dick Light:

I just posed what I think is a straightforward question. Think of all the classes you took here as a student, which one had the biggest impact on you and why? I want to tell about George, it's one guy, one person. He was a graduating senior. Oh, did he took me so seriously. Actually it was a pleasure. He said, "Let me think. Let me think. Yes. I know what it is. It was my junior year seminar on East European politics and history." I'm sort of staring at him. I don't know him. We're just matched at random. I just said, Oh really, well, it had a big impact on you? He said. "It changed my life." This is my point about any university can do this. It can be spread so easily just by hearing these examples.

Dick Light:

Anyway, I said, well, George, tell me about it. An obvious question. Why did it change your life? How did it change your life? What happened? He said, very simple. We basically were discussing relatively recent East European and Russian politics, history and literature. He said, we came once a week for three hours, Thursday afternoons, two to five, we all met. There were 15 of us in the seminar. It was quite a luxury, only 15. That's a good thing. Anyway, he just said for the first three or four weeks, the professor

gave the standard assignments, read chapters three, four, and five in the book for next week, come prepared to discuss and then comes the bullseye. He said, "In the fifth week, the professor gave a different assignment." I remember these very clearly.

Dick Light:

He looked me in the eye and he said, "Professor Light, what's your reaction to this homework assignment?" He said, "I know this is not your field, but what's your reaction?" He said, the professor said your assignment for next Thursday is on December 12th, 1993. The Russian people voted overwhelmingly to approve a new constitution. Your assignment for next week is, one, read the new Russian constitution and translations, since most of the students are not fluent in Russian. Anyway, read the new constitution. Part to read the old Russian constitution. Part three, browse the American constitution to remind yourself of the key points.

Dick Light:

Next week, your assignment is, come prepared to discuss A, the difference and similarities between the new and the old Russian constitution and B the differences in similarities between the new Russian constitution and the American constitution. This young man started laughing. He said, "Professor Light, honestly, what do you think of that assignment?" We're all adults here. Honestly, what I think? I think it's nuts. He said, "Why?" I just said, it's way too much. I couldn't begin to do that. He started laughing. He said, "That's the point. That's why I brought this up." The professor is really smart and he agreed. It's nuts. He agrees with you. So the professor divided us up into groups of five, three groups of five. Each of us specialized in a different part of that assignment.

Dick Light:

Then we all reported back to the class. He said, look at the skills I learned from that class first. I had to learn to divide up work constructively. Second, how to get the work done. Third, how to function effectively in a small working group of five people. My four colleagues were not all my closest friends, we were strangers, but we had to figure out how to work together and make a presentation. He said, finally, can you imagine how hard we work? We must've had seven meetings outside of class and that one week to get our act together to not embarrass ourselves, I'm done. This young man said, everywhere I looked when I looked for jobs, Google, Facebook, Snapchat, Dropbox, we can tell them 200 other names like that.

Dick Light:

And every one of them, nobody goes and works alone. Everyone works together. I learned how to work collaboratively in that Eastern European history and politics class. I guess what I'm trying to say is, any great universities should, number one, look for findings like that, by asking their students what worked well and then replicating it over and over and over again. I hope that's a reasonable answer.

John Haigh:

We have hit the witching hour. We're right at noon, or a few seconds over. If you feel you need to leave, don't be shy. I will say we've got probably another couple of minutes. And there are some questions that are related in the chat box that I want to just hit to Dick and feel free to drop off if you need to drop off. But Dick has offered to stay on for another five minutes or so. I'm going to lump all these questions together Dick, because they have a common theme, which is really around advising and how do you

have more effective advising. The first one is, how do you suggest navigating delicate advising topics with students without offending or discouraging them? You've talked about this a little bit.

John Haigh:

Second one is, what are your thoughts on advising outside of academic context, such as career services, there so much emphasis the days on employment outcomes, I wonder if I'm non academic advising can contribute to student success and personal growth. And the last one is, can you list some of the baseline competencies for great advisor, particularly with the student body, with a broad array of identities, please include the professional development areas that might make good advising functions and big advising functions. Small questions for you to answer, [inaudible 00:59:36]. Sorry.

Dick Light:

Well, you know what, maybe I have a global answer to all those. You've just posed three slightly different questions, but they're obviously all subcategories of this broad thing, this broad idea called good advising. How about I just say, it's completely clear to me, again, I'm going to focus on the same word choice, the difference between great universities versus the many that are fine. No one's angry at them, they're fine. But the difference between the great and the not so spectacular, is that, the great universities figured something out. I'm so struck when I visit the not so great ones, when I ask a question, it often comes across as if it's a new insight. Here it goes. Here's my specific example. I'm going to ask everyone, who's still logged in, since it's a couple of minutes after noon now, everyone who's logged in.

Dick Light:

How many hours are there in a week? Okay. A little arithmetic, seven days, 24 hours a day, seven times 24, 168 hours. I'll ask every student, how many hours a week do you spend in classes, in your formal classes? At the Kennedy School, at undergraduate, whatever the heck it is, I'm getting funny comments, whatever it is. The answer is what? Typically what? 12, four courses, three hours a week, maybe four courses, four hours a week, 15, whatever it is. Well, out of 168 hours, that leaves more than 150 for everything else. I think one of the roles of a good advisor is to help each student fully capitalize on those 150 hours. I don't mean they have to be focused every minute of those 150 hours that they're not sleeping. That's crazy, spend your time with your girlfriend. More power to you.

Dick Light:

That's not the point. The point is though, try to be constructive, even in informal interactions with classmates. How about I just say, here are two short examples of when I advise, I use these examples, I really do use them with my students and the students seem to like them. Let me share them with everyone who's still logged in. The first one is this, most all of you I'm sure either have seen or have heard of the Vietnam war Memorial in Washington, D.C. Do many of you know the name of the person who designed it? Well, let me just finish my own story. Her name is Maya Lin, L-I-N. And she designed it when she was an undergraduate at Yale. I never met Maya Lin, but what I can tell you is Yale has a legend and it's true.

Dick Light:

There was a contest open to anyone in the world, design in Vietnam or Memorial. One day Maya Lin as a Yale junior, age 20 or whatever she was, was sitting in the dining hall with three friends. She told them about the contest and they knew she was interested in architecture. They said, well, what would you

design? This is not a joke. You may think I'm joking. I'm not. She took the mashed potatoes on her plate, on the table, in front of her three friends and pushed the mashed potatoes around and said, this is the way it would look. Her friends said, that's unusual. That's actually quite spectacular. You ought to apply. She said, don't be silly. I'm 20 years old, I'm competing against, I am pay, I'm competing against world class architects.

Dick Light:

They said, no, no, no, no, you ought, you should, the point is they encouraged her. The end of the story she was chosen and that's the end of the impact of an outside of class, the 150 hours a week outside of the classroom experience. I'm going to use my other example, because I happen to love it. I bet everybody on this call has either used or knows perfectly well what federal express is. Well, how was federal express started? Somebody started it, it didn't come flying out of the air out of nowhere. I have no connection to Yale. These are two Yale stories. I have zero connection in any part of my life. There's a man named Fred Smith. he's a real man. He's a guy.

Dick Light:

He was at Yale in the late 60s. As a course assignment, he was told in an economics class, applied economics, write a business plan for a new company, that will be profitable and useful to Americans and indeed internationally, but it has to be an idea that's actually doable. It can't be a total pipe dream, imaginary thing. He basically wrote a design for federal express. He basically said, it'll be reliable, it'll have a hub. It now has a Memphis as a hub. He hadn't chosen that yet. He was 20 years old. He handed in his paper, he got it back with a grade from the professor, B minus, that's really true. And the professor wrote, love the idea, but it's totally impractical. All of his friends encouraged him and said, to hell with the professor, may the professor have a nice rest of his day.

Dick Light:

You should start the company you envision it Federal Express. He did. And some exactly 50 years ago in 1971, he had 28 airplanes carrying three packages. That was their first day in business. He had 28 small single propeller airplanes carrying packages, but with high reliability to different places. What's my point? The point of these two, I think mildly entertaining anecdote is, that's what you get for going to a great university in this case, Yale. But you go because it's all the stuff outside of class that can make the real difference. I think you muted John.

John Haigh:

With that, Dick, I just want to say thank you so much. That was terrific. I noticed in the chat a number of people, including some faculty saying, what time well spent with you, Dick and how they learn, and I've learned some things that are going to affect how I think about teaching and my role at the Kennedy School. Thank you so much for that. For all of the attendees, thank you for taking the time to join us. It's terrific to have you here and hopefully you will find time outside of your classes to come join us for some of the other seminars out of the center. Thank you Dick.

Dick Light:

Thank you all for taking the time out of what I know are busy days folks, to join me and in all seriousness, thank you, John, for hosting. I hope this is a little helpful. Even if you find half of these ideas helpful, everyone wins. Have a good day.