

Book Review

Felten, P. & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. (187 pp., 39.95)

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Peter Felten and Leo Lambert's charge to readers in their book, *Relationship-Rich Education*, is that fostering meaningful and sustained relationships that are key to students' college successes is not exclusive to elite, resource-rich institutions but it starts with having well-timed conversations and seizing everyday opportunities to support and connect with students in the classroom and beyond. Felten and Lambert's elaboration on the power of meaningful and multiple learning-oriented relationships in undergraduate education encourages us to reflect on the challenges many colleges are facing to sustain, retain, and grow their enrollment with the shift to online education that COVID-19 has brought (as noted by the authors in the postscript). As online education has multiplied students' college options by easing geographical barriers, it would serve colleges to emphasize relational connections with students to not only sustain their enrollments but to sustain their students who must grapple with formidable social, economic, and psychological fallout from the pandemic.

Peter Felten, the executive director of the Center for Engaged Learning, an assistant provost, and a history professor at Elon University, previously wrote *Schools of Thought: Well-Rounded Education in the Lands of Opportunities* in 2018 in which he offers

a critical personal reflection on various approaches to learning within the US education system. Leo Lambert, an education professor and president emeritus of Elon University, was a co-author of *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most* together with Felten and others in 2016, a book that, along with other key takeaways, emphasizes the value of relationships, not just in students' lives but across various levels of the institution. Felten and Lambert's current work was published in 2020 as the value of relationships across all levels of education was receiving increased focus. The same year saw the publication of *No More Teaching Without Positive Relationships* by Howard, Milner-McCall, and Howard, a book that emphasized the student-teacher relationship in K-12 education.

Felten and Lambert's book contains six chapters bookended by an introduction and a conclusion and a COVID-19 postscript. Chapter 1 presents their vision for the book. Chapter 2 covers the barriers/challenges to achieving this vision. Chapter 3 explains how to integrate relationships into the culture of a college. Chapter 4 elaborates on cultivating relationships in the classroom. Chapter 5 focuses on relationships throughout the college experience. And Chapter 6 highlights the importance of mentorship. Felten and Lambert state their thesis in the

first line of their introductory chapter, “Relationships are the beating heart of the undergraduate experience” (p. 1). The supporting evidence for this premise comes from interviews conducted with 385 students, faculty, and staff (204 were with students) at twenty-nine diverse institutions of higher education including public, private, and military campuses. Felten and Lambert combine their interviews with critical research and literature on best practices in higher education. The authors include short illustrative examples throughout their book and include longer case studies at the end of chapters. For instance, chapter three ends with a case study of how the authors’ home institution, Elon University, elevated their institution from small regional college into mid-sized national university. Elon University is a tuition-dependent institution with a modest endowment that has committed over the long term to invest its discretionary funding in fostering an interconnected academic community including creating more residential housing where students and faculty live side by side, supporting high-impact practices such as mentoring students in their research and internships, and lowering student-faculty ratios. The cases explored in this book provide potential directions for faculty, staff, and student leaders seeking to create a campus culture characterized by success-oriented relationships. The book is by no means written as a how-to guide, nor should it be, as the implementation strategies used by private comprehensive institutions with modest endowments will likely differ from those taken by public community colleges who often must do more with less funding. That said, the book foregrounds the importance of welcoming and supportive messaging to students from

all campus stakeholders, regardless of institution type. Communication Center professionals will recognize the centrality of their work to creating/prompting, shaping, coordinating, and sustaining this messaging.

In chapter one, Felten and Lambert distill four interlocking relationship-rich principles from their interview research: every student must experience genuine welcome and deep care, every student must be inspired to learn, every student must develop a web of significant relationships, and every student must explore questions of meaning and purpose. Faculty readers of the book will recognize a key challenge to the authors’ vision is that academia rarely sufficiently rewards the ample time that many dedicated faculty members already spend in developing relationships with students, a pattern which can dissuade those on the tenure track from a meaningful dedication to students, as Felten and Lambert discuss in chapter two. In Chapter 3, the authors caution that when realigning the culture of academe towards relationships, an institution “should value the students it currently enrolls, not those from some past mythological age when all undergraduates concentrated only on academics, behaved with great decorum, and respected the wisdom of their elders” (p. 61). Communication Centers can realize this by marketing their programs in ways that speak to the lived realities and cultural backgrounds of their students and by delivering their services in ways that eliminate learning barriers without pathologizing the learner as deficient.

Felten and Lambert’s work warns that colleges and universities that fail to recognize, value, and embrace the whole student, including their socio-cultural identities, are sabotaging their

best efforts at relationship-rich education. The authors note that the current undergraduate student lives with stark realities including racially-motivated violence, poverty, uncertain/undocumented immigration status, an education impacted by underperforming K-12 schools, and family concerns. The focus on student identities is a point that deserves more elaboration in the book. The dearth of intersectional experiences in the book is perhaps proportionate to how often interviewees reported experiencing challenges arising out of an intersection of their identities but this could be changed by diversifying the criteria used in selecting interviewees.

In sum, the book is an important read for faculty and administrators concerned about the success of their students. This book would be valuable reading for courses focusing on contemporary issues facing higher education, effective andragogy, and higher education administration. From the perspective of Communication Center professionals, the book argues for a goal of building sustained and positive relationships instead of singular and unidirectional transactions and further for creating relationships that endure even as they evolve (i.e., the tutor who will transition into the research mentor and colleague). While the book is by no means the final word in the conversation on cultivating a community of relationships to support our students, it has the potential to fuel much-needed discussions within academia germane to whom and what we currently value, what we reward and valorize, and why we need to change those practices.

References

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