

BOOK REVIEW

Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college by Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert**Maryland, US: Johns Hopkins University Press 2020****ISBN: 9781421439365****Alex Playsted**, Monash University, Australia.Contact: alexplaysted@gmail.com

Looking back at the flotsam and jetsam bobbing in the wake of recent upheaval and significant change in higher education and indeed the world, *Relationship Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College*, by Peter Felten and Leo Lambert (2020), offers a collective expertise capable of helping the sector navigate not just to safety, but to truly higher ground.

Felten and Lambert are realistic. They know their chosen title sounds like an intuitive truth to many, and they are likewise aware of how such a title is often received by those focused more on business by numbers. With this in mind, they have made a truly concerted effort to fill a gap in the literature, ground their ideas in concrete examples, and to address fears, concerns, and challenges from different corners of the college campus. Their argument is a coherent and holistic dive into higher education's critical need to shape what it does around a fundamental and all-encompassing consideration: our deep human need for relationship.

In a recent *Dare to Lead with Brené Brown* podcast, Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (2001) and other renowned business titles (of which he has sold more than 10 million copies), remarked that he is often mistaken for a business author. Rather, he says, he is interested in really deep human questions, and business has been the data-rich environment in which he has been best able to study such questions. His resulting fundamental understandings about people have, in turn, offered the field of business powerful insights and advantages. Like Felten and Lambert, Collins advocates for addressing his context's challenges by first understanding its people and their needs. But are business and higher education really so different? Written around the same time, *Making Work Human: How Human-Centered Companies are Changing the Future of Work and the World* (Mosley & Irvine, 2021) distinguishes differences between mediocrity and greatness in the likewise rapidly changing business world. Of any influencing factor worthy of consideration, Mosley and Irvine (2021) claim the only truly irreplaceable factor is people: "The qualities that make us most human—connection, community, positivity, belonging, and a sense of meaning—have become the corporate fuel for getting things done, for innovating, for thriving in the global marketplace, and for outperforming the competition' (p. xvi). If higher education is also to innovate and thrive, even survive, Felten and Lambert's stories of transformational power and

relationships suggest our institutions' need to access the same fuel source. No matter the context, there is a very real call to approach our deep questions and draw on our "soft" skills to do the hard and necessary work needed to authentically engage staff and students alike in the name of long-term achievement and resilience.

Felten and Lambert couple their argument for change with current stories and examples of inspiring people, programs, and innovative practices drawn from 29 diverse US higher education institutions and 84 related thought leaders. They show what's possible, why it's hard, but why it's worth it. They also illustrate that while relationship-rich education exists around us all the time, the level of potential success it drives across an institution depends upon the extent to which it's prioritised, and by who.

What becomes clear is that leading relationship-rich cultures requires a particular mindset, and that mindset is expressed through the work of Students as Partners. Felten and Lambert build the case that every individual on a campus from the highest tiers of leadership to dining hall staff must "raise their consciousness about the personal power they hold to make a difference in the lives of students" (p. 150), championing every available opportunity to supersede transactional experiences with relational and transformational ones. It begs the question, in an era of emerging new opportunities for students to seek accreditations and qualifications beyond the bricks and mortar of universities, when being a student increasingly comes with pressures that impede natural opportunities for meaningful social interaction and when trust in our institutions continues to decline, are the relational dynamics of higher education its single most important offering?

Part of what makes this book so valuable is the tangibility it builds around what relationship really means, furnishing the intuitively felt but often under-analysed with much needed language, perspective, and narrative. This texture also helps expand and broaden the idea of mentorship in higher education and demonstrates how its critical facets can be authentically and frequently introduced, adapted, and scaled. It amplifies the reciprocal nature and mutual benefit of true partnership, helping to illustrate the potential derived from successfully and creatively reimagining our educational relationships and consequent opportunities. As Felten and Lambert state, "Learning, at its heart, is a relational process" (p. 161), and the authors affirm the necessity to encourage intimate and thoughtful lateral learning between all staff and students in order for universities to thrive, both educationally and financially.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Alex Playsted is a trained English as another language and primary and secondary school teacher in Australia. He worked within Monash University's student engagement and experience portfolio where he contributed to, created, and ran programs helping to engage students in developing personal and social strengths. He remains focused on student engagement, development, and relationship building.

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