

## BOOK REVIEW

**Connections are everything: A college student's guide to relationship-rich education**, by Peter Felten, Leo M. Lambert, Isis Artze-Vega, and Oscar R. Miranda Tapia

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**Marissa M. H. Chow**, Class of 2025, **Ankita Jiten Patil**, Class of 2023, **Gia Hao (Hao) Vo**, Class of 2025, **\*Kelly E Matthews**, Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation, University of Queensland, Australia.

Contact: [k.matthews1@uq.edu.au](mailto:k.matthews1@uq.edu.au)

## WHAT MATTERS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

Decades of research, drawing on countless institutional case studies and comparative global student engagement data sets (see Coates et al., 2022), indicates the centrality of peer-to-peer and student-to-faculty/academic relationships to student engagement, learning, satisfaction, and graduation in higher education. Researchers know this, and tertiary teachers and administrators work hard to create opportunities for these relationships to flourish productively; however, students are often left in the dark. That is, until now.

In *Connections Are Everything: A College Student's Guide to Relationship-Rich Education* (2023), Peter Felten, Leo M. Lambert, Isis Artze-Vega, and Oscar R. Miranda Tapia write directly to and for tertiary students. Their aim is simple and important—to author a book that “empowers students to seek out relationships by demystifying the varied ways they can cultivate significant connections” (back cover). At 172 pages, the authors organised the text into three parts: “Relationships and You,” “You Never Know Who Will Change You (or How),” and “You Can Do It.” The parts are bookended with an introduction and conclusion, a glossary of “College Terms to Know,” notes, and an index.

Written to students in first (I) and second (you) person, the authors engage directly with student readers. Real stories and quotes from students in United States (US) higher education bring the book to life with tips, strategies, and facts also presented. The book is practical and easy to read. The authors are inviting, which fosters a sense of warmth and trust for readers.

That was our consensus in a conversation about the book.

We are three students and a professor from a large (55,000 students), comprehensive (undergraduate to post-graduate to PhDs), and research-intensive (“Top 50” in many global rankings) university in Australia. Around 30% of students enrolled at our institution are

international students. We were all born outside of Australia and bring unique insights from multiple educational contexts and cultures to this review. As expected, we held differing views on how effectively the book achieved its aim and how it might land for students from outside of the US. We present our conversation about the book below.

**Marissa:** I grew up overseas and moved to Australia halfway through high school. As a first-year Bachelor of Science student, I enjoyed reading the book as it gave me insight into success stories that outlined how I could gain opportunities and make the most of my university experience by developing relationships with different people.

The authors presented many different avenues of support available to students and gave practical tips on how to take advantage of these avenues. The stories were good examples of how the tips could be put into practice in real life, and I liked the “Try this!” tasks, which can give students the confidence to act.

**Ankita:** I am an international student about to finish my master’s at the University of Queensland. Being a non-book reader, this book achieved its aim of guiding students to build relationships. The examples in Part Two were most relatable for me as a new graduate—I could look back and connect with those stories. But I needed the third part (“You Can Do It”) because it painted the picture of how to make our education relationship-rich. Specifically, the “Mentoring Relationship” section encouraged me to reconnect with my networks and ask them for a coffee meeting as I look for job opportunities.

**Hao:** I am an international student studying a dual degree of computer science and commerce. I genuinely enjoyed reading it as a student and avid book reader. The practical parts of the book, like Part Three (“You Can Do It”), were my favourites to read. The tables and tabulated visuals worked well for me as a more quantitative thinker. The real stories were easy to empathise with, and I appreciate the discussion of these stories. At times, I wanted more multi-perspective discussions from students with different backgrounds to better understand how to translate their stories to my personal college experience.

**Kelly:** I moved to Australia from the US in the early 2000s. As an academic, I research in this area and enjoyed the stories of students’ lived experiences. The authors’ choice to keep research data offstage while ensuring the book was evidence-informed was well-considered for the intended audience.

**Hao:** Although the authors use good storytelling, I still found it hard to resonate with US-based experience, which differs from my educational experiences in Asia and Australia.

**Marissa:** I see Hao’s point. While the core concepts were useful, the context was a bit too specific to the US. As a result, students unfamiliar with the American college system may find some jargon confusing (e.g., first-year seminars and faculty advisors), even with the glossary of terms.

**Ankita:** Nonetheless, being an international student in Australia, I still found many similarities between Australian and American academic cultures. However, I saw fewer similarities to my educational experiences in India.

**Kelly:** I was intrigued when we discussed who should read the book, specifically at what point in their studies.

**Hao:** Most first-year students and other undergraduates would benefit from reading the book. Yet, it will best suit students in the US and Western-style teaching environments.

**Marissa:** First-year students wanting an overview of the different types of people who can help enhance their university experience should read this book, even if they might not end up forming relationships with all of them.

**Ankita:** Yes, and the book also serves as a helpful revision of tips and skills for international postgraduates and recent graduates like me. Overall, the book has provided valuable insights that can be applied both within and outside the college setting.

#### OVERALL, WOULD WE RECOMMEND THIS BOOK TO STUDENTS?

Students come to higher education from various backgrounds, identities, and motivations, as the book demonstrates. The book will offer different points for students at different stages in their journeys through higher education to reflect on—if students outside of the US can see through the context and culture to grasp the more significant principles of forming human relationships. Humans are social beings. The principles evoked in the book can extend to the working lives that students will navigate post-graduation as life-long learners.

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Marissa M. H. Chow** is (at the time of writing) a student studying a Bachelor of Science and an Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation student ambassador at the University of Queensland, Australia.

**Ankita Jiten Patil** is (at the time of writing) a recent graduate of a Master's in Urban and Regional Planning program and an Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation student ambassador at the University of Queensland, Australia.

**Gia Hao (Hao) Vo** is (at the time writing) a student studying a dual Bachelor of Computer Science / Bachelor of Commerce degree and an Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation student ambassador at the University of Queensland, Australia.

**Kelly E. Matthews, PhD** is (at the time of writing) a professor of higher education at the Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation at the University of Queensland, Australia.

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